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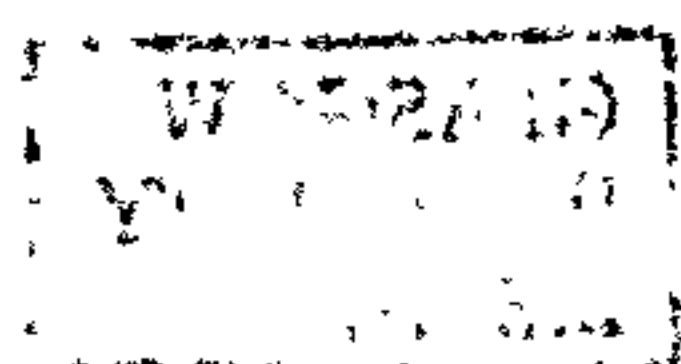
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**"THE HOME OF THE LIVING
WRITER":
THE PLAYWRIGHT AND THE
ABBAY THEATRE**

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**Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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Faculty of Arts, University of Glasgow.
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Abstract

This thesis attempts to outline the practical relationship between Irish playwrights and the Abbey Theatre, from the early work of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899, until the present day. It argues that the Abbey's reputation for being a writer's theatre tends to be contradicted by its distant association with Irish playwrights during the greater part of its history. Only during the early 1980s was there an active attempt to integrate the playwright within the company, creating a vibrant and active community for the development of new writing.

Up until the 1980s the Abbey subscribed to the established twentieth-century view that the playwright was a literary writer, outside the creative centre of theatre. The Abbey's changing roles -- from literary theatre, to institutional national theatre and to director's theatre -- distracted the Theatre from acknowledging the valuable contribution individual dramatists could make, ensuring that the playwright remained vulnerable and isolated. The Abbey remained heavily dependent on its own historical inheritance and international reputation, satisfied with a repertoire of predictable classics.

The Theatre's approach to playwrights changed in 1978, when Artistic Director Joe Dowling attempted to create what he termed "the home of the living writer". With assistance from Script Editor Sean McCarthy, Dowling instigated a series of policies which went towards building a coherent writer's theatre within the Abbey, similar to London's Royal Court. Playwrights became members of the company, were assisted with the development of ideas and encouraged to contribute to the rehearsal process. These actions assured experimental playwright development, exemplified by the work of Tom MacIntyre, whose work proved that a playwright could evolve his own artistic identity within an established theatre.

Since Joe Dowling's resignation in 1985, the Abbey has failed to continue a clear policy towards the practical assistance of the playwright. It is argued, however, that both Dowling's policies and MacIntyre's plays have influenced a growing Irish theatre scene, well prepared to explore the possible active relationship between the playwright and the rest of the theatre community.

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Introduction

This thesis examines the development of a practical relationship between the playwright and the Abbey Theatre, Dublin.¹

In academic analysis of the Irish Dramatic Movement² during the twentieth century primary consideration has been given to the significance of the writer. D.E.S Maxwell states in his critical history of Irish drama that "[a]t the heart of the matter and so attracting the emphasis are the playwrights",³ an emphasis that has continued with Michael Etherton's study of the contemporary Irish theatre: "Such a focus accepts the continuing dominance of authorial insights in the creation of a significant drama in Ireland."⁴ Maxwell considers that the focus on writing has been at the expense of close consideration of the actor or specific theatres and yet there is one theatre that is linked intrinsically to any analysis of the playwright: the Abbey Theatre. The names of the greatest twentieth-century Irish dramatists, Synge, O'Casey, Yeats, Friel, are spoken of in the same breath as the theatre where each gained his reputation making certain, in turn, that the Abbey's reputation is assured. It is this historical link with the playwright that determines a belief that the Abbey's main function is that of a writer's theatre. Joe Dowling in recent years has stated that "before anything else, the Abbey Theatre is a writer's theatre; it has always been a writer's theatre: that is what its main function is".⁵ This opinion is shared by actor, critic and dramaturg

¹ The perimeters of this thesis are not exact. 1899 saw the opening of the Irish Literary Theatre, the precursor to the Abbey. The six years between then and the opening of the Abbey in 1904, saw the clear definition of the philosophies on play writing. The thesis closes with an examination of the Abbey during the 1980s and makes suggestions about the future of the relationship between the playwright and the Theatre.

² A self-imposed term, used by the early directors of the Abbey Theatre. First used as an academic definition by Una Ellis Fermor *The Irish Dramatic Movement*. (London: Methuen, 1939).

³ D.E.S. Maxwell. *A Critical History of Modern Irish Drama 1891 1980*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). p7.

⁴ Michael Etherton. *Contemporary Irish Dramatists*. (London: Macmillan, 1989). pXV.

⁵ Joe Dowling. Interviewed in Dublin, 15 November 1991.

alike, associated with the Abbey today. The actor Tom Hickey, central to many new plays during the 1980s, sees new drama as fundamental to what the Abbey contributes to Irish theatre: "New Irish writing presented in the best possible way with the best facilities and the best actors and the best directors: that's what this place is about."⁶ The theatre critic Fintan O'Toole believes that new drama is essential to the continued presentation of the old repertoire: "To me, the energies and resources which come out of doing new work are the only energies and resources which allow you to do *The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Plough and the Stars*."⁷ Christopher Fitz-Simon appointed Script Editor after Sean McCarthy in 1983 believes the Abbey to be unique among national theatres: "We don't consider it our function to do what other national theatres, such as the British National Theatre, do, which is to present a wide spectrum of world theatre."⁸ According to Dowling any role as a national theatre with responsibility for preserving existing Irish repertoire is transcended by its duty to Irish playwrights, as he states: "without the preceding reputation as a place to develop new work, there would be little in the way of classic Irish plays".⁹

At a cursory glance, there is little to suggest that Dowling's identification of a link between the rise of an Irish drama and the parallel rise of the Abbey is inaccurate. Before the Theatre came into being there was little in the way of acknowledged Irish drama. The Abbey was founded upon the enthusiasm for expressing a cultural identity within Ireland during the last two decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ The Celtic Revival, influenced by the founding of organisations such as the Irish Literary Society (London 1891), the National Literary Society (Dublin 1892), and the Gaelic League (Dublin 1893), was

⁶ Tom Hickey. Interviewed in Dublin. 5 April 1991.

⁷ Fintan O'Toole. Interviewed in Dublin. 28 August 1991.

⁸ Christopher Fitz Simon. Interviewed in Dublin. 1 August 1990.

⁹ Dowling. 15 November 1991.

¹⁰ See Ulick O'Connor. *Celtic Dawn*. (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984). Robert Kee. *The Bold Fenian Men*. Volume Two of *The Green Flag*. (London: Quartet, 1972). Chapter 8, "The Growth of National Consciousness".

conceived with the express intention of defining a specific Irish identity through a separate literature that had hitherto been immersed with that of England. The need for such a movement was clarified by Douglas Hyde in his speech "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland" given at the inaugural meeting of the National Literary Society on 25 November 1892.

The Irish race is at present in a most anomalous position, imitating England and yet apparently hating it. How can it produce anything good in literature as long as it is actuated by motives so contradictory?¹¹

Before an indigenous identity had been defined within Ireland there had been little reason for the budding writer to stay in the country. The great Irish playwrights of previous eras -- Congreve, Farquhar, Sheridan, Goldsmith -- were lured to London and embraced by the literary world of the colonial rulers.¹² Even in the decades before the Celtic Revival, there seemed little alternative to England, as Bernard Shaw was to state about growing up in Dublin during the 1850s and 1860s:

There was no Gaelic league then, or sense that Ireland had in herself the seed of culture. London was the literary centre for English literature and as the English language was my weapon, there was nothing for it but London.¹³

Another writer who left the country was not to be so sympathetic. Joyce, in explaining his reasons for emigration, identifies the lack of a specific body of drama that could be described as distinctly Irish: "A nation which never advanced so far as a miracle play affords no literary model to the artist and he must look abroad."¹⁴ With such taunts in mind the Irish Literary Theatre and later the Abbey set out not with the intention of providing immediate and superficial relief for patriotic spirit, but steadily and carefully to "build a Celtic and Irish school of

¹¹ O'Connor. p112.

¹² See the early chapters of Christopher Fitz-Simon. *The Irish Theatre*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983).

¹³ O'Connor. p99.

¹⁴ O'Connor. p205.

dramatic literature".¹⁵ The Abbey was intended to be a home for new plays and from this ideal came the works of Synge, O'Casey and Friel.

Without the Abbey and a defined commitment to encourage the Irish writer it is assumed that Irish theatre and, therefore, the Irish play would not have the reputation it deserves today. When in 1978 Dowling stated his intention to make the Abbey or at least the smaller Peacock Theatre "the home of the living writer",¹⁶ it was not seen as being new policy, but the reiteration and consolidation of the primary aim for the institution's existence.

While acknowledging the achievement of the twentieth-century Irish dramatists in creating a defined and internationally endorsed body of national drama, I wish to consider closely in this thesis exactly what practical contribution the Abbey Theatre has made to this achievement. In his book *The Story of the Abbey Theatre*, Peter Kavanagh states that the Abbey "helped in the development" of the Irish playwright through "producing a whole school of dramatists".¹⁷ Kavanagh's comments exemplify a vagueness that has characterised statements on the relationship between playwright and Abbey throughout the Theatre's history. What "development" has been required by the Irish playwright and how has this been achieved through the "producing" of their work by the Abbey? Until very recently few people involved in determining an artistic policy at the Abbey have attempted to answer this question, and their reluctance to address the specific practical needs of the playwright leads to a further question. How close an association has there been between the provider of drama and the producer of drama, considering that the Abbey evolved as a literary theatre at a time when the playwright was beginning to be seen as a member of the literary profession, with little actual involvement as an intrinsic member of the theatre company?

¹⁵ Manifesto for the Irish Literary Theatre, quoted in Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*. (London: Putmans, 1914). For more details, see Chapter One.

¹⁶ Term used repeatedly by Joe Dowling, during the early years of his directorate, to define his policy for the Theatre. First quoted in *The Irish Times*, 17 May 1978.

¹⁷ Peter Kavanagh. *The Story of the Abbey Theatre*. (Orono: Univ. of Maine, 1984). p3. See Chapter Two.

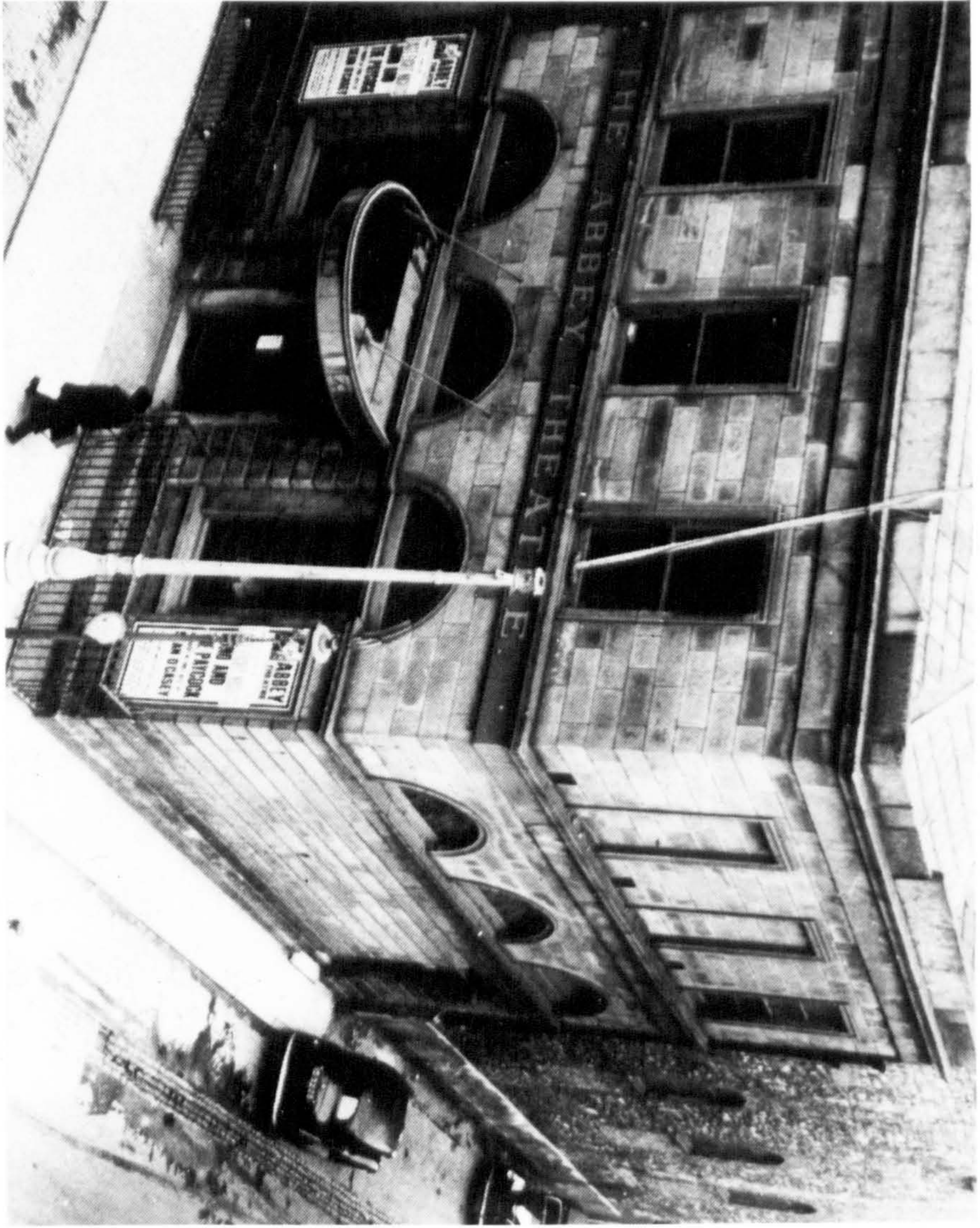


Figure One. The Old Abbey Theatre. Circa: 1940.

Throughout Europe during the twentieth century, the playwright has lost his/her traditional role as the central determinator of the drama. His/her place has been taken by the director and this substitution has occurred not only because of the conception of playwright as literary writer, but also because of the rise of a more institutional consideration of theatre, forcing a sense of general importance above the individual preoccupations of the dramatist.

While the Abbey was founded through an intellectual specificity towards Irish culture, its practical infrastructure has developed along the lines of general European ideas. In its creation at the turn of the century the Abbey's structure and approach to drama was influenced by the Independent Theatre Movement thriving throughout Europe. The Abbey's rise as Irish National Theatre assured an institutionalisation of policy -- exemplified by the German theatre movement -- leading to rigid rules as regards the kind of theatre to be produced, leaving little room for the individual artistic idea. When during the 1960s the Abbey finally let the individual have some say in the creation of policy, it was the director who was given priority over the playwright, catching up with a European theatre that had for the best part of the century been influenced by directorial control.

The working structure of European drama during the twentieth century, of which the Abbey has clearly been a part, has determined that the playwright has become an isolated figure outside the creative heart of theatre. The traditional "dual structure" of the playwright's role, identified by John Arden as central to Elizabethan Theatre, has been forgotten.¹⁸ It is assumed, today, that a play is written in private and the completed manuscript signals the end of the

¹⁸ See Arden. "The Playwright and the Playwriter" in *To Present the Pretence*. (London: Methuen, 1977). In this essay Arden argues that by seeing the playwright merely as a poet with little understanding of the day-to-day workings of the theatre, many practitioners have felt able to "call for a rejection of the supremacy of text". As a playwright and not a mere writer, Arden would support openly the rejection of the purely literary within the theatre, drawing attention to the spelling of 'wright' as in cartwright or millwright. The dramatist is a craftsman. He comments that "such an artist requires a wider workshop than the keyboard of a typewriter. He/she must see him/herself as a person capable of presenting a complete artistic vision upon the stage -- not as a semiskilled subcontractor to the theatre, who requires someone to produce the play once the text is completed".(p210).

playwright's contribution. For some playwrights this isolation has not been a disadvantage. Many have the skill of the literary writer to conceive an idea and realise it in theatrical terms without leaving the study. It could be argued that, through their isolation, successful playwrights have received greater acknowledgement: their singular vision has never been in doubt and through publication, which has become the inevitable goal of the literary playwright, a higher profile is possible. But for every playwright who thrives in isolation, there are many others who do not. Even the successful playwright on occasions has had to struggle to have work accepted. Many more who need the creative contact of actors to realise the full potential of the work have been subjected to outright rejection. No assistance is offered, little contact or communication is expected. The theatre waits for the envelopes to fall through the letter box with little interest as to what has gone on before. After all, once it has accepted the play they will expect the playwright to take little interest in its part of the work.

Until Joe Dowling became Artistic Director in 1978, the Abbey epitomised this kind of theatre. As I try to demonstrate, the Abbey's history is full of occasions in which the playwright has become frustrated by the distance of the executive. It is true that many writers created successful plays in spite of this restrictive attitude. Synge, O'Casey and Friel have represented the twentieth-century playwright's ability to create theatricality in isolation, and yet even they have come into conflict with frustrating policy regarding playwright contact. If successful Irish playwrights need little assistance from the institution that produces the work then how far can that institution take credit? Kavanagh talks of the Abbey giving assistance to the playwright by 'producing' the work, but does this really constitute active encouragement?

With the appointment of Joe Dowling as Artistic Director in 1978, the Abbey came under the control of an individual who believed that a writer's theatre has to do more than simply produce new drama. Dowling acknowledged the importance of the playwright as the central creative force in theatre and was

determined to treat him/her with due respect. The Abbey, or at least the Peacock, therefore, was to become "the home of the living writer" not as a reiteration of clearly defined historical policy, but with the intention of creating from scratch a policy that would fulfil and honour -- belatedly -- the institution's reputation as a writer's theatre. In establishing this principle, Dowling was to pursue a policy similar to that of the English Stage Company at London's Royal Court Theatre.

Founded by George Devine in 1956 this new company, which came to be known as the Royal Court, set out with the intention "to lease a London theatre for staging the work of neglected writers".¹⁹ This aim was soon to be replaced by the idea of presenting new plays. The Royal Court became the home of a new wave of British playwrights providing a realistic, political and demanding form of theatre that was seen as being a reaction against the "sparkling" West End contributions of Christopher Fry and Terence Rattigan that had dominated the theatre of the 1940s: an artificial domination, due to there being few openings for the aspiring playwright.

The chances for young writers during the period immediately after the War in Britain can be compared to those found within the Abbey after the opening of the new theatre in 1966.²⁰ London quite simply did not have a theatre dedicated to the presentation of new drama. Few agencies were prepared to look at new work and even if they did there was little chance for discussion or of encouragement. Anyone wanting to write for the theatre had to do so in the isolation of his/her study and then take the fairly worthless step of sending the script off, unsolicited, to the local repertory theatre where it would remain untouched for years

¹⁹ Richard Findlater (Ed). *At the Royal Court. 25 Years of the English Stage Company*, (London: Amber Lane, 1981). p12.

²⁰ See Chapter Three. During the 1960s, a period of supposed expansion in the theatre in Ireland, few new writers were associated with the Abbey in spite of the fact that several hundred scripts arrived at the Theatre each year. No one was employed to deal with these scripts. New drama was being provided by Tom Murphy and Brian Friel, two writers whose work was established initially outside the Abbey. No playwright was considered a member of the company and little financial support was forthcoming for the benefit of the writer.

The opening of the Royal Court was important because of the practical advantages it gave to the playwright. As Irving Wardle comments, "the idea was not new, what must be new was the way of working".²¹ The practical ideas attempted by the Theatre can be divided into five areas and tend to define a writer's theatre.

The first thing the Royal Court provided is obvious: a designated home for living writers. Now the unsolicited script could go somewhere relevant. The first and perhaps most famous new play to be presented at the Royal Court was Osborne's *Look Back In Anger* (1956). This play was sent as an unsolicited script, as Osborne states, "... to the Artistic Director, expecting a reply within months or an unreturned manuscript. I heard within days."²² Further to the specificity of the role of the theatre was the standing of the company. Even in the beginning, the intention of the Royal Court was to make as much impact for the new work as was possible. This theatre was not in the suburbs or the provinces, but in fashionable Chelsea. Arnold Wesker comments:

The interest in new drama, which they stirred up and which was given its first thrust by John Osborne's *Look Back In Anger*, brought the Court to the attention of the agents, impresarios and directors from all over the world. We were made 'international writer's, almost literally, overnight. This is a launching from which, more than 20 years later, I'm still reaping the benefits.²³

The second contribution to the needs of the playwright made by the Royal Court concerned the actual contact between playwright and theatre. It was all very well Osborne sending an unsolicited script to the theatre, but without a determination to read it and an employee to deal with it the whole exercise would have been pointless. It is natural that in the first instance, the playwright's contact with the theatre is going to be unsolicited and 'cold'. The main problem with such an approach to most theatres, particularly during the 1950s, was (and is) that few theatres employ someone to deal with this contact. As Christine Eccles

²¹ Irving Wardle, *The Theatres of George Devine*, (London: Methuen, 1978). p167.

²² John Osborne, *A Better Class of Person*, (London: Penguin, 1981). p275

²³ Findlater. p82.

comments: "everything starts with the unsolicited script: rarely does it end with one".²⁴

Through their determination to deal with new scripts, the Royal Court virtually invented the role of Literary Manager. The Literary Manager or Script Editor, as it has become known, was a role unheard of before the 1960s in Britain. Based on the German Dramaturg, the Literary Manager has become what Eccles calls, rather dismissively, "a service industry, advisory but not executive".²⁵ It is, none the less, an essential service. Not only does the Literary Manager deal with scripts, he/she actively encourages the playwright, talks about the script, and goes in search of new plays: his/hers is a familiar and friendly face at the theatre whose role, whatever else, is to fight for the interests of the writer. While the Royal Court did not employ an actual individual in the role until the mid 1960s, after Kenneth Tynan had been appointed Literary Manager at the National Theatre, it could be suggested that the whole of the executive working at the Royal Court tried to fulfil the role.²⁶ In effect, this meant that for the playwright already known to the theatre, the unsolicited script became a thing of the past. Contact could be made with a theatre in a more personal and civilised manner: a move that could only raise the confidence of the playwright.

This familiarity in initial contact led to the third area of development made by the Royal Court for the benefit of the writer. Once acknowledged by the theatre the playwright became part of the team: a member of the company.

William Gaskill recalls:

Any writer whom the Court wished to encourage was given a pass, which enabled them to see productions free, watch rehearsals and come to meetings.²⁷

The effect of this upon a young and inexperienced writer cannot be doubted. He/she was being respected as a professional *within* the theatre. It also gave

24 Christine Eccles, "The Unsolicited Playscript... and its Almost Inevitable Return". *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 3 No. 9. February 1987. p24.

25 Eccles. p25.

26 The first Literary Manager at the Royal Court was appointed by Gaskill in 1965

27 Gaskill. p35.

him/her a degree of security and support, as Osborne comments: "You were part of a family, which accepted all your frailties and imperfections,... Almost everyone was involved emotionally in what happened, and it helped to power the works."²⁸ In extension to this encouragement the Writers Group was set up, principally by Wesker and Ann Jellicoe. This group would meet with the rather vague idea of developing scripts through discussion. Some improvisation was attempted and ideas were discussed, but the main benefit was that it gave the writers involved a sense of belonging to an active community.²⁹

The fourth area of support concerned the actual production of the play script. With the playwright now acknowledged as a professional member of the theatre company, it was natural that he/she should find him/herself in the rehearsal. Such a presence within the rehearsal room is now accepted as part of the work of the writer. Kenneth Rea states that, "negotiations over the past decade have meant that the writer has a contractual right to be in the rehearsal room".³⁰ All directors expect it, most welcome it, but in the 1960s the principle had not been established. The Court took seriously the desires of the playwright and encouraged the ongoing relationship between a writer and a particular director. As Arnold Wesker states regarding his association with John Dexter, "The Court gave me a team."³¹

The encouragement of a recurring team for the production of a playwright's work is an indication of the final and perhaps the most important area of encouragement for the playwright. What the Royal Court wanted was not new plays, but new playwrights. The Court believed that the writer of one play could not describe him/herself as a playwright. The writer's work had to continue, to mature, to reflect the theatre and the actors he/she was working with. In effect a playwright is only a playwright when working within a theatre and only the

28 Findlater. p26.

29 For details of the Writers Group, see Findlater. Chapter by Ann Jellicoe: p52.

30 Rea. p61.

31 Findlater. p68.

theatre that gives the writer the opportunity to experience continuity can consider itself a true writer's theatre. The Royal Court, through its determination to dedicate itself to new writing, to provide individual contact with the writer, to consider the playwright to be professional, to give him/her an active role within the rehearsal period, and to help develop the playwright's skill, from play to play, gave the British theatre writer the chance to work in a true writer's theatre.

Although it is too simplistic to imply that what happened in Britain during the 1960s happened in Ireland twenty years later -- as if Ireland was merely catching up -- there is little doubt that what Joe Dowling succeeded in doing at the Abbey during the early 1980s has a lot in common with the writer's theatre found at the Royal Court during the 1960s. As the fourth chapter of this thesis demonstrates, the five aspects of Royal Court policy -- defining a writer's theatre -- were employed by Dowling at the Abbey. The Peacock was designated "the home of the living writer", providing a high profile theatre for the presentation of new work; Dowling employed the first full-time Script Editor, Sean McCarthy, a man who was dedicated to the on-going development of the dramatist; playwrights were welcomed as members of the company, contributing to planning and policy as professional members of the theatre; for the first time, writers were required to contribute to the rehearsal process and their talents were encouraged beyond the particular needs of an individual production. For several years Dowling succeeded in securing the practical conditions within the Abbey that allowed its reputation as a writer's theatre to become justified.

In effect the creation of a writer's theatre at the Abbey gave the playwright respect and made possible an active contribution within a system that had been defined while considering the dramatist as an isolated literary figure. It did not, however, bring a return to the principle of playwright as central determinator of the drama. Both the Royal Court during the 1960s and the Abbey during the 1980s were run by directors on a repertory system that had been determined by the institutionalised belief in recurring style and structured programming. The

dramatist was well paid, contributed to rehearsals, was given encouragement for ongoing projects, but in the final instance his/her work had to be accepted by the director responsible for wider continuity of the theatre's programme. In short, a writer's theatre may have been created, but a playwright's theatre in which the dramatists was central determinant of the company's repertoire had not.

It is important to stress that although a writer's theatre is a compromise between outright playwright control and institutionalised literary distance, such a policy has provided strong benefits for the dramatist and the production of new drama. In effect, a respect of the individual creator of drama has been imposed upon a twentieth-century drama policy that has the advantages of a well funded and high profile theatre system that has flourished under the empirical insight of the director. It could be argued that with growing respect, resulting in a confidence to contribute to policy and executive planning, the playwright has found a way to determine ongoing theatrical exploration within the present infrastructure. While the Royal Court went into "exile" with the creation of Joint Stock during the 1970s, providing greater interaction between playwright and actor in the actual creative process, the Abbey during the 1980s franchised off members of the company and the Peacock Theatre for a short period each year, so that Tom MacIntyre could develop his own method and system of creating drama.

In 1974, Joint Stock Theatre Company was formed. William Gaskill with Max Stafford Clark, the former director of the Traverse in Edinburgh, set out to combat the deficiencies in creating new drama found at the Royal Court. As Rob Richie, in his book on the Company, was to comment: "From the outset, the consistent aim has been to create conditions in which new work can be produced to the highest artistic standards."³² The idea was to achieve high profile, while remaining small scale. At the heart of this intention was the ideal of ensemble theatre popular with the politically motivated companies that had cropped up

³² Rob Richie, (ed.), *The Joint Stock Book, The Making of a Theatre Collective*, (London: Methuen, 1987). p13.

since 1968: using a collection of actors with the assistance of a director to craft the ideas of a playwright in a more total theatrical manner. Because many involved in Joint Stock had been associated with the Court, as Edward Bond puts it, "the Royal Court in Exile",³³ the new company managed to secure immediate media attention and, with it, sufficient funding. As Rob Richie suggests, it was "a company that could retain the flexible methods of the fringe yet have access to better facilities, reach a broader audience and achieve higher standards".³⁴

From this starting point the company managed to define an often overstated, yet clear working method, to achieve its aims of presenting new drama through an ensemble system. In doing so, Joint Stock managed to re-invent playwright's theatre. The method has been described by Rob Richie:

An extended preparation period, typically ten weeks, is divided into a four-week workshop and a six-week rehearsal. During the workshop, actors, writer and director explore the subject matter, each contributing ideas and undertaking research. Improvisation, talks with experts, interviews with character models, research trips, reading sessions, group discussions - all are used to generate material for the play. In the second stage of the process - the gap between workshop and rehearsal - the writer composes the play. This is not, as is sometimes assumed, a question of scripting improvisations or following instructions drawn up by the group. The writer's work remains an independent creative act and the result may have no obvious relationship to the material yielded by the workshop...³⁵

In laying out a specific system, Joint Stock was able to clarify a specific contribution for the playwright that escaped the vagueness of the Royal Court's associations. By splitting the process in two, it insisted on the playwright returning to the traditional 'dual structure': working within the rehearsal process, responding to the needs and ideas of the actors, and then retiring to the study to resume the life of the poet and return with a crafted script with singular vision.

This new playwright's theatre, under the banner of Joint Stock, provided British theatre with some of the most important new plays of recent years. David Hare's *Fanshen* (1975); Howard Brenton's *Epsom Downs* (1977); Stephen Lowe's

33 Findlater. p123.

34 Richie. p15.

35 Richie. p18.

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists (1978); *Cloud Nine* and *Fen* (1979 and 1983), both by Caryl Churchill and *Victory* (1983), by Howard Barker were all products of the Joint Stock system.

There were also many failures, with some writers finding the exposure to the demands and expectations of the actors too hard to take. Nick Darke comments of his feelings of humiliation when trying to serve the actors. "I got little sympathy from a group of actors, a director and a musical director who were committed to touring this rubbish round the country for three months, whilst I sat at home waiting for the royalties."³⁶ But even in this defeat, a positive realisation is demonstrated. The writer was no longer the isolated semi-professional, sub-contracted to provide the necessary evil of the written script. Nor was Darke, in his humiliation, seen as a misunderstanding or selfish artist with only his interests in mind. His worries were linked intrinsically with those of the theatre company: he was a *member* of that company.

While tremendous success was achieved in the development of individual productions, Gaskill failed in his personal attempt to make the company into a permanent body of artists. Actors brought up in the old fashioned freelance system were worried, with a degree of justification, about stagnation, but also by the idea of writer's domination. Simon Callow recalls discussions about the group: "Again and again I asked the question: what is Joint Stock? What does it stand for? The most common reply -- a way with working with writers -- didn't seem to me an adequate basis for a permanent group."³⁷

With this misunderstanding it was inevitable that the company, like all other companies, would continue to be run by directors. Consequently, Joint Stock failed in the ultimate ideal of playwright's theatre of having a company that not only determined the theatricality of individual projects, but developing the work and ideas of the playwright from one project to the next. Only two

36 Richie p145.

37 Callow. p64

playwrights, Caryl Churchill and Howard Barker, produced more than one play for the company. Indeed, for ongoing development for the playwright, the Royal Court, with its established home base and defined infrastructure, was -- and is -- better able to serve the playwright.

Joint Stock's work can be seen as a prototype of a playwright's theatre: a try-out where various playwrights were given the opportunity to taste a more adventurous approach in creating drama, but were never to determine the identity of the company through their developmental discoveries. Without the company becoming, in effect, the property of the playwrights, to explore not only the methods of creation, but the recurring thematic ideas that were liberated by such radical methodology, Joint Stock could never achieve the status of a true playwright's theatre. It was in Tom MacIntyre's work at the Abbey that such a unification of method and thematic development was achieved.

In the fifth chapter of this thesis, I consider the successful application of a playwright's theatre by Tom MacIntyre, in a series of plays produced under the direction of Patrick Mason. Between 1983 and 1988, MacIntyre was to produced five new plays at the Abbey. Initially, MacIntyre was just another playwright encouraged to work within Dowling's new writer's theatre. With the assistance of Mason and Tom Hickey, however, MacIntyre's work became the nearest example to playwright's theatre found within any established theatre. MacIntyre, Mason and an ongoing group of actors found a way of "franchising" themselves off from the mainstream of the Abbey, taking responsibility for their own work and finding their own relationship. By only working with one playwright throughout the six year experiment, the small company could get beyond the tentative experimentation enjoyed by Joint Stock playwrights to a point where it was *using* the new methods of construction to develop a coherent and complex company identity that was based solely on the work of the playwright. The dramatist was back at the centre of drama.

Such attempts at creating a playwright's theatre demonstrate how the dramatist can work within the defined European system of theatre that has evolved, during the twentieth century, whereby the assumption of directorial supremacy has isolated the playwright. In the case of the Abbey, it has proved that a national theatre can make its most vibrant and active contribution to preserving the reputation of the country's theatre by respecting the individual talents of its playwrights, and defining policy that is rooted in individual vision. Contact with the living writer is more important than preservation of the dead one. Whether those who have run the Abbey in recent years have learnt this lesson is a moot point: for all the developmental and experimental work at the Theatre during the 1980s, the institution still seems to be concerned with a more general national theatre policy of reflecting the surrounding theatre scene rather than actively instigating new work. But there is little doubt that the influence of both Dowling's policies and MacIntyre's work has been brought to bear on Irish theatre at large, allowing for a more interesting and sensitive relationship between playwrights and theatre companies.

To examine these issues in detail, this thesis is divided into six chapters. In Chapters One, Two and Three, I examine the Abbey in the years up until 1978: before the policy of making the Theatre "the home of the living writer". By re-examining the wealth of already published historical evidence, I consider how the practical needs of the Irish playwright were compromised by the Abbey's specific preoccupation with, first, the rise of the literary theatre; secondly, by institutional responsibility, and finally, by a growing commitment in Ireland to the concept of director's theatre. In Chapters Four and Five, by considering primary source material collected specifically for this thesis, I examine the Abbey after a commitment had been made to a "living writer's" theatre. First, the commitment to playwrights made by both Joe Dowling and Sean McCarthy during the early 1980s, and secondly, the relationship between the institution and the work of Tom MacIntyre: a form of theatre that can be defined as playwright's theatre. In

Chapter Six, I examine the relationship between the Abbey and the playwright in recent years, from the resignation of Joe Dowling to the present day. I consider whether Dowling's attempts to create an active and accessible relationship between the playwright and the institution have made an impact on the coherent identity of the Theatre, or whether his period of control can be seen as an isolated moment in an otherwise passive and uninspiring history of developmental collaboration.

This thesis does not set out to provide a critical analysis of Irish playwrights or their work. Such valuable academic work has been provided by Una Ellis Fermor, in her book *The Irish Dramatic Movement* (1931); Robert Hogan in *After the Irish Renaissance* (1968); Christopher Fitz-Simon, in *The Irish Theatre* (1983); D.E.S. Maxwell, in *A Critical History of Modern Irish Drama 1891 - 1980* (1984) and by Michael Etherton, in *Contemporary Irish Dramatists* (1989).³⁸ I am interested only in the practical working relationship between Irish playwrights and the Theatre where much of their work has been staged. Such an exercise is clearly not going to provide an overview of the extent of the Irish Dramatic Movement. There are times when I only touch on the work of some of the most established Irish dramatists: Brian Friel and Tom Murphy, two successful playwrights whose works have been presented many times by the Abbey, for example, receive the briefest of mentions due to the limited practical assistance provided by the Abbey at the beginning of their careers.

A complete chronicle of the Abbey's history is also outside the brief of this thesis. My identification of events and political manoeuvrings within the Abbey are related only to the welfare of the playwright and many important figures who committed themselves to serving the Abbey are ignored because they have been concerned with the wider policies that have made up the colourful history of the Irish National Theatre in general. As with a critical analysis of Irish drama in

³⁸ For publishing information, see Bibliography, under individual authors.

general, the history of the Abbey, at least until 1979, has been well documented. For a very detailed examination of the Abbey's pioneering years, I refer to *The Modern Irish Drama, a documentary history*, planned to cover the years 1899-1926 in six volumes, five of which are already published.³⁹ For a complete overview of the Abbey's history, until Joe Dowling became Artistic Director, I refer to Hugh Hunt's book, *The Abbey. Ireland's National Theatre 1904 -1979*. No history exists for the period from 1979: the start of a very important time for the Abbey, at least as far as its relationship with playwrights is concerned.

³⁹ For publishing information, see Bibliography, under Robert Hogan.

Chapter One: The Abbey Theatre 1898 - 1915. The Playwright and a Literary Theatre

The whole interest of our movement is that our little plays try to be literature first - i.e. to be personal, sincere, and beautiful - and drama afterwards.

J.M. Synge.¹

This chapter looks at the Abbey during its pioneering years as a literary theatre at the turn of the century. It examines the intentions of the founders when creating the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899 and how their concerns for serious and literary content to the proposed drama created a distance between potential playwright and the company, continuing into the new century, despite the arrival of the Fay Brothers, the move to the Abbey Theatre and the presence of J.M. Synge.

In the first half of the chapter, I examine the struggle to create a literary theatre. I consider the political and literary preoccupations that determined the identity of the theatre, with little consideration of the needs of theatre production. I demonstrate how, in spite of the exclusion of Yeats's growing interest in poetic drama, the early repertoire was dominated by the plays of the founders out of necessity, because of an isolation imposed by the "high art" of literary demands.

In the second half I consider how the distance between the directors of the organisation and playwrights continued into the new century in spite of a growing repertoire of plays and a brief flirtation with democracy. I examine how the artistic contribution of the Fay brothers led to the establishment of an international reputation for acting, but not for writing; how new playwrights, like Padraic Colum and William Boyle, found that they were being kept at arms length over the theatrical realisation of their plays. Finally, I focus on the intriguing

¹ Letter to Frank Fay, written from London in April 1904. Fay papers, National Library of Ireland.

relationship between the Abbey and J.M. Synge: how his commitment to the ideal of literary theatre and his belief that a play script should be finished before reaching the theatre was undermined by the informal and personal writer's theatre that he created for himself, through his association as director at the Abbey Theatre: an association that could have been quite easily extended to the other playwrights of Ireland.

The Irish Literary Theatre, the precursor to the Abbey, was founded in 1899. It was created initially as a three-year "experiment" with the intention of providing Dublin with serious drama. Because of the context of its creation, it was inevitable that this new theatre would become a literary theatre. The context was determined by two mutually exclusive movements that were to be a natural influence upon the founders of the Theatre. The first movement was the Independent Theatre Movement; the second was the Irish Literary Revival.

At the end of the nineteenth century, viewed from London, Dublin was considered to be a provincial town. Like the majority of provincial 'British' towns in the days before the Repertory Movement, Dublin looked to London for its theatrical inspiration. Unfortunately, London could not inspire. J.T. Grein had created the Independent Theatre in 1891,² but the mainstream, with the commercial inclination to cross the Irish sea and entertain the people of Dublin, was still motivated by the old actor-manager system, where the reception of the star performer had a higher priority than the method or form of entertainment. Frank Fay, soon to be a leading light in the new theatre movement in Dublin, illustrates the situation in 1899, with a review for *The United Irishman* of Boucicault's *Arrah na Pogue* and *The Colleen Bawn*, presented in Dublin by E.C. Matthews's Company:

I suppose Mr E.C. Matthews is the best Irish comedian to be had at present, but as Shaun he is only passable. Like his kind and doubtless

2 For a consideration of the Independent Theatre Movement, I refer to Anna Irene Miller, *The Independent Theatre in Europe, 1887 to the Present*, (New York: 1931. Reissued, Benjamin Blom, 1966). For the Movement's specific impact in Britain, see Jan McDonald, *The 'New Drama' 1900 - 1914*. (London: Macmillan, 1986).

because he plays more often in England than in Ireland, he 'plays for the laugh' all the time, and the audience punish him by laughing at his pathos, and this is exasperating to one who considers that their poetry, pathos and tenderness are the only qualities which distinguish *The Colleen Bawn*, *The Shaughraun* and *Arrah na Pogue* from ordinary melodrama.³

If the London Theatre, on show in Dublin, was not able to inspire Dubliners, then the Dubliners themselves had to build their own Independent Theatre. To be exact, several individuals saw the importance of creating an 'art theatre' in Dublin, breaking the influence of London through developing a 'theatre for ideas' in competition to the commercial sector. In this way, Dublin was similar to many other provincial British towns, like Manchester, Liverpool or Glasgow, becoming part of the Independent Theatre scene by creating a Repertory Theatre and giving the town's people the chance to experience the "new drama" on their own doorstep.⁴ The "new drama" of the time was distinctly literary. In London, more play scripts were being published. Shaw, Granville Barker and Galsworthy dominated the new theatre scene, with their serious, polemical dramas, prompting through their literary depth a serious consideration of the worth of theatre in academic circles. Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats, like Annie Horniman, Alfred Wareing and other pioneers of the Repertory Movement, were well versed in the literary goings-on in the London Theatre and were influenced by the strength and quality of literary theatre.

Further to this initial influence, however, the Abbey's literary preoccupation was accentuated by an isolated characteristic that determined its influence beyond the theatres of Manchester, Liverpool or Glasgow. The Abbey was always more than just another Repertory Theatre, and the reason for this was due to Dublin being more than just another provincial British Town. The individuals who created the Abbey Theatre were doing so in the light of the growing political and cultural exclusiveness of Ireland: a new consciousness,

3 Frank Fay, "Irish Drama at the Theatre Royal", *The United Irishman*, 8 July 1899.

4 See Alasdair F. Cameron, *The Repertory Theatre Movement, 1907-1917*. (Unpublished Thesis, University of Warwick, 1984). Dr Cameron argues that the rise of the Repertory Movement was inspired, to a great degree, by the rise of the Irish Dramatic Movement, through the influence of Synge and the involvement of Miss Horniman.

brought about by what was termed the "Irish Literary Renaissance".⁵ This movement assisted the Abbey in raising its profile above the rest of the Repertory Theatres and also, due to the political and literary preoccupations central to this movement, it would accentuate the literary preoccupations inherent in the "new drama" as a whole.

The Abbey, therefore, was to become the epitome of the literary theatre, founded both through the artistic conviction popular in Europe that literature was the saviour of drama and the political determination within Ireland to create and preserve a literary identity. Irish drama owes its existence to this literary ideal. There is little doubt that the Abbey Theatre made its reputation through the serious contribution it made to a growing literary ideal. In the years that led up to the Insurrection in 1916, the company moved from being a small organisation, run by a group of enthusiastic, yet inexperienced amateurs, into an established theatre, with accomplished actors, an international reputation, a growing repertoire of plays and an undisputed claim to be the National Theatre of an independent nation-in-waiting. It is important to acknowledge these achievements, well documented elsewhere, and stress the success of the literary revolution within Independent Theatre in the main aim of preserving a serious intent within drama.⁶ Drama's transformation from commercialism to literature, however, was achieved without the active involvement of the playwright and as I hope to show, the

5 Since the downfall of Parnell in 1890, there had been growing support for the ideal of the Celtic Revival, generated by a realisation that Irish independence would not be achieved by the commercial and political rationale that had been preached by the Home Rule party during the 1880s. What was needed was, in the words of Robert Kee, "a climate in which an Irishman could feel new self-respect for being Irish".(Kee. *The Bold Fenian Men*. Vol. Two of *The Green Flag*. London: 1972. p132). A rediscovery of the old Celtic myths, set consequently in motion, a determination to realise, in written form, a spiritual identity in being Irish. To write was to preserve and preservation was the central intention in the popularity of the Literary Revival.

6 For a detailed documentation of the rise of the Abbey Theatre, in the context of the Irish Dramatic Movement, I refer the reader to *The Modern Irish Drama* series, edited by Robert Hogan and others. (Dublin: Dolman Press). The first three volumes, *The Irish Literary Theatre*(1975), *Laying the Foundations*(1976),and *The Abbey Theatre: The Years of Synge*(1978), cover the period to 1910. For a more specific examination of the Abbey, refer to the books by Hunt, Robinson, Fay, Kavanagh and Gregory, cited in the bibliography.

Abbey calling itself a writer's theatre may well have built up a repertoire of plays, but put a tremendous distance between itself and the writers of those plays.

The wider literary and political influences upon the Abbey were always going to complicate the actual theatre-making needs of the organisation. This is demonstrated by examining the intentions and actions of the founders of the organisation: how, in their enthusiasm for the political and literary ideals of the movement, they lost sight of personal theatrical ideas and ignored the practical needs of the potential theatre maker.

The individuals we now associate with the original cause for an independent Irish theatre are: Lady Gregory; W.B. Yeats; Edward Martyn and slightly later, George Moore. All four seem to be of diverse backgrounds and have diverse interests. There was, in the original aims of the four who founded this theatre, little clarity of what their theatre might be: all four had, it is clear, very different ideas.

Gregory, Yeats and Martyn (Moore had not yet been approached) were of one mind enough, however, to publish in the year of 1897, a statement of intent in the form of a letter to possible benefactors. This 'manifesto' has been central to all analysis of the twentieth-century Irish Dramatic Movement.

We propose to have performed in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland, will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom of experiment which is not found in the theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art and literature can succeed. We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and easy sentiment, as it has been represented in the past, but the home of ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people who are weary of misrepresentation in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us.⁷

It could be argued that as a clear indication of the founders initial aims, the importance of this manifesto is often overstated. As Lady Gregory was to

⁷ Quoted in Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*. (London: Putmans, 1914). p 20

comment in *Our Irish Theatre*, sixteen years later, "it seems now a little pompous".⁸ The intention of this document, however, was to make an impact in a short and accessible statement. In attempting this, the statement succeeds in the area of political aims, linked closely with the literary preoccupation of preserving a national cultural identity and demonstrates the signatories' assured understanding of the external importance of their idea. It is clear, first, that the three signatories were intent on an earnest approach to the creation of their theatre. The Irish Literary Theatre, as it was to be called, was to be a 'serious' theatre: a fundamental concern of all Independent Theatres throughout Europe. Secondly, there is a clever balance of influences and intentions, placing their aims somewhere in the middle of all the cultural battles that surrounded it. This theatre was to be Irish, stressing the "ancient idealism" that was central to the Irish Literary Society's ideals.⁹ While acknowledging the separate identity of the Irish people, the statement stressed the need for an apolitical intent which would leave them the "freedom to experiment" in line with any independent theatrical aims that might come up.

But what theatrical aims? While the political arguments within the statement seem so well structured, the artistic arguments are vague. There was a desire to experiment, a realisation that drama could be powerful and emotive, a belief in the artistic independence of theatre, yet, there is little indication as to how they proposed to experiment. The signatories demanded "freedom to experiment", but in what way and to what end?

There is one clearly stated artistic aim in the manifesto and that is to "build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature". More than any other statement made at the time, this artistic aim paves the way for the Abbey assumed role as a writer's theatre. There is little indication, however, of how the signatories of this

8 *Our Irish Theatre*. p20.

9 For a readable, if rather laudatory, account on the rise of the Irish Literary Society and other movements of the Irish Renaissance, see Ulick O'Connor, *Celtic Dawn, a Portrait of the Irish Literary Renaissance*. (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984).

statement believed this aim would benefit the development of theatre as a specific and separate art form. Could it be that they saw theatre as a mere subsidiary of their primary interest in the written word? Were they to build up a collection of plays in the same way as one might build up a collection of books in a library? From the aim "to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature", stated clearly in 1897, there seems to be a political intent -- "to build up a Celtic and Irish school" -- and a literary intent -- "to build up a school of dramatic literature" -- but what of a distinct theatrical intent?

It is the lack of documentation on the subject of the founders theatrical ideas and aims that leads me to believe that the Irish Literary Theatre came into being without a programme of practical development. The founders did not really know what they were doing, they had no experience, and without such knowledge, their aims to develop both the Irish theatre and the Irish playwright were going to be difficult to execute.

Most commentators on this period of theatrical development never seem to consider the reasons and thoughts that might have been behind the decision to create a theatre. In Robert Hogan's and James Kilroy's exhaustive study, *The Irish Literary Theatre, 1899 - 1901*, the reader is given extensive information on the background to Dublin's theatre before 1899, but little on the background views of the individuals who wanted to change this theatre.¹⁰ Hogan and Kilroy virtually ignore Martyn and Lady Gregory and their early interests in art, concentrating on Yeats who, "in the 1890s was an increasingly appreciated young poet who had always been interested in theatre".¹¹ The reader is told of an interest in theatre at school followed by a paragraph on the production of *The Land of Heart's Desire* at the Avenue Theatre, London in 1894. Hogan and Kilroy continue: "the idea of a literary theatre for Dublin now strongly began to take shape in Yeats's mind, and

10 Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *The Irish Literary Theatre, 1899 - 1901*, (Dublin: Dolman, 1975). p8 - 24. Henceforth referred to as Hogan 1.

11 Hogan 1. p24.

in 1897 he discussed the matter first with Lady Augusta Gregory and then with Edward Martyn".¹²

In such a narrative approach to the subject -- undoubtedly the main intention of Hogan and Kilroy -- one would not expect extensive analysis of the motivation to create a theatre. Their book tells a story, a story that does not develop in real terms between 1894 and 1897. Others who choose a more analytical approach to the subject, however, seem equally unprepared to discuss the level of true theatrical understanding and intent. In one of the more recent books on Irish theatre, *A Critical History of Modern Irish Drama*, D.E.S. Maxwell, while understanding the importance of the dramatist in Irish theatre, makes little attempt to examine how writing for the theatre was actually going to be approached. Admittedly, Maxwell's first chapter, 'Dreams and Responsibilities',¹³ does make an issue of the "odd combination" of characters that collectively created the movement. Maxwell mentions that "altercation and conflicts of personality took place..." and implies that arguments were to evolve, at times over the differing interests in the theatrical styles developing throughout Europe. Never does Maxwell turn his examination towards the founders specific and personal interests in theatre, saying of Yeats, whom he believed, like Hogan and Kilroy, to be the "chief agent", that he "had always been interested in theatre... and began to seek a special place for it in the movement".¹⁴ The 'movement' Maxwell refers to is the general Celtic and Irish Renaissance and, as previously stated, it was concerned with the development of the political consciousness of Ireland, hand-in-hand with the growing interest in Irish literature. Maxwell implies therefore, that Yeats merely saw theatre as another part of literature.

¹² Hogan 1. p25.

¹³ D.E.S. Maxwell, *A Critical History of Modern Irish Drama 1891 - 1980*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). p 8-19.

¹⁴ Maxwell. p8-9.

Figure Two. W.B. Yeats, by Sean O'Sullivan.



This, of course, is not strictly true. Through the twentieth century, there has been a growing movement of 'Yeatsians' who have come to acknowledge the tremendous worth of W.B. Yeats's contribution to the theatre as a practitioner. There are some who go so far as to suggest that he has been a pivotal influence on much of the non-naturalistic theatre work across the world in the last 100 years.

Una Ellis Fermor, while acknowledging that the dramatic movement in Ireland was an 'offshoot' of the Literary Movement, stresses Yeats's specific interest in poetic drama. This must be seen as a defined theatrical intent. "For Yeats", comments Ellis Fermor, "the centre of dramatic art was speech, and life itself, no less than literature, was the product of language."¹⁵ Yeats's interest in theatre developed out of his understanding of the beauty of language, central to his feelings for poetry. Thus the Irish Dramatic Movement, or at least Yeats's own work, became important to European development of Theatre. As Una Ellis Fermor says:

It was thus left to the Irish Dramatic Movement to bring back to the English theatre the poetry that it had missed in Ibsen, presenting it, if not in terms of English society at least in a language that Englishmen could understand, and not leaving it to them to make either translations or selections.¹⁶

In Una Ellis Fermor's account of the development of the story of the Irish Movement, we again see a gap in detail in the years before the foundation of the Irish Literary Theatre: "In the interval between 1892 and 1899 Yeats had discussed with many people the possibilities of finding a small theatre in London or Dublin."¹⁷ There seems now to be a reason, however, for if Yeats was intent on finding a theatre in either London or Dublin, then one can imply that the theatre was more important than the politics of theatre.

Both Yeats's interest in poetic drama and his indifference to the geographical position of his theatre seems to be supported by Lady Gregory. In

¹⁵ Una Ellis-Fermor, *The Irish Dramatic Movement*. (London: Methuen, 1939. Second edition, 1954). p15

¹⁶ Ellis-Fermor. p7.

¹⁷ Ellis-Fermor. p33.

Our Irish Theatre, she refers to an entry in her diary to highlight Yeats's early interest in drama:

....Yeats stayed on. He is full of playwriting.... He with the aid of Miss Florence Farr, an actress who thinks more of a romantic than a paying play, is very keen about taking or building a little theatre somewhere in the suburbs to produce romantic drama... He believes there will be a reaction after the realism of Ibsen, and romance will have its turn.¹⁸

Again, one can see that Yeats was putting his interest in theatre above his interest in nationalism: the suburbs Lady Gregory refers to here are London's. Further to this, Lady Gregory refers to Florence Farr, a collaborator with Yeats in early experiments on speaking poetry, experiments that are acknowledged by Joseph Holloway.

Saturday May 6. Attended Mr. W.B. Yeats's rambling discourse on 'Dramatic Ideals and the Irish Literary Theatre',.... Mr. Yeats rambled off without notes to speak of the orator, and mistook the actor's calling for that of the orator or elocutionist in his ideas of how drama ought to be presented. He advocated that poetry should be rhymed or chanted, and that the scenery and dress should be subordinated to the words spoken; in short, that good literary writing should appeal to the mind and not the eye, and that acting should not be acting but recitation of the old sing-song order.¹⁹

It seems that Yeats was already coming to terms with his "total" understanding of what poetic theatre could create. The fact that Holloway, a theatrical reactionary, expresses doubt and confusion over the exercise, does nothing to dampen the modern critic's inclination to see Yeats's preoccupations as sincere and intelligent experiments.

For good or for bad, this poetic approach to drama was Yeats's personal contribution to the creation of the Irish Literary Theatre and it has to be acknowledged that Yeats's lyric plays formed a great part of the repertoire of the Abbey Theatre during its early days. Of the twenty-one plays produced by the Irish Literary Theatre and its successors between 1899 and 1904, seven were written by W.B. Yeats. If the amount had been anything less, then it is fair to

18 *Our Irish Theatre*. p17.

19 *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre. A selection from his unpublished Journal Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer*. (ed.) Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill. (Southern Illinois University Press, 1967). p5.

suggest that the Abbey may not have come into being. Annie Horniman, who provided the money for "a little theatre", did so on the understanding that the theatre was there mainly for the development of Yeats's work: a poet and a playwright she was dedicated to.²⁰ Lady Gregory, another of Yeats's female admirers also seems to imply that her work at the Abbey was concerned primarily with advancing Yeats's work: "The plays that I have cared for most all through, and for love of which I took up this work, are those verse ones by Mr. Yeats." The only reason why Lady Gregory started to write her "little comedies", she states modestly, was "to give the audience a rest from verse".²¹

So Yeats's plays were -- and still are -- performed by the Abbey, but what is more interesting is whether those who see Yeats's plays today as examples of in-depth theatrical experimentation really consider the Abbey as the theatre that actually developed this theatrical understanding. There are two points of view. James Flannery, whose book, *W.B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre*, puts forward the view that, however hard Yeats's theories were to put into practice, his work was central to the rise of the Abbey's importance: "We have lost sight of one of the primary reasons for the phenomenal success of the early Abbey Theatre."²² This view seems to be supported by Richard Allen Cave who has attributed recent failings in dramatic quality at the Abbey to a movement away from Yeatsian ideals. In an article entitled 'Time for a Yeatsian Revolution', Cave stresses the importance of Yeats's work to the Abbey. What Cave also suggests in this article, however, is that the Abbey never fully adopted Yeatsian principles in the first

20 See Alasdair Cameron, *The Repertory Theatre Movement*, for a detailed explanation of the role of Annie Horniman in the creation of the Abbey Theatre. Miss Horniman provided money for both, the conversion of the Theatre and subsidy for the first ten years of its life in Abbey Street. Dr Cameron believes, rightly, that her initial interest in the affairs of the Abbey led to an indispensable commitment to the British Repertory Movement. As an Englishwoman, her charity for the Abbey tends to be ignored by the more Nationalistic commentators: many even criticise her for 'undue' interference.

21 *Our Irish Theatre*. p52 -53.

22 James W. Flannery, *W.B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre, The Early Abbey Theatre in Theory and Practice*. (New Haven: Yale 1976). p xiii.

place: "it was to Yeats's chagrin that the Abbey excelled from the beginning in the one tradition at the expense of the other".²³

This view, that the Abbey never really was a Yeatsian Theatre, is expressed by Cave's former colleague, Katharine Worth, who in her celebration of Yeats's contribution to the European Movement, *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett*, dismisses the worth of the Abbey Theatre as a home for Yeats's plays. "The evidence [of the existence of a Yeatsian Theatre] does not come from the Abbey; it seems still to be working through the phase of Ibsen-inspired realism which every theatre in Europe apparently has to experience."²⁴ Professor Worth suggests that by the time of her death in the mid-fifties, Una Ellis Fermor was coming around to this view, believing the development of a theatre movement, rooted in the work of Yeats, to be of little relevance to the Abbey.

Worth stresses this idea very early in her book, with the intention of ignoring the Abbey for the remainder of her thesis. While it is difficult, within a wider consideration of Yeats's work, to reject the institution to the same extent, it is clear that the development of the Abbey does seem to have little to do with the parallel development of Yeats's artistic ideas for the theatre. This argument is best supported by Yeats's own views on the subject. In 1919, he wrote a widely known article called 'A People's Theatre' which considered the Abbey's success in creating a theatre, allowing for "the making articulate of all the dumb classes each with its own knowledge of the world, its own dignity, but all objective with the objectivity of the office and the workshop, of the newspaper and the street, of mechanism and of politics".²⁵

Yeats saw the rise of the realist movement and its dramatists, now closely associated with the Abbey, as being "excellent just in so far as they have become

²³ Richard Allen Cave. "Time for a Yeatsian Revolution". *Theatre Ireland* 22, Spring 1990. p22

²⁴ Katharine Worth, *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett*. (London: Athlone, 1978). p1.

²⁵ W.B. Yeats, "A People's Theatre". Reprinted, in full, by Eric Bentley. *The Theory of the Modern Stage, An Introduction to Modern Theatre and Drama*. (London: Penguin, . 1968). p 327.

all eye and ear, their minds not smoking lamps, as at times they would have liked, but clear mirrors".²⁶ While acknowledging the achievement of many of these writers and the theatre that allowed them their opportunity, Yeats wishes to stress that "we did not set out to create this sort of theatre, and its success has been to me a discouragement and a defeat".²⁷

Even before 1919, the Abbey was less inclined to produce Yeats's plays. Between 1910 and the end of 1919, only three new W.B. Yeats plays were produced. This was the age of Lennox Robinson and St John Ervine, with drawing rooms -- all be it Irish drawing rooms -- the standard setting. Yeats was developing his ideas for the drama away from the theatre that he created. A discouragement and a defeat it most certainly was, but to suggest, as he does in 1919, that this discouragement was due to them failing their original aims, seems highly suspect. Hugh Hunt makes the point that, "...[t]he greatness of Yeats's contribution to a people's theatre lies not in his plays but in his championship of a theatre".²⁸

Hunt appears to be correct. In 1897, if Yeats was preoccupied by poetic drama, he seemed quite prepared to forget this for the sake of the wider political motivations. In the initial statement of intent in 1897, the signatories said little or nothing about the actual development of a poetic theatre based on any ideas that Yeats might have had. It is clear that at least Edward Martyn, among the others, also had personal ideas and a vision of a very different kind as to what the Abbey might turn into. Yeats wanted poetic drama, Martyn wanted Ibsen. The two compromised because they shared a vision that was, in their eyes, more important: the general cultural ideal of having an Irish theatre. Such a compromise seems to demonstrate a respect for the work of new writers and a commitment to building up a wide school of drama. But by not adopting a distinct theatrical vision, the

26 Bentley. p330

27 Bentley. p331.

28 Hugh Hunt, *The Abbey, Ireland's National Theatre, 1904 - 1979*. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1979). p120.

founders were drawn away from the practical side of making theatre, ignoring their own inexperience as dramatic producers and the need to create specific resources for the playwright.

The three signatories constantly demonstrate their ignorance and inexperience about producing theatre and their initial attempts to act on their statement of intent were to lead them away from the theatrical foundation of a theatre, towards literary foundations. As Lady Gregory admitted that she "had never been at all interested in theatres",²⁹ it was left to her to organise the financial side of the operation, while Martyn and Yeats, who had professed an interest in theatre, took on the artistic side. It seems that their first action was to recruit George Moore to the team: an event enlarged upon by Moore in *Hail and Farewell*. Moore's first reaction, or so he suggests, was one of despair, commenting: "Of course they know nothing of Independent Theatres."³⁰ Moore was always the least enthusiastic member of the initial company, sharing only a little of the other's affection for their home country. Moore was the typical absentee landlord, who had left Ireland for Paris at the first opportunity, and saw Dublin as being an artistically inferior city. Moore amusingly sums up his opinions by suggesting that "to give a Literary Theatre to Dublin seemed like giving a mule a holiday".³¹ In many ways, Moore was right. It would seem like artistic suicide at the time to open an "art" theatre in what was a provincial town. It could be argued that by going to Moore, who was bound to show initial suspicion, Martyn and Yeats were demonstrating pragmatism: the need to recruit a realist.

In actuality, Moore was less of a realist and more of a self publicist. Yeats and Martyn went to Moore because of assumed experience in theatre, an experience that is confidently expressed in *Hail and Farewell*: "I treated them to a

29 *Our Irish Theatre*. p19.

30 George Moore, *Hail and Farewell*. (ed.) Richard Cave. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1985). p76

31 *Hail and Farewell*. p77.

full account of the Independent Theatre, begging them not to waste their plays upon Dublin."³² D.E.S. Maxwell, however gives a clearer consideration of the extent of Moore's theatre work.

Moore claimed a greater practical experience of the stage than any of his partners, with some reason. Apart from his celebrity as the author of *Esther Waters*, and as a self-advertised 'bohemian', he had conducted a vendetta against the conservatism of the English theatre critics (*Impressions and Opinions*, 1891). He was an active supporter of J.T. Grein's Independent Theatre, which in 1893 staged his *The Strike at Arlingford*. Even so, Moore's credentials were not overwhelming. They were sufficient to allow him to condescend to Yeats and even more to Martyn. The Irish enterprise gave him the opportunity to instruct his colleagues and to display himself to advantage.³³

It is clear that "greater practical experience" over his partners did not mean Moore was an expert. In the preparations that followed for the first season by the Irish Literary Theatre, in which Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* and Martyn's *The Heather Field* were to be presented, George Moore demonstrates a rather uninspiring approach to new theatre ventures and what he does is done for self advantage, having little sympathy for the nationalist interests of his partners. In both his actions and his intentions, Moore does little to assist the artistic development of the Literary Theatre.

What Moore describes in *Hail and Farewell* is a series of conversations with both Yeats and Martyn over the practicalities of rehearsing the two chosen plays. Moore gives the impression that he and he alone was grabbing-the-bull-by-the-horns and getting down to the details of who the actors were, who was "producing" and where they were rehearsing. In actuality, he shows a distinct unwillingness to experiment and demonstrates his own comparative inexperience by seeming to getting the priorities wrong. Moore replaced the original choices of leading actress and play producer with people who had had experience in the established theatre, believing them to be better at the craft of theatre and better able to get on with it. He insisted on rehearsing the work in a traditional way ("It

³² *Hail and Farewell*. p76.

³³ Maxwell. p9.

is impossible to rehearse anywhere except in the Strand."³⁴), wanting a solid, uncompromising and economic approach to the process, which most probably saved the quality of the first productions, but left little room for the romantic imagination that had conceived the idea of the Theatre in the first place. Moore saw the group as being just another theatre company and believed that they should aspire to the conventions of such companies. These actions not only failed to inspire any sense of Irish cultural independence, they also gave the impression that the main intention of the new company was to do nothing more than secure conventional productions for two pre-chosen plays. The Irish Literary Theatre had, in its first season, exactly the same structure, the same rehearsal conventions and virtually the same actors as E.C. Matthews's company: hardly an independent challenge to the commercial sector.

In the following two years, the Irish Literary Theatre did not attempt to break down their dependence on London or the attitudes of the commercial theatre. In the second season, in their attempts to appear a serious and important contributor to the Dublin Theatre scene, the Irish Literary Theatre again chose to employ established English actors and further to this, weakened the divide between themselves and the commercial theatre, by choosing to present the plays for the season in the Gaiety Theatre, the epitome of an established and commercial venue. In the third season in 1901, the Literary Theatre all but became a commercial theatre company, not only staging plays at the Gaiety, but employing Frank Benson's Shakespearean Company to present them. With the definitive English actors' troupe sweeping across the stage, the presentation of the Irish drama was subjected to the same external attempts to define Irishness as E.C. Matthews brought to Boucicault. Benson's attempts prompted a similar response from Frank Fay, who wrote:

To my mind, the greatest triumph of the authors lies in their having written in English a play in which English actors are intolerable. ... The actors did

34 *Hail and Farewell*. p93.

not act the play as if they believed in it; the fact is they could not, for it is not in their nature.³⁵

In spite of such negative comment, it is difficult to discover just how good the original productions were. Such critical consideration of the quality of presentation was remarkably rare. Hogan comments that "no commentator gives a vivid or even particularly clear impression of how the actors looked, how they sounded, how they moved, or what they did". Hogan suggests that the productions were far from being professional, but their defects were washed over with the "generally enthusiastic response which the occasion evoked".³⁶ *The Daily Express*, *The Freeman's Journal* and *The United Irishman* seemed intent on arguing the wider political issues of which the theatre was inevitably part.³⁷ The main issue raised in the first years seemed less to be about the quality of the plays on show and more to do with the morality of the plays and whether they fitted into the newly defined Irishness. The debate on *The Countess Cathleen*³⁸ gave the company a lot of publicity and made the productions an important event in Dublin, but the controversy merely added to the superficiality of artistic criticism. Those who believed the play to be moral tended to say it was good, those who found it immoral disagreed. The exception seems to be *The Irish Times*, whose reviews of the Irish Literary Theatre's productions are rooted in artistic considerations and are ominously negative.³⁹ But the overall impression from the media did little to turn the Directors' attention towards the needs of presentation: they were gaining valuable experience in dealing with the press, arguing their politics and tolerating an unruly audience, but little experience and worthwhile criticism on the standard of their theatre and knowledge of how to develop new drama.

35 Frank Fay, *United Irishman*, 26 October 1901.

36 Hogan 1. p76.

37 Hogan 1. p37-42

38 See Hogan 1. p36. Yeats's play was criticised for being 'un-Irish', for its rather mild challenges to the glory of God. An ominous indication of what was to occur in the future..

39 Hogan 1. p 46, 73, 78.

With the new Irish drama being presented by English companies and the Dublin media tending to ignore this practical anomaly, the budding Irish playwright could not have been encouraged. For all their good intentions to "build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature", the Directors of the Irish Literary Theatre were forced into a situation whereby any form of distinct development seemed less important than the preservation of their own reputations. It is fair to suggest that during the first three years of the experiment, the Irish Literary Theatre seemed like a private club set up for the pleasure of the founders, with the work of the founders dominating the schedule. This seems in particular to be the case with Edward Martyn, who had been attempting to put on his two major plays, *The Heather Field* and *Maeve*, since the early 1890s. His lack of success seems due entirely to a lack of dramatic ability, stressed by the objective *Irish Times* in its review of the first production.

The *Heather Field* is wearisome because it has no action worthy of the name; its dialogue is stilted; its characters are not very deftly drawn; and its reflection of Irish life is not very convincing.⁴⁰

The implication is that Martyn had no hope of putting this play on and so used his own finances to create a theatre, not for the benefit of an Irish and Celtic school, but for himself.

Martyn's inabilities were to cause the movement a great deal of problems in the second year of the Irish Literary Theatre, again forcing an inward looking approach to the planning of the season. Martyn had finally written a third play, *The Tale of the Town*, and had submitted it to Yeats and Moore to be considered as the third play for the second season. Both were unenthusiastic. Marie-Thérèse Courtney, in her book, *Edward Martyn and the Irish Theatre*, suggests that "the dogged determination of the directors of the Irish Literary Theatre to reject Edward's play rests on a pretext that is fantastic if not fraudulent". Courtney weakens her claim that Martyn's play was rejected without decisive reasoning, by

40 "The Irish Literary Theatre", *The Irish Times*, 10 May 1899. Quoted in Hogan 1, p47.

reporting Yeats's and Moore's "excuses" and "evasions" on the subject, summed up by the slightly less than evasive comment from Yeats: "It seemed to us crude throughout, childish in parts, a play to make our movement and ourselves ridiculous."⁴¹

Away from the partisan opinions, there seems little doubt that *The Tale of the Town* caused the movement a good deal of worry. In *Hail and Farewell*, George Moore describes the moment when Martyn gives over the play for the others to do as they wished.⁴² It was left to Moore and Yeats to collaborate on the play, turning it finally into *The Bending of the Bough*, signed only by Moore. In itself, the action taken by Moore and Yeats demonstrates a growing understanding of artistic development and a realisation that the playwright could not always complete the work in the comfort of the study. Yeats and Moore never rejected the play, merely attempted to get it ready for production: in many ways, a pure act of dramaturgy.

Unfortunately, this collaboration seems to be an isolated moment, forced upon the movement by the lack of plays to produce. There was a lack of plays to produce due not only to the undoubted preoccupation the founders had with their own plays, but also to the growing exclusiveness brought about by the insistence that good theatre was literary. The Directors of the Abbey would never appreciate the legitimacy of an unfinished, rough script and in doing so, they refused to acknowledge the importance of assistance, advice and training in building up a Celtic and Irish School of dramatic literature.

In "Plans and Methods" in the first edition of *Beltaine*, (the occasional publication of the Irish Literary Theatre), Yeats is uncompromising about the kind of play the movement required. Further to the accepted intentions to produce theatre for a 'limited public', Yeats unaccountably adds:

⁴¹ Sister Marie-Thérèse Courtney, *Edward Martyn and the Irish Theatre*. (New York: Vantage, 1956). p110.

⁴² *Hail and Farewell*. p211.

In all or almost all cases the plays must be published before they are acted, and no play will be produced which could not hope to succeed as a book.⁴³

In this statement, one sees how new playwrights, with little experience of the publishing world, were unlikely to come to the attention of the new theatre. By stressing the importance of the Movement, by associating it with the mainstream of literature, few people would be encouraged to try their hand at creating drama, for fear of rejection or ridicule. Statements like that of the *Irish Daily Independent*, commenting on the work of the Movement, stressing that "literature being the highest form of art and drama the most exalted form of literature",⁴⁴ may have emphasised the importance of drama, but hardly seem likely to have extended an encouraging invitation to the young and timid writer. There is little wonder, therefore, that by the end of the initial three year experiment, Fred Ryan -- a supporter of the movement -- was forced to comment that, with the exception of Alice Milligan, "the Irish Literary Theatre during its three years has not really brought to the surface any young writer hitherto unknown". Ryan underlines the exclusive literary preoccupations of the time as well as the failure to widen the Theatre's appeal, by adding:

Moreover, beyond possibly supplying models to young writers, the Irish Literary Theatre so far has merely been the vehicle by which literary men of already assured status and who already possessed the ear of the world, were able to have their plays produced which in any case would have secured a reading public owing to the authors' names.⁴⁵

The Irish Literary Theatre did not succeed during the initial three year period in developing the work of the Irish playwright. The impact of the movement had been made by the external arguments regarding the legitimacy of the idea of an Irish Theatre. The company had been set up with the distinctly literary artistic aim of building up a collection of Irish plays. The majority of plays, however, had already been published and were by established writers, who were as comfortable within London society as they were within Dublin. They had

43 *Beltaine* 1. p7.

44 Hogan 1. p79.

45 Hogan 1. p118

employed traditional English personnel and methods to achieve the theatre and had never looked beyond the immediate circle of literary figures for potential artistic input. The Irish Literary Theatre had been a private club.

In the years between the end of the Irish Literary Theatre and the opening of the Abbey Theatre itself, much changed within the organisation. By 1901, the number of those interested in creating an Irish theatre had grown. With increased numbers, a greater objectivity became apparent. George Roberts was one such theatre enthusiast who became involved with the next stage of the Irish Dramatic Movement's development. In his accounts of the discussions that were to take place, Roberts states a widely held belief that the Irish Literary Theatre had been a failure.⁴⁶ The next stage in the development of the movement was to confront the supposed failure of limited material as well as the lack of Irish actors: now seen to be a mistake. With these acknowledgements, it is obvious that the movement was breaking away from the influence of George Moore and his rather reactionary ideas on the production of theatre.

With Moore no longer a member of the movement, Yeats was free to look elsewhere for practical input. It was in this climate and under these circumstances that the old Literary Theatre moved automatically into the important association with Frank and Willie Fay and their amateur company, the Irish National Dramatic Company.

Neither Lady Gregory or Yeats do justice to the Fay brothers in their various accounts of the founding of the theatre, stressing the brothers' roles as stage managers rather than directors. Such dismissive reflection on the Fay brothers' contribution could have a lot to do with the rather acrimonious split that was to occur finally, in 1908. Further to this, vanity may have got in the way of objective acknowledgement, by Yeats, of the Fays' contribution. There are those who were to place the Fay Brothers' importance to the movement on a par with

⁴⁶ Robert's comments are quoted in Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *Laying the Foundations 1902 - 1904, Modern Irish Drama*, vol. 2. p27. Henceforth referred to as Hogan 2.

Yeats. Gerald Fay, whose account of the early history of the Abbey Theatre has a strong bias towards his father and uncle, believed that by the Fays' contribution to the Movement the Abbey was to become an actor's theatre and that the idea for the National Theatre first came from the Fays.⁴⁷ This argument tends to overdo things: Hugh Hunt, in his more objective account, stresses that neither of the brothers were ever great actors. Hunt, however, goes on to stress the essential nature of the Fays' service to the theatre:

Between them they transformed what, up to now, had been a predominantly literary movement into a living theatrical entity with its distinct national flavour and stylistic form; distinguished, moreover, by the team work of the players, the restraint of their acting, and the emphasis they placed on the spoken word.⁴⁸

For all Yeats's grudging acknowledgement in later life, his attitude at the time was very positive. Yeats was to comment in *Samhain* in 1903: "I am myself most interested in the Fays' 'The Irish National Dramatic Society' which has no propaganda but that of good art."⁴⁹ After initial contact in 1902, when Yeats allowed the Fays to present his play, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, within their separate company, an official merging of organisations was achieved in 1903, for the presentation of Yeats's *The Hour Glass* and Lady Gregory's *Twenty-Five*. The new name of the merged organisation was The Irish National Theatre Society: the official name of the Abbey Theatre ever since.

The alliance between Yeats's Irish Literary Theatre and the Fays was undoubtedly what was required at the time. The development of artistic quality was generated by a sense of unity and totality within the company, in which writers such as Padraic Colum and James Cousins became as much part of the company as any actor. Judging from the accounts of the time, particularly those of George Roberts and James Cousins, the company forming in 1903 was more

⁴⁷ Gerald Fay, *The Abbey Theatre*. (London: Hollis and Carter, 1958).

⁴⁸ Hunt. p32.

⁴⁹ W.B. Yeats. (ed.). *Samhain (An Occasional Review)*. October 1903. p5. Republished in: B.C. Bloomfield (ed.). *Samhain, October 1901 - November 1908*, English Little Magazines No. 14. (London: Frank Cass and Co, 1970).

democratic and unified than any other company in the history of the Movement.⁵⁰ Even the traditional and established writers were becoming more involved with the day-to-day development of their work. In the productions of *Deirdre* and *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, presented by the Fays' company in 1902, George Russell and W.B. Yeats, the respective playwrights, were involved closely with the rehearsal. Russell, according to Roberts, was so interested in the production that he attended all the rehearsals, "going over the speeches for the actors and getting something of his method of chanting into their delivery".⁵¹ *The Leader* was to observe after the first night of these plays that with this company, "there was less of a clique about them".⁵²

With this came a more practical and matter-of-fact approach to the theatre, creating better quality presentations. There is little doubt that the reputation of the company that started to grow outside Dublin even before the company moved into the Abbey was due entirely to the acting presentation of the Fay brothers rather than the literary quality of the plays of Yeats. When the company made its first tentative, yet highly successful, trip to face the critics of London, the now famous reviews of Arthur B. Walkley and E.K. Chambers were a reflection of the acting rather than the content of the plays: Walkley's review in *The Times Literary Supplement* was to be an important contribution to proving the existence of an "Abbey acting style". What Walkley also stresses is the importance of the "unfussy" stage business in developing the poetic qualities of Yeats's plays: "We had never realised the musical possibilities of our language until we had heard these Irish people speak it."⁵³

Yeats's work was benefiting from the improvement of acting quality, but what of the aim to build up a school of drama? From the time the Fays became part of the Movement, more writers started to join the theatre: James Cousins,

50 See Hogan 2. p9 - 12, for an account of the democratic discussions that took place during this period.

51 Hogan 2. p 12.

52 Hogan 2. p 13.

53 Hogan 2. p 60 - 63.

Padraic Colum, J.M. Synge and, slightly later, William Boyle were among the first to contribute plays to the theatre. The repertoire was growing, but were these writers to become true playwrights within the theatre? In spite of a growing confidence in the actual presentation of the theatre, brought about by growing democracy, the selection of plays remained a formal process. While the Fays, with their dedication to the idea of training and development of skills, took over the responsibility of production, the selection of the new drama remained the mandate of Yeats and Lady Gregory. For all their appreciation of the need for the development of acting skills, the two directors saw little need to change their attitude to the submission of new plays. The content of the plays, within the new theatre company, was still intended to be serious and serious drama was still considered to be literature.

By 1913, when Lady Gregory was writing *Our Irish Theatre*, the directors were confident of their contribution to the development of playwriting in Ireland.

As Lady Gregory puts it in her chapter on 'play-writing':

We were accused for a while of smothering the work of young writers in order that we might produce our own, but time has done away with that libel, and we are very proud of the school of drama that has come into being through the creation of our theatre.⁵⁴

Lady Gregory goes into detail about the method of selection for Abbey plays, explaining the workings of a reading committee, which took over the burden of reading all submitted work under the supervision of Yeats and Lady Gregory herself. Perhaps the most interesting inclusion within this chapter is the printed form written by Yeats, sent to playwrights whose work "is not good enough to produce, but yet shows some skill in construction or dialogue".⁵⁵ This form was entitled: 'Advice to Playwrights who are sending plays to the Abbey, Dublin'. In the early years of the Abbey Theatre, this document was to be the greatest dramaturgical contribution of the directors towards the growing school of writers.

⁵⁴ *Our Irish Theatre*. p 63.

⁵⁵ *Our Irish Theatre*. p 61-62.

The content of this 'Advice to Playwright's is clearly laid out. Yeats starts by stressing the "educational" nature of the Theatre, the plays of which are containing "some criticism of life". The bulk of the document stresses this point, arguing extensively about the content of plays. There is little advice on the method of construction, merely finishing with the following paragraphs:

The Abbey Theatre is continually sent plays which show that their writers have not understood that the attainment of this unity, by what is usually a long shaping and reshaping of the plot, is the principal labour of the dramatist, and not the writing of the dialogue.

Before sending plays of any length, writers would often save themselves some trouble by sending a 'Scenario', or scheme of the plot, together with one completely written act and getting the opinion of the Reading Committee as to its suitability before writing the whole play.⁵⁶

No suggestion is made that the scenario could be used as the basis for active, two-way discussion. The attitude of the time was that the writer should not come near the theatre until the agreement to produce the work is finalised. The general tone of the document is one of distance and discouragement: there is no personal touch to the proceedings, by the very fact that this document is a pre-printed sheet, sent out regardless of the personal problems of the individual writer. Such actions suggest a lack of sensitivity and intensity within the theatre: a dependence on bureaucracy and inflexible policy. Despite the widening of the groups appeal and membership in 1901, there still seemed to be a distance between the directors and the creation of the art.

This distance is underlined by the official position of the Fay brothers within the organisation, particularly after 1905, when the "society" was dissolved into a "limited" company, which according to Hogan and Kilroy, "signalled the end of a democratic society of amateur players by concentrating the governing responsibilities in the hands of a board of directors which consisted of Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory".⁵⁷ As this statement demonstrates, there was no

⁵⁶ *Our Irish Theatre*. p62.

⁵⁷ Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *The Abbey Theatre: The Years of Synge, 1905 - 1909*. *Modern Irish Drama*, vol. 3. p34 -35. Henceforth referred to as Hogan 3.

position on the Board for either of the Fay brothers, meaning that the two people involved with implementing artistic policy in the theatre had no real authority.

The limitations on both Frank and Willie Fay were to lead to problems and misunderstandings regarding the aims and actions of the company. Both brothers had to implement discipline within an organisation where they were virtually ignored. This was becoming a problem for Frank Fay as early as 1903; when he complained, in a letter to Yeats, about the complacency and lack of dedication the actors had. "I am always anxious to help people who want to learn what I can teach but no one comes."⁵⁸ Willie Fay seems to have been better liked by the company, but as the official stage manager, tended to get more criticism. On the infrequent occasions when Miss Horniman exerted her right of opinion on artistic affairs, it tended to be Willie Fay who faced the full force. This was seen when the company was on tour in 1906. Willie Fay managed to hold out against Horniman, but in an undated letter, while on tour, quoted by Hogan and Kilroy,⁵⁹ he demonstrates how he was answerable to the Directors. The letter explains and gives an insight into the normal tribulations of a stage manager: dealing with disputes within the acting company over parts; dealing with payment and scenery. The fact that Fay has to write to Yeats with these problems demonstrates how unprepared the Directors were to delegate: a situation that could hardly lead to a consistent approach to the creation of the theatre.

It should be stressed that both Frank and Willie Fay were, by nature, practical men who understood the difficulties of running a theatre. Willie Fay wrote to Yeats in 1905, stating: "I knew quite well that in a business like this there can be no democracy." Fay demonstrated that he realised how a more direct control on the theatre could strengthen the quality of the work, asking the question of Russell, the leader of the democrats: "Would he suggest electing the Secretary of the Department by vote of the officials, or is a man put into the position

58 Hogan 2. p 56

59 Hogan 3. p 77 - 78.

because a capable person to do the work?"⁶⁰ This is all very well, but if the Directors -- those with direct authority over the theatre -- are not prepared to get involved fully in the running of the theatre, then any "direct authority" fails to be direct and becomes distant. None of the directors seemed inclined to assist the Fay brothers with the running of the theatre, choosing to communicate by letter.

This distance is demonstrated by the Abbey Theatre's initial treatment of one of its most popular playwrights, William Boyle. At the time of the Abbey's production of his first play, *The Building Fund* (1905), William Boyle was living in London, working as a civil servant. It was impossible for the playwright, in this instance, to become involved with rehearsals: a disadvantage of which Boyle was well aware. On 13 April, Boyle wrote to his friend, George Roberts, explaining his desire to see a rehearsal in order to "improve the language of the dialogue by changing a word here and there...".⁶¹ Earlier, just after the initial completion and submission of *The Building Fund*, Boyle had written a letter to another friend within the Movement, D.J. O'Donoghue, in which he shows that he is acutely aware of the difficulties of geographical distance. Reporting the criticisms that the Abbey had made to him (by letter), Boyle suggests changes he could make, yet feels frustrated by the situation he is in:

Now, I want you if you can do so without much trouble to see Fay and sound him on this. A man will naturally speak more freely to one he knows than he would care to write to one he doesn't know. There were also some slight alterations he mentioned to you might be needed. If I knew his mind I could make one job of the rewriting.⁶²

Not all of the tension identified in the relationship between the Abbey and William Boyle can be attributed to geographical distance. Boyle's style of writing and the popularity of the plays did not suit the Directors, with their literary inclinations. On reading Boyle's work, today, one can see clearly a weakness of style. The three popular comedies written at this time, *The Building Fund*, *The*

⁶⁰ Hogan 3. p 36.

⁶¹ Hogan 3. p 27.

⁶² Hogan 2. p 118.

Eloquent Dempsy (1906) and *The Mineral Workers* (1906), were all well-made plays, but without theatrical innovation, using melodrama as much as realism and adopting popular themes and issues that hide behind comedy when they become too intense. These plays, based on the Irish issues of the time, but without the Irish spirit, language and style obvious in the plays of the Abbey Directors, gave the audience what they wanted to hear, but went against the principle of serious drama and left the Directors with a dilemma. How could they encourage the new playwrights to develop their plays with greater integrity, while avoiding the charge of exclusivity directed at them by certain members of their audience?

One such member of the audience was of course, Joseph Holloway, who described Boyle's first play, *The Building Fund*, as a "splendid popular success" and goes on to comment on the "struggle it had to pass the committee of literary cranks", who are described as being the "mutual admiration dramatists".⁶³ Synge, while sharing Yeats's view that the play was "impossibly vulgar", may well have had Holloway's opinions in mind, as he sheds some light on the Directors' situation through this letter to Yeats:

It is, of course, in many ways a very capable piece of work -- both in dialogue and putting together, although there are points I do not like -- but I think it is too near the conventional historical play and has too much conventional pathos to be the sort of thing we want. On the other hand, we seem to be short of plays, and it is hard to say on what pretext we should vote against this stuff, however little we may like it.⁶⁴

It looks as if the Directors were only too conscious of their reputation for disparaging popular work and were anxious to avoid unpopularity. But if the Directors were to have taken a more active role in the creation of the art, then these feelings of isolation would not have occurred. It would have been possible to discuss their ideas with their potential playwrights, clarify the Theatre's commitment to serious drama, assist with the drafting of their work and to strengthen their right to be dictatorial.

63 Holloway. p 57.

64 Hogan 3. p 29.

It should be stressed that the Directors did try to advise and assist the younger dramatists, not only by sending out pre-printed sheets, but with hands-on assistance. Perhaps the best example is that of Padraic Colum, who at the age of twenty-two, in 1903, provided the Movement with their first true commercial success, *Broken Soil*. In the latter half of 1902, Colum was already known to the "elders" of the movement, being assisted and championed by George Russell who stated: "He is a rough jewel at present, but a real one. I prophesy about him." Hogan and Kilroy, who quote the above, state that,

(Colum) had submitted himself to an apprenticeship in playwriting, working with the Fays, AE and Yeats in perfecting dramatic techniques, and activity which very soon proved successful when, in 1903, *Broken Soil* was produced.⁶⁵

Broken Soil proved that the Movement could encompass younger, less well known writers, capable of producing important work. The fairly objective newspaper, *The Irish Times*, praised the play:

It is a cleverly constructed work; the dialogue is natural and energetic; the idea running through the three acts is of the very essence of sound drama; the characters are clearly drawn; and there is not from first to last a moment without interest.⁶⁶

The talent at work was to develop further with plays like *The Land* (1905) and *Thomas Muskerry* (1910): the former, another big success for the Abbey Theatre; the latter, a play worthy of revival to this day.⁶⁷

Colum, however, had nationalist instincts. This was to create tension between the playwright and the Theatre, the Directors believing that such influences would effect the objectivity of his work. In another early play, *The Saxon Shillin'* (1903), the Directors were proved to be right. Refused by Yeats and the Fays for its theatrical slightness, it led to accusations from Maud Gonne, a leading advocate of the nationalist cause, that the Fays and the Directors of the Theatre were "terrorising" Colum. The uneasy balance in loyalty led to Colum

65 Hogan 2. p 42.

66 Hogan 2. p 87.

67 To date, the new Abbey Theatre has failed to produce any revivals of the work of Padraic Colum.

Figure Three. Lady Gregory, by Gerald Festus Kelly.



finally leaving the theatre in 1907, to join the Theatre of Ireland,⁶⁸ actions that Sanford Sternlicht -- a major scholar on the work of Colum -- considered to be "one of the great mistakes of his life". Sternlicht continues:

At twenty-six he was too young and too green to stand alone. The Abbey had nurtured the primitive artist and given him time and scope to develop.⁶⁹

In 1906, when Colum was planning a production of *The Land* for what Fay was to term "the enemy", Lady Gregory wrote to Colum to argue against his moving away from the Abbey. One of the reasons she gave was that "you cannot have forgotten the most generous and wholehearted help Mr. Yeats gave you on this very play, taking his best thought, his time and energy from his own work to do so".⁷⁰

It seems, therefore, that Colum benefited from the dramaturgical assistance of Yeats during the early years of the Movement and the fact that he moved eventually away from the Abbey does not diminish this achievement. The fact remains, however, that Colum was acting without close contact with the Directors of the Abbey. The discussions over his leaving are conducted by letter; his leaving was not due to gradual intentions or a desire to discover wider influences, but to disagreements and conflicts that owe more to misunderstanding and inflexibility. The distance between playwright and director at the Abbey led to the early exits of both Colum and (temporarily) Boyle from the Theatre.

Colum and the support he received was an exception to the rule of the Abbey Theatre. Influenced by the insistence that good theatre was literature, the Directors of the Abbey continued to send out impersonal statements to potential writers. The faceless contact, conversely, may well have been influenced by a

68 The Theatre of Ireland was a national theatre organisation, set up in rivalry to the Abbey, in May 1906, by Stephen Gwynn and Edward Martyn who, by then, had become disaffected with his former partners. The organisation was to remain amateur but received tremendous support from many established practitioners who were firmly committed to the nationalist cause. See Hunt, p67.

69 Sanford Sternlicht (ed.), *Selected Plays of Padraic Colum*. (New York: Syracuse University, 1986). p xiii.

70 Hogan 3. p 59.

desire not to appear too exclusive. If the theatre had adopted a policy in which they shared close contact with the playwrights -- allowing accommodation to write, giving detailed and personal advice, insisting on their attendance at rehearsals -- then it would have been likely that there would have been fewer writers available. The limited resources of the theatre meant that the directors could not support a large group of writers. At the time, and with justification, the aim of the directors was still to "build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature". The Directors demanded quantity and in terms of the actual number of new plays produced, up until 1915, the Abbey can be seen as a prolific new writing theatre. Few of the authors of these new plays, however, were ever considered to be members of the company: actual playwrights of the Abbey. With hindsight, however, it is clear that this isolation from the institution was to impair the lasting impact of many of these new writers and therefore reduced the achievement of producing a large quantity of new plays.

During the first ten years or so of the Movement's occupation of the Abbey Theatre, more and more Irish men and women were beginning to write plays and send them to the company. New plays by W.B. Yeats and the prolific Lady Gregory were seen less and less at the Theatre. Between 1899 and 1910, Lady Gregory and Yeats provided twenty-five new plays for the Abbey between them. This amounts to a massive forty percent. From 1910 to 1915, the collective percentage of new plays from Yeats and Lady Gregory dropped to eighteen percent. This drop was due mainly to a large increase of new plays by new authors. By 1915, the Abbey Theatre had produced 117 new plays: a considerable number. Fifty-two different playwrights had contributed to this achievement, with only four writers, apart from Yeats and Gregory, contributing more than four plays: Synge; William Boyle; Lennox Robinson and St John Ervine. These figures prove that the Directors had achieved their aim in reducing the exclusivity of the Theatre.

In terms of lasting impact and the establishing of a writer's theatre, however, such a wide body of contributors may not have been a good thing. In his book *The Story of the Abbey Theatre*, Peter Kavanagh, rightly acknowledges the difference between the Abbey and other developing theatres at the time:

Many of the small theatres that came into existence during the same period are remembered because they helped in the development of a single dramatist of genius: the Moscow Art Theatre (1898) produced Chekhov; the Théâtre Libre in Paris (1887) helped Ibsen [*sic*]; the Avenue Theatre in London (1894) produced Shaw's first play. The Abbey Theatre in Dublin, however, produced a whole school of dramatists, many of whom were of the first rank. Immediately the names of Yeats, Synge, O'Casey, Lady Gregory, Colum, Robinson, and Murray come to mind.⁷¹

Kavanagh's examples are somewhat double-edged. Is it possible to compare the work of Chekhov, Ibsen and Shaw with that of Lennox Robinson or T.C. Murray or even Yeats himself? By making the comparison, Kavanagh has unwittingly brought to light the continual preoccupation the Abbey has with quantity.

Of the fifty-two playwrights who worked for the Abbey up until 1915, thirty-one contributed only one play. These writers do not write for the theatre again, giving up on playwriting before their work had chance to develop and mature. The vast majority of these writers are totally unknown to us today. The lack of personal contact had not encouraged them to develop their work. Of the writers who continued to write, how many can credit the Abbey for actually developing their work? How many of the seven mentioned by Kavanagh have made a lasting impact on theatre?

In the new Abbey Theatre, after the opening in 1966, revivals of the Abbey repertoire from the earliest years of the Theatre are few and far between. There have been nineteen plays by W.B. Yeats produced in the new theatre, most within special festivals set up in his honour in the Peacock Theatre.⁷² Lady

71 Peter Kavanagh, *The Story of the Abbey Theatre*. (New York: Devin-Adair, 1950. Reprinted and published by the National Poetry Foundation, Orono, 1976). p 3.

72 Since 1989, the Abbey has been the home for the International Yeats Festival. The director of this festival, James Flannery, stages each year up to three Yeats plays from the old repertoire. Aside from providing the venue, the Abbey has little responsibility in the presentation of this work and has not, since the foundation of this festival, presented its own independent productions of Yeats's work.

Gregory has had ten of her plays revived in the new theatre and, as with Yeats's work, all these productions were produced in the Peacock Theatre. The implication is that neither playwright can command commercial success within the Abbey today. There have been four plays by Lennox Robinson and two plays by T.C. Murray produced at the new Theatre, but none from Padraic Colum. The bulk of the new theatre's acknowledgement of the old, has inevitably been through revivals of Sean O'Casey's first three plays and the work of J.M. Synge.⁷³

It is the work of Synge and O'Casey that has brought international recognition to the Irish Theatre. For all Yeats's supporters throughout the academic world, few theatres choose to produce his work, while Synge and O'Casey are considered as much part of the modern international repertoire as Ibsen, Shaw and Chekhov. By the time O'Casey saw his work produced at the Abbey, the Theatre had become established as the National Theatre with a subsidy from the newly created Free State. The Theatre already had an established repertoire of Irish plays which made it less preoccupied with the development of a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. The problems that O'Casey encountered through conflict with a pre-defined institution are dealt with in the next chapter. While the theatre was truly a pioneering theatre, defining its relationship with its writers, actors and audience and mirroring the cultural developments in the society in which it was created, the Abbey Theatre produced one playwright of lasting importance: J.M. Synge.

J.M. Synge has become acknowledged as one of the greatest playwrights of the twentieth century. Since his death in 1909, Synge's work has never been out of print. His plays are constantly revived, not only by the Abbey but by theatres around the world. *The Playboy of the Western World*, once reviled by Irish nationalists and used as evidence to criticise the suspect nationalism at the

⁷³ Between 1966 and the end of 1989, there have been 15 productions of plays by J.M. Synge at the Abbey, and 11 productions of the first three plays by Sean O'Casey: see next chapter

Abbey, has become as much part of the nation's heritage as the Theatre that championed it.

Although the nation has adopted Synge as a literary figurehead, the Abbey rightly cherish their special association with the man and his work and make little attempt to advance in equal terms, the other playwrights that helped build up that early school of Irish plays. This is in direct conflict with Kavanagh's claim that the Abbey is associated with more than one playwright of importance. The advancement of the plays of Synge, however, has been enough to assure the Abbey of its place in history, on equal footing with the Moscow Arts Theatre and the Théâtre Libre.

The idea that the Abbey owes its early reputation, in the main, to its association with Synge, however, challenges immediately the importance of a writer's theatre. With dramatists of such genius as Synge, is collaboration and ongoing association a true theatrical necessity? At first glance, it appears that dramaturgical assistance was the last thing Synge required in the crafting of his plays.

Synge was a man of independent spirit who enjoyed contradicting the enemies of the Abbey and their supposed unified strength. There is little doubt that his plays were bound to upset the audiences of Dublin at the time and his short interview given to *The Evening Mail* at the time of *The Playboy* riots, considered to be rash, does demonstrate his impatience and belligerence when confronted with a united front of criticism: "I wrote the play because it pleased me", he stressed, while insisting that it was "a comedy, an extravaganza, made to amuse". Synge is reported to believe that he didn't "care a rap how people take it".⁷⁴ A lot of this aggression could be due to an instinctive defensiveness, but the playwright always showed natural aloofness towards not only the audiences of his plays but the company that presented them. While the Theatre and particularly

74 David H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens, *J.M. Synge, 1871 - 1909*. (Revised Edition, New York University, 1989). p 258 - 259

Yeats made every effort to support the plays of Synge, Synge never acknowledges the fight made on his behalf by those people who were meant to be on his side. Malcolm Kelsall has written extensively on the relationship between the Fays and Synge during rehearsals for *The Playboy of the Western World*. Willie Fay believed that Synge was really out to annoy his audience and would not make any changes that were suggested. As Fay puts it with a hint of exasperation, "We might as well as saved our breath."⁷⁵ Kelsall believes that Synge gave no help to the actors, who were obviously worried about the reaction the play would receive, demonstrating a contempt for those who were actually involved with the creation. For the greatest dramatist of the movement, Synge seemed to have little interest in the creation of theatre through the development of a rehearsal.

Such an indifference to the proceedings within rehearsal tends to underline the fact that Synge was a firm believer in the idea that serious drama was part of literature. In writing to Frank Fay, Synge stressed that: "The whole interest of our movement is that our little plays try to be literature first.... and drama afterwards."⁷⁶ To his mind, plays were the responsibility of the dramatist and the dramatist alone. Ann Saddlemyer points out that, "the incessant revising and meticulous polishing of his plays took place in the study, not on the stage".⁷⁷ Constant rewriting was required before even his closest associates could read the play: Synge would write several versions of a play, lettering each version. After the problems with *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge's friend, Agnes Tobin wrote from London: "What a blessing you did not go on to version 'L' if version 'K' has had such a disastrous effect."⁷⁸

If the creation of the plays that, in turn, created the Movement happened outside the Abbey, then it can be implied that the Abbey, not only never was a writer's theatre, but never needed to be. It is through the success of the work of

75 Malcolm Kelsall, "The Playboy before the Riots", *Theatre Research International*, Vol. 1, No.1 October 1975). p29.

76 Letter to Frank Fay, April 1904..

77 Ann Saddlemyer (ed.). *J.M. Synge: Plays*. (Oxford: Oxford University, 1968). p xi

78 Greene. p 263.

J.M. Synge that the idea of a literary theatre appears to be justified. Here was a dramatist creating the most theatrical of plays who, by his own admission, preferred to complete his work within the study. Like all Independent Theatres at the time, it was assumed that all the Abbey had to do, to assist the cause of the serious dramatist, was to exist: providing a place for the plays to be presented. This theory is undermined, however, by a closer examination of the relationship between Synge and the Abbey.

The Abbey can lay claim to actively assisting the development of Synge's work by pointing to his involvement as a Director within the Theatre. Synge was not dealt with at arms length and, in this sense, was treated differently from any other writer. Through becoming a Director of the Theatre, it could be suggested that in some way, Synge was provided with an instinctive form of dramaturgy.

In the first instance there is little reason for Synge's co-option to the Board of Directors, having little to do with the Theatre in its early years and not being the first playwright to come to the notice of the original Directors. There seems to be little analysis of the growing relationship between Synge and Yeats and Lady Gregory, previous to 1905. Neither Hogan and Kilroy nor Synge's biographers -- David Greene and Edward Stephens or Maurice Bourgeois -- make any comment on the dramatist's suitability for the post of Director.⁷⁹ By 1905, however, when the appointment took place, it is assumed that Synge has equal footing with the other dramatist-directors: much to the chagrin of Miss Horniman who, rightly, believed Synge's growing importance as an infringement of what she saw as the Theatre's main reason for existence: to develop the art of W.B. Yeats.

Perhaps Synge's co-option was due to a traditional sense of propriety. For all Synge's belief in his own independence and individualism, he was still easily identified as a member of the ascendancy class within Ireland. As a member of the upper-middle class, a Protestant and with a Trinity College education, Synge's

⁷⁹ Maurice Bourgeois. *John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre*. (New York: Haskell House, 1966).

background was similar to Renaissance leaders such as George Russell, Douglas Hyde and Yeats himself. Such a background would seem superior than those of either Fay brothers or other aspiring writers such as Colum or Boyle, at least to Yeats with his ingrained feudalistic vision.

Whatever the reason for Synge's appointment, his work as Director assisted the development of his own writing. Synge had the opportunity to read, assess and comment on plays by other dramatists, forcing him to widen his interest and balance his opinions of theatre. From 1905, Synge was writing a series of letters, coming into contact with many writers and actors, working and talking extensively with both Lady Gregory and Yeats, and in doing so, demonstrated his critical involvement as well as a practical objectivity that could only have widened and refreshed his understanding of drama and drama production.⁸⁰

As the one Director resident in Dublin, it was natural that Synge was to become involved closely with the day-to-day running of the Theatre. According to David Greene, Yeats suggested that Synge become Managing Director, implying that the latter was in a better position, both geographically and politically, to administer the Abbey. In contrast with his image as an aloof poet, Synge launched himself into the running of the Theatre, with energy and sensitivity. Greene lists his actions:

Synge's first experience at running a professional theatre could not have taken him through a more critical period. He had difficulty keeping Yeats from feuding with AE, who was in sympathy with the seceders. He helped the Fays to recruit and train new actors, and he continued to read new manuscripts submitted to the directors.⁸¹

Synge was also to take a greater creative role, taking on the production of plays other than his own. Synge directed successful productions of several Lady

⁸⁰ For a full consideration of Synge's involvement with the Abbey, see Chapters 8 to 14 in Greene.

⁸¹ Greene. p214.

Gregory plays, in particular, her versions of *Teja* and *The Rogueries of Scapin* (both 1908).

Perhaps the most important influence on Synge's writing, deriving from his work as Director, was due to the close friendship he felt for the company. Synge was a companion to both Fay brothers; he travelled with the company while on tour and, most significantly, Synge fell in love with one of the actresses, Molly Allgood. Such an association enabled him to craft his parts and characters with the specific actors available. Synge comments continually, in letters to Molly Allgood, that he was writing parts for her. He experienced difficulty with the final script of *Deidre of the Sorrows* because of the isolation he endured during his final illness. He wrote to Molly Allgood: "I long to hear you read the part, as it is meant to be spoken."⁸² Elsewhere, he is insistent that J.M. Kerrigan should not resign (over the Fay incident), because *Deidre* would be impossible without him.⁸³ Such an approach to creating characters demonstrates a practicality alien to the "high art" of literature.

Through his love letters as well as through his relations with other members of the company, Synge lives down any reputation for being isolating and aloof. What one sees from all his letters is a sense of realism. When dealing with Yeats, he is pragmatic; when writing to his long-term friend John MacKenna, he is amusing; when communicating with Molly, he is, at times, pathetic and hurt, at others, patronising, but with all his letters as with his dealings in conversation, Synge is honest and open, allowing the reality of every situation to be the main influence on his opinion and his ideas. Through the close association between Synge and the Abbey, the dramatist's plays are crafted with rounded characters, developed along side the continued intimacy between writer and theatre.

This informal influence on Synge, perpetrated by his formal association with the Abbey, developed in him a strong feeling for theatre, a continued and

⁸² Greene. p329

⁸³ Greene. p 307.

exciting communication, that no other writer experienced through contact with the institution during this period. Of course, many Irish writers managed, during the early years of the Abbey Theatre, to create successful plays without stepping outside the private study, happy to be considered members of the literary profession. And yet, Synge, their most successful colleague, who himself expressed a desire to see drama as literature, experienced the influence of personality and human contact that was available to him due to his unique position within the Abbey: an experience that all the Abbey writers could have shared if there was an individual, informal and encouraging influence in authority within the institution.

Until Joe Dowling took over in 1978, there has been no individual able to instil a personal vision upon the theatre designed to encourage a writer's dramatic experimentation. Such a damaging situation had been forced upon the theatre by a belief that the Abbey's political role as Irish National Theatre was not only sacred, but was an artistic policy in itself. The firm, yet misguided, strictures imposed by the founders -- the political and literary preoccupations, the inexperience that led to failings in the early work, a preoccupation with the directors' work, a lack of authority for the stage managers -- all cemented together to create an impregnable façade of artistic propriety, that was in place by the death of Synge, and remained intact until Dowling's appointment.

Chapter Two: The Abbey Theatre 1916 - 1960. The Playwright and Institutional Morality

LENNOX ROBINSON: Well Yeats, the Abbey is making a fresh start. You have lost an Old Player and engaged some new ones. Do you intend to make any changes in the theatre's policy - I mean in the kind of plays you produce?

W.B. YEATS: It seems to me that you should go to our playwrights, not to me. It is for them to change their policy - if a change is desirable.¹

In this extract from a debate of 1919, Yeats asserts his fundamental respect for the playwright. As the Abbey faced the challenge of meeting the demands of a changing national status, the founder believed that serious literary playwrights would crop up and contribute plays reflecting the new world in new ways and ease the National Theatre on its evolutionary way. But what Yeats could not, and would not, account for was the fact that the literary system that had been determined by the Directors' distance and exclusivity could not hope to give the would-be playwright an active opportunity to shape the destiny of Irish theatre. No playwright was to replace the exclusive position Synge had held as Director. Synge, according to Robinson, had "shaped the Theatre, he was not shaped by it". Now, writers needed to be shaped by it: in Robinson's words, to have "their dramatic education in the theatre itself".² Only then would the writers retain control of the Theatre's destiny. But the literary shape defined by Synge and Yeats meant that future writers of drama would never contribute to a changing policy: they were too isolated in their studies, cut off from the exclusive club of the Abbey Theatre.

1 "Abbey Theatre - Mr. W.B. Yeats and Mr. Lennox Robinson Discuss its Policy", *Freeman's Journal*. 26 April 1919.

2 Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham. *The Art of the Amateur. 1916-1920. The Modern Irish Drama. Vol. 5.* (Dublin: Dolman Press, 1984). p 197. Henceforth referred to as Hogan 5.

Following Synge's death and given Yeats's growing impatience with producing realistic plays, the days of the private club were soon to be over. By 1919 Annie Horniman's subsidy was long gone and the theatre had to make its own way.³ New blood and a new system of management was required, enabling the National Theatre to survive beyond the lives of the founders. In 1919, Yeats and Robinson debated the future, but the destiny of the Abbey had, for several years, been apparent. As the new Ireland moved into the 1920s, the Abbey would start a twenty-year evolutionary process: from private club into establishment institution.

The institutionalisation of the Abbey did nothing to reduce the distance between playwright and Theatre. A larger Board of Directors, including Lennox Robinson, and a state subsidy provided the Abbey with an automatic right of existence, but did little to develop individual artistic freedom. The distance determined by the intransigent policy of individuals was replaced by a distance determined by committee, with little policy beyond that of collective cultural responsibility. This was to lead to a situation in which the individual playwright was infinitely less important than the institution itself.

The movement towards institutionalisation began with the managerial difficulties experienced during the five years before Lennox Robinson was re-engaged as Manager in 1919. Between 1914 and 1919, four Managers were employed: A. Patrick Wilson; St John Ervine; J. Augustus Keogh and Fred O'Donovan. According to D.E.S. Maxwell, "three of them were intent on furthering their own careers". A vicious circle was in place, with the directors desperately needing the services of a Manager to leave them free for their widening interests and problems, but refusing to give total control to the person they employed. The Managers may well have been putting their own interests

³ Miss Horniman finally lost patience with the Abbey in 1910. An agreement was reached in February of that year, whereby she would continue to pay the subsidy until the end of the year, when she would sell the lease of the Theatre to the Directors for a greatly reduced sum of £1000: a final act of generosity from the woman who had made the Abbey possible.

before that of the theatre, but as Maxwell implies, "Yeats's deliberating presence did not induce hopes of permanence".⁴

The appointment of Ervine is interesting. As a playwright, he had first come into contact with the Abbey, upon their presentation of his first full length play, *Mixed Marriage* in 1911. From then until well into the 1930s, Ervine provided successful plays for the Abbey and his appointment as Manager in 1915 implies a close association between playwright and theatre, beneficial to the writing of drama. Unfortunately, neither he nor the Directors saw the advantages of such an association: Ervine dismissed all suggestions that the Abbey's major role was that of an Irish writer's theatre. John Cronin comments: "As manager of the Abbey, he made clear his intention to produce there such works as *Samson Agonistes* and *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, and his conviction that no worthwhile plays were being written in Ireland."⁵ At a meeting of the Dublin Literary Society in 1916, he refuted in characteristically aggressive style the idea that the Abbey was not doing enough for new Irish drama:

The truth is that we have not produced new works of genius at the Abbey because the new works of genius have not been offered to us. I have read about a hundred plays in the past four months. The overwhelming majority of them were poor plays; they were not even second or third rate. Is it my fault? Is it the fault of the Directors of the Abbey Theatre? A Synge is not to be found in every café.⁶

Such comments were hardly going to instil confidence in the potential playwright. Ervine had little intention of making the Abbey a theatre for dramatists: the idea that the playwright was separate from the running of the theatre was now firmly established, as Yeats was to comment to Ervine when gently easing him out of his position as manager: "Management and the work of authorship are hardly compatible in the long run."⁷

4 D.E.S. Maxwell. *A Critical History of Modern Irish Drama 1891 - 1980*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). p 80.

5 St John Ervine. *Selected Plays*. Introduced by John Cronin. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1988). p 8.

6 Hogan 5. p15.

7 Hogan 5. p33.

Lennox Robinson comments: "During these four years, 1914-18, not many great plays were being written."⁸ This was not only due to distance inspired by literary distinctions of drama, or by managerial tension. Indeed, the problem faced in the selection of Managers was due in part to wider problems for the Abbey: problems that made the lack of plays pale into insignificance. Maxwell comments: "The natural strains of management, it is true, were aggravated by the lack of guaranteed funding, aggravated in its turn by greater events."⁹ The Abbey was struggling to remain open against the background of growing social unrest. From 1914 when Dublin was reeling from the effects of the General Strike and Lock-Out, to 1923 when the Irish Civil War finally petered out, the Abbey had to fight to remain solvent. Dublin was experiencing curfews, structural damage and understandable antipathy towards serious drama, on the part of a tired population. A particular example of this unrest and its effects on the Theatre was seen in March 1921 when Dublin was under night-time curfew, making evening performances impossible. The Abbey had to close and lay off its actors. As before, in times of crisis, the burden of survival was placed firmly on the shoulders of the ageing Lady Gregory, who according to Hunt, "hastened to London to raise an Abbey Theatre Fund, appealing to her influential friends and to the theatre's many admirers".¹⁰ This was not the first time Lady Gregory had used her personal influence to secure the survival of the Abbey. More than Yeats, she cared personally about the Theatre, and during these difficult times, struggled to keep the place open, sometimes directing plays and, on one occasion, going on stage herself.¹¹ In 1921, London again came to the rescue of the Abbey. Lady Gregory wrote in her diary: "Yesterday by second post a letter from Lady

8 Lennox Robinson. *Ireland's Abbey Theatre. A History 1899 - 1951*. (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1951). p100.

9 Maxwell. p 79.

10 Hugh Hunt. *The Abbey, Ireland's National Theatre. 1904 - 1979*. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1979). p104.

11 On 17 March 1918, Lady Gregory appeared as "The Old Woman" in *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*. *The Evening Telegraph* commented that she "displayed little sign of perturbation, and her study of the poor old woman was impressive". Hogan 5. p 193.

Ardilaun with a cheque for £500! So the Abbey is safe for a long time, I hope for ever!"¹² This private association, however, could not hope to save a theatre which was getting bigger and costlier by each season. Five hundred pounds was a lot for one individual, but to save what was becoming a national organisation, it was derisory. Lady Gregory's struggle was admirable, but it meant that development was always short term with little thought given to expansion of the repertoire: survival was the one priority.

The actions of Lady Gregory, during these years, demonstrate her commitment to the Abbey and her determination to retain a personal stake in proceedings. Over the next ten years, her opinions and advice still influenced the organisation, but the idea that the Abbey was a private club, run on the whims of Yeats and Gregory, was dying. Two decisions were made which assured stability for and the existence of the Abbey for future generations, but failed to secure the active involvement of the playwright.

The first of these decisions had already been made. In April 1919, Lennox Robinson was appointed Manager. Robinson had held the post before: during the years after the death of Synge. At the time, he had demonstrated the indecision and inexperience of youth: it is widely believed that his actions in keeping the Theatre open on the day of Edward VII's death led to the withdrawal of Miss Horniman's money. Lady Gregory was reluctant initially to re-appoint Robinson, but Yeats was insistent. As he wrote to his fellow Director:

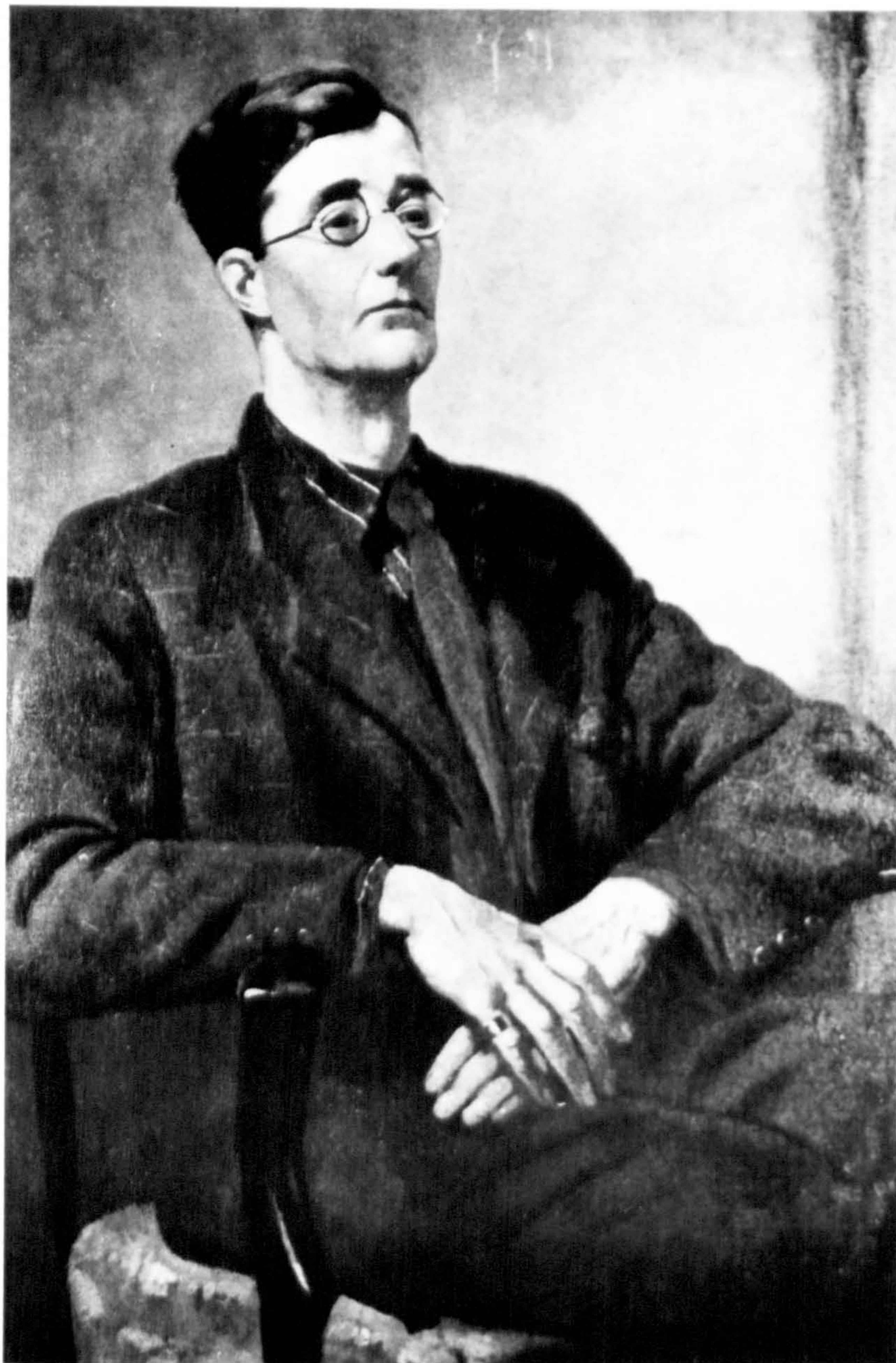
Lennox Robinson represents the Ireland that must sooner or later take the work from us; the sooner that some young man who feels that his own future is bound up with the Abbey is put in charge, the better.¹³

After the self-interest of the preceding managers, Yeats's insistence on loyalty was understandable. Further to this was Yeats's clear realisation that they must find someone who could gradually take greater responsibility for the Theatre. At the time, Robinson was Yeats's man. Yeats was prepared to show trust from the

12 Hunt. p105

13 Hunt. p114.

Figure Four. Lennox Robinson, by James S. Sleator.



beginning, arranging for Robinson to become a shareholder and member of the Board. Although his position was to be reviewed annually, Robinson had broken the duopoly at the Abbey Theatre, becoming the first Board member from outside the original organisation.

Lennox Robinson, a Corkman born in 1886, was, in the words of Hunt, to prove "more resilient than his predecessors".¹⁴ Yeats was to be proved right about his new Manager's loyalty: Robinson was to be the first in a long line of servants of the Abbey, who were to dedicate themselves to realising what they believed to be the spirit of the Abbey tradition. Unfortunately, there was little sign that Robinson believed the active encouragement of new playwrights to be part of that tradition. Like St. John Ervine, he had first come to the attention of the Abbey as a dramatist. His first play, *The Clancy Name*, appeared in 1908, with a second, *The Crossroads*, a year later. While accepting greater responsibility for the development of the writer, Robinson saw the Abbey's encouragement of new writers to be of indirect involvement. His greatest contribution, during these early years, was to set up the Dublin Drama League: an organisation that would perform international plays on Sunday nights to stimulate the floundering Irish drama. At a public meeting, he expressed his belief that such an organisation would benefit the new writer.

Here in Ireland we are isolated, cut off from the thought of the world, except the English world, and from England we get little in drama, except fourth rate. I ask you, for the young writer's sake, to open up the door and let us out of our prison. Seeing foreign plays will not divorce our minds from Ireland... but being brought into touch with other minds who have different values of life, suddenly we shall discover the rich material that lies to our hand in Ireland.¹⁵

There is little doubt that the Dublin Drama League was a stimulus for the Irish theatre, until it was replaced by the more professional Gate Theatre in 1929.¹⁶ Whether it was a specific stimulus for the Irish writer, in particular, is

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Lennox Robinson, *Curtain Up*. (London: Michael Joseph, 1942). p 119.

¹⁶ For a clear analysis of the work of the Dublin Drama League, see B.K. Clarke and Harold Ferrar. *The Dublin Drama League 1919-1929*. (Dublin: Dolman, 1979).

very hard to determine. Inspiration is one thing, active involvement is quite another. The work of two playwrights who came into prominence during the next few years seems little influenced by the international repertoire and their relationship with the Abbey demonstrates the writer was still isolated.

The two writers were Brinsley Macnamara and George Shiels. Macnamara was a writer of comedy, whose first play for the Theatre *The Glorious Uncertainty* (1923) was to be a popular success. Throughout his association with the Abbey, however, he was a tireless critic of the Theatre policy. Macnamara was a pious Catholic, who demanded respect for the moral identity of the nation and was, therefore, hardly intent on active association determined by individual artistic insight. George Shiels was an even more popular writer, whose work was to dominate the Abbey for twenty years after the first presentation of his work in 1921. He was to have even less of a personal association with the Abbey. An accident in Canada, some years before, had left him permanently disabled and he found it difficult to move around and contribute fully to the theatrical experience. Robert Hogan states that: "Shiels saw only one of his plays, an Abbey performance in Belfast of *Professor Tim* which he witnessed from the wings."¹⁷ For the most part, the only way Shiels found it possible to communicate was by letter: a system that was quite acceptable to the Abbey.

Robinson's contribution as Manager to the Abbey, therefore, was to enlarge the repertoire, making the organisation more established within the Dublin theatre scene, but doing little to work out a practical structure for the development of new drama. The Abbey was growing and its priorities were changing. In 1922, the directors made the second, and more important decision that would lead to the institutionalisation of the Theatre. The Board approached the Provisional Government for the first time, in the hope that financial assistance would be forthcoming.

¹⁷ Robert Hogan. *After the Irish Renaissance*. (London: Macmillan, 1968). p34.

It is clear why such a decision was made. The Abbey needed a subsidy in order to survive. According to Hunt, the Theatre was on the verge of bankruptcy: "Obviously, the theatre could not continue to appeal to the charity of Lady Gregory's wealthy friends."¹⁸ But by accepting the assistance of the State, the Directors were knocking in the thin-end-of-the-wedge of institutional responsibility. Practical and essential though the state money was, it provided a potential danger to artistic freedom of which Lady Gregory and Yeats had, in times past, been only too aware. Subsidy meant influence or at least interference: after years of trying to placate Miss Horniman, the Directors cherished the freedom to do things their way and Lady Gregory was fond of stressing the principle behind this: "Our position is clear. If we have to choose between the subsidy and our freedom, it is our freedom we choose."¹⁹ When confronted with Miss Horniman, the Abbey stood up for what it believed in, lost her subsidy and soldiered on. Now, however, the Theatre was dealing with greater money and a larger body, well able to exert influence as and when it desired.

The first Government subsidy was granted to the Abbey Theatre in 1924. The sum of £850 had been pushed through by Ernest Blythe, the then Minister of Finance, for the Free State Government.²⁰ Blythe, a Gaelic League enthusiast, no doubt saw the possibilities for the Theatre to be exploited for the development of the Irish language. Little of his personal interest in the Abbey was seen at the time, but Peter Kavanagh's innocent profile of the man has a sting in the tail.

Blythe, the minister of finance, seemed a friendly and reasonable person, without much education, perhaps, but simple and without guile; or so it appeared at the time.²¹

The Establishment had their foot in the door of the Abbey Theatre. Blythe insisted that there should be a Governmental representative on the Abbey Board. In itself, such a request was not unjustified: Yeats and Lady Gregory were still in

18 Hunt. p134.

19 Peter Kavanagh. *The Story of the Abbey Theatre*. (Orono: University of Maine, 1984). p134

20 The sum of £850 was voted through for the financial year 1925-26. In the following year, the sum was increased to £1000.

21 Kavanagh. p125.

control and had their own ideas of how the theatre should be run, making it fairly impossible for one Governmental representative to overturn anything, particularly when the first Government appointee was George O'Brien, whose main interests were in economics and had little pretension to a knowledge of drama. When O'Brien did object to parts of O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, he was simply outvoted, whereupon, according to Kavanagh, "he graciously admitted that he had mistaken his position as being that of a censor".²²

O'Brien may well not have been a censor, but he was there as a representative of potential interference. If the State was to provide the money, it required the Abbey to accept the responsibility it had to the State: a State that was to have clearly defined ideas of what needed to be presented on the stage of the National Theatre. For the first time, some other organisation had the potential to hold a big stick to the Abbey, threatening the freedom of the repertoire: do something controversial and the grant is withdrawn. Such a threat is voiced indirectly, by O'Brien, when submitting his objections to *The Plough and the Stars*.

... the play might offend any section of public opinion so seriously as to provoke an attack on the theatre of a kind that would endanger the continuance of the subsidy.²³

While there was only one representative, such potential danger could be abated, but the principle had been defined and was to cause problems in future years.

It seems that the Abbey was to start out in the new era of national independence with its future assured. But whether the inclusion of new Directors with ideas about widening the repertoire of the theatre, or the acceptance of State funding with the inevitable demand for representation, were the actual contributing factors to the continuation of Abbey success during the 1920s, is a moot point. What was to bring the Abbey fame and fortune during these years

²² Kavanagh, p135.

²³ Garry O'Connor. *Sean O'Casey. A Life*. (London: Macmillan, 1988). p188.

was the discovery of a new playwright: new drama was still the saviour of the Abbey Theatre.

Sean O'Casey's three "Dublin" plays have made more impact than any other series of plays within the Abbey Theatre's history. The first of the three plays, *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), brought the crowds back to the Abbey, selling out for its first two-week run; the second play, *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), made an immediate impact in London, winning the Hawthornden Prize and a prestigious run at the Royalty Theatre, under the direction of J.B. Fagan; the final play, *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), prompted anguish and rioting among the morally righteous of Dublin, bringing debate and argument back into the theatre. As O'Casey's fame was being guaranteed by these events, the Abbey's own position as premier theatre in Ireland was being enhanced. To this day, the first three plays of O'Casey are performed extensively as part of the Abbey's repertoire and no history of the playwright's work would fail to mention the contribution made to his success by the Theatre.²⁴ But the debt the Abbey owes to O'Casey is less well documented and, at the time, the Management of the Theatre seemed unable to acknowledge his importance: the institution was becoming more important than the individual.

By a close analysis of the actual relationship between the Abbey and O'Casey, one discovers that the contribution made by the theatre to the successful completion of these plays was minimal. Indeed, the Abbey's one decisive practical act, which shaped O'Casey's destiny, was the rejection of his fourth play, *The Silver Tassie*: actions that would lead to the playwright rejecting his homeland and any possible relationship as a playwright within a theatre company.

The first contact between the Abbey and O'Casey demonstrates a disorganised and nonchalant system at work in the receipt of new scripts. O'Casey's first submission, in 1921, was a play called *The Crimson in the*

²⁴ Between 1966 and 1989, there were 11 productions at the Abbey Theatre of the first three plays of Sean O'Casey

Tricolour. He had written it out in long-hand and sent Robinson his only copy. According to O'Casey's biographer, Garry O'Connor, this document was lost while in the possession of the Abbey, prompting O'Casey to write it out again from memory. O'Connor stresses that "patience was a necessary attribute for the playwright", as, upon the second submission, O'Casey had to wait three months before he heard anything. When he did hear, the response was negative: outright rejection.²⁵ O'Casey was indeed patient and never complained about the length of time the process took. No individual was to blame for the disorganisation, but it proves that the Abbey, as an institution, was not really equipped to deal with new writing.

What O'Casey did complain about was the nature of the rejection. O'Casey showed a stubbornness and pride that were to characterise his association with the Theatre. Faced with a stream of negative criticism, he replied to Robinson, "I have re-read the work and find it as interesting as ever, in no way deserving the contemptuous dismissal it received".²⁶ While these comments show a quick-fire temper, they also show a demoralised playwright, stung by outright rejection. It is implied, both by O'Connor and by Hunt, that this rejection was designed deliberately, by a shrewd Robinson, to spur O'Casey on to greater things.²⁷ If this was the case it demonstrates an inability to deal with playwrights honestly and openly. If the play showed some merit, it would have been far better to communicate with the author and assist with any future drafting. If such had been the case, O'Casey might not have needed to hide behind his pride so often.

The rather patronising treatment by the Abbey of O'Casey's early work meant that throughout the association between company and playwright, there was ongoing tension and continued distance. O'Casey never became a member of the company. Jules Koslow comments: "Contrary to popular belief, O'Casey did not learn playwrighting [sic] by watching plays at the Abbey Theatre. O'Casey

25 O'Connor, p132.

26 O'Connor, p133.

27 Hunt, p121; O'Connor, p138.

himself reveals that he had been to the Abbey only three times before he wrote his first play and that he learned to write plays by reading and acting them out with his brother."²⁸ Kavanagh states: "O'Casey as a person never was considered by Yeats. He was a slum dweller, not a garreteer, and Yeats, who had become growingly [sic] aristocratic in behaviour, could never consider becoming a close friend of O'Casey."²⁹ Even with a more structured administration, therefore, the Abbey remained distant from its playwrights. O'Casey was happy with the success of his plays and gave credit where it was due, but found a barrier between himself and the institution: as Garry O'Connor comments, "The keepers of O'Casey's new temple were Yeats and Lady Gregory, but he still stood reverently on the steps ... they had yet to embrace him socially, to grant him the status of novice or even son".³⁰ When he finally became close to Lady Gregory, staying on one occasion at Coole, the relationship was developing a long way from the Theatre.

If the Abbey made a contribution to the success of O'Casey's first plays, it was through providing a company of actors worthy of the playwright's supreme characterisation. O'Casey has supplied some of the strongest character parts to be seen in twentieth-century theatre. The full potential of these parts was first realised, in 1924, by an Abbey company that had been rebuilding slowly after the defections, resignations and, in some cases, martyrdoms of the previous ten years. O'Casey's favourite actor, Barry Fitzgerald, as well as Gabriel Fallon and F.J. McCormick, were all comparatively new to the company. Sara Allgood had returned at the beginning of the 1920s. "The new company might have been hand picked to serve O'Casey's plays", comments Hunt, and he continues: "The stage was now set for the Abbey to be reborn through the marriage of players with the plays of a great playwright."³¹ It was, however, a rather traumatic marriage. The

28 Jules Koslow. *Sean O'Casey. The Man and his Plays*. (New York: Citadel, 1966).

29 Kavanagh. p138.

30 O'Connor. p156.

31 Hunt. p118.

performances by Allgood, Fitzgerald and McCormick as Juno, Boyle and Joxer respectively, in *Juno and the Paycock*, are among the most renowned acting successes recorded in Abbey history. Other younger members of the company, such as Gabriel Fallon, Shelah Richards and Ria Mooney, were given their chance to shine in *The Plough and the Stars*, and yet the relationship between O'Casey and the company was as distant and strained as was the relationship with the Directors. There is little doubt that O'Casey was tactless in his criticism of the acting. A particular enmity evolved between himself and F.J. McCormick. After a performance of *Man and Superman*, O'Casey went out of his way to criticise McCormick's performance in the part of Jack Tanner, writing publicly of "extravagant vehemence".³² On one occasion O'Casey was banned from the Green Room.³³ Such a relationship can be dismissed as trivial and unimportant: an inevitability, considering the temper of O'Casey. There is little doubt, however, that such distance was damaging. When Riots broke out over *The Plough and the Stars*, many actors rushed to support the play;³⁴ others, however, were reticent, with McCormick and Eileen Crowe denying all responsibility for the production.³⁵ While the playwright must take responsibility for his own tactlessness, it demonstrates how little contact there was between an Abbey playwright and the company. O'Casey was to admit later that, "Sean was altogether ignorant of jealousies behind the curtain".³⁶ No one thought to educate him: the company members were separate from the playwright; their place was on stage and his was in the study. An unfortunate attitude, because it, along with the general casualness the Abbey showed towards its greatest asset, was to cause the playwright to look elsewhere for stimulation. As Hunt comments:

³² O'Connor. p185.

³³ See O'Connor. p183-186.

³⁴ O'Casey comments on the disturbances on the Abbey stage during *The Plough and the Stars* riot: "Barry Fitzgerald became a genuine Fluther Good and fought as Fluther himself would fight, sending an enemy, who had climbed onto the stage, flying into the stalls with a Flutherian punch on the jaw".

³⁵ See Hunt. p126.

³⁶ Sean O'Casey. *Inishfallen, Fare thee Well*. Reproduced in *Autobiographies 2*. (London: Macmillan, 1963; rep. 1992). p145.

He was hurt by the coolness of the Abbey players, for his lack of tact in criticising their work had left him with few friends. Lennox Robinson was aloof, Yeats remote. On 5 March [1926], he packed his bag and went to London.³⁷

O'Connor believes that "there probably could not have been a Dublin trilogy without the Abbey Theatre". This is certainly true, but what was forgotten, as the Directors waited complacently for the next masterpiece, was that the opposite was just as true, if not more so. Robinson was to joke that no one should tell O'Casey of what the Abbey had done for him, for "he thinks there could be no Abbey Theatre without him".³⁸ This joke demonstrates a growing misunderstanding by both Robinson and the other Directors of their priorities. By 1926, the Abbey was into its second year of state funding: no more would the National Theatre of Ireland have to send out the begging bowl to admirers in London. Never again would the Abbey have to close on financial grounds. The Abbey would have survived without any of O'Casey's plays. But in what state? The answer was demonstrated by what was to come after O'Casey left for England, denying the Abbey the chance to contribute to the development of the greatest playwright in Irish history and leaving a theatre that looked increasingly into its own past for future success. Maxwell outlines and analyses the major actions of the Abbey during the final years of the 1920s.

In 1929 the Abbey rejected Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady says 'No!'*. In 1928 it had refused Sean O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie*. One excuse advanced has been that the Abbey's technical resources and its players could not do justice to the peculiar demands of either play. A more likely explanation is a failure of judgement and perhaps daring, a fault in the managerial central nervous system.³⁹

The central nervous system was certainly failing and this was due to the management believing their theatre to be bigger than the playwrights that contributed to it. Institutional responsibility was firmly established and any

37 Hunt. p130.

38 O'Connor p156.

39 Maxwell. p79.

commitment, on Yeats's part, to the idea of playwrights changing the policy of the theatre had been forgotten totally.

The rejection of *The Silver Tassie* brought condemnation by many at the time and has continued until the present day. Hunt comments: "Yeats, who had accused the Abbey audience of disgracing itself by failing to appreciate *The Plough and the Stars*, now disgraced himself and his theatre by rejecting *The Silver Tassie*."⁴⁰ At the time, most of the criticism was understandably about the play in isolation, as Shaw wrote to Lady Gregory: "You should have done it anyway.... it is a Hell of a play."⁴¹ Shaw was right, they should have done *The Silver Tassie* anyway, but not simply for the sake of the play. In many ways the Directors' judgement of the play, which led to their rejection, was justified. For all its innovations, *The Silver Tassie* is not a masterpiece in the way of O'Casey's previous three plays: as Maxwell comments, "Yeats could have made a case for questioning, though not rejecting, *The Silver Tassie*."⁴² It has become clear, however, that whatever the quality of the work, the Abbey owed O'Casey a production. Here was a playwright struggling to develop his own ideas of drama away from the dominant realism found in most Abbey productions: actions that Yeats should have applauded, but did not. Hunt observes clearly: "For the Abbey the rejection of *The Tassie* was to rob it of a playwright who might have weaned its audience off the deadly diet of popular comedy and spurious realism."⁴³ Note that Hunt writes "playwright" rather than "play". Whatever the quality of this first tentative exploration of expressionist style, the Abbey Directors should have realised that encouragement, assistance and, above all, presentation were required to develop O'Casey's ideas in future work. Because the play was not perfect, the Directors expressed "disappointment".⁴⁴ They could offer little else.

40 Hunt. p130

41 See O'Connor. p160-163.

42 Maxwell. p107.

43 Hunt. p133.

44 See O'Connor. p246 -250.

What consolidates criticism of the Directors and their inability to see the presentation of *The Silver Tassie* as an essential part of playwright development is that, since 1927, they had at their disposal a theatre space ready for such experimental work. In 1926, a decision had been made to transform the upstairs area of the old building into a 100 seat theatre, to be named after the 'peacock blue' that adorned the walls. If the Abbey was truly a writer's theatre, wanting still to build up a school of dramatic literature, then the obvious use for this space would have been for the presentation of work that may not have filled the Abbey. No longer could the Board hide behind commercial considerations. Such a clear definition of the Peacock's use, however, was lost on the Directors. There were some suggestions that it could have been used as a home for poetic drama; even stronger demands were made for its use in presenting international drama. For the most part, however, the Board thought fit to rent it out to other companies. Indeed, the first production in the Peacock was of Georg Kaiser's play *Morn to Midnight* -- an international play -- produced by the New Players, an amateur company. After this production, the Theatre was rented out to the newly formed Gate Theatre Company, for the presentation of their repertoire of non-Irish theatre. After the Gate moved to its present building in 1930, the Peacock returned to the control of the Abbey, whereupon they used it as a home for their schools of ballet and acting. Not once did the Abbey use this new space for original work. It was as if the Board liked the idea of having a studio, believing it to be the right kind of facility for an arts theatre, but had little practical understanding of how it could be put to use.

Through the rejection of both *The Silver Tassie* and later, Johnston's *The Old Lady Says 'No!'*,⁴⁵ as well as the failure to utilise the Peacock Theatre, the Abbey started to lose credibility as a home for new drama. In 1930s Ireland, the

45 The now famous story of how Johnston's play 'Shadowdance' got its new title through its rejection by Lady Gregory demonstrates a growing cynicism towards the Abbey directorate.

National Theatre was to mirror the country it served, through desiring stability.⁴⁶ The Abbey rested on its laurels, pleased with the state of the country and happy to be associated with those governing it. Robinson was, according to Kavanagh, particularly complacent:

Robinson did not seem to care whether new dramatists came along or not. His attitude was that the Abbey was an established theatre and there was no need to look for talent. When it came along he would recognise it and give it an outlet⁴⁷

Unfortunately for Robinson, the Abbey and Ireland, no playwrights of any worth were to be discovered in the next decade.⁴⁸ Certainly, there were individuals who still expressed ill-conceived confidence in the future of new drama and implored the Abbey to search actively for playwrights. In 1934, Frank O'Connor and Sean O'Faolain wrote to the *Irish Times*, complaining that the Abbey had lost sight of its responsibility to new Irish playwrights.

In the first place, we doubt that there has been any slackening of activity among Irish dramatists, and we cannot, therefore, agree that the theatre was compelled to fall back on the revival of old plays. In the second place, we consider it bad policy on the part of a National Theatre to set out a scheme for the production of Continental plays. This is, surely, a pitiable confession of defeat.⁴⁹

Maxwell, commenting on this observation by O'Connor and O'Faolain, makes the point that, although sincere, such opinions were questionable. Although O'Connor was to attempt to adapt his acknowledged talents as a novelist to works for the stage, few of his plays were to make any impact. "... he did nothing -- and

46 See J.J. Lee. *Ireland 1912 - 1985. Politics and Society*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). The domination of Irish politics by Eamon de Valera, during the 1930s and 1940s, with what Lee calls his "bland Arcadian image of an ideal Ireland"(p331), ensured that Ireland closed ranks and preoccupied herself with reassuring conservatism and Catholic morality. Ten years on from the Treaty, the Irish government was less concerned with freedom than instability. After fifty years in which every nationalist movement, from the Home Rule Party to Sinn Fein, had split, de Valera was "haunted by fear of faction"(p337). Lee continues: "Once he selected his ministers, he strove to secure unanimity in cabinet decisions. He spent an enormous amount of cabinet time simply wearing down opposition, even minority opposition rather than taking a vote"(p336). With such a determined governmental preoccupation with stability, it was natural that cultural organisations would be muted in any desire for an analytical and enquiring role to the development of the arts.

47 Kavanagh. p146.

48 The most popular playwright during the 1930s continued to be George Shiels. Brinsley Macnamara and Lennox Robinson himself continued to contribute plays.

49 Maxwell. p134.

in those fallow years it is probably the bleak truth that no one could have done much -- to create any new renaissance of dramatic talent".⁵⁰ The Abbey was to become too ingrained within a society that had little taste for innovation.

The 1930s, therefore, saw a dramatic fall in the Abbey's standards. Fintan O'Toole observes a clear change in fortune for the Theatre, during the "emblematic" year of 1929.

At either side of that year, one could define two alternative notions of a national theatre, one generous, troublesome and critical in spirit, the other neutered, official and essentially the conduct of conservative means... Whereas before 1929 it could be said that the Abbey was a national theatre trying to create a nation in its own image, after 1929, the situation was reversed - a nation which had defined itself in narrow, exclusive and conservative terms creating a national theatre in its own image.⁵¹

Such a transformation was accentuated by the Government's decision, in 1929, to establish a Censorship Board, which was, according to Terence Brown, to "repress writings which might disturb conventional moral sensitivities".⁵²

The fact that the Abbey deteriorated so soon after the departure of O'Casey tends to demonstrate how important new drama was for the life blood of the institution. Robinson's complacent belief in the Theatre's own self-importance, however, quickly became the accepted line. It is at this point that the Abbey lost all sight of the ideal of a writer's theatre. As stability became the watchword of the nation, the Abbey moved towards a closer association with the mainstream of Irish identity. With the inevitable consolidation of institutional responsibility starting to define the management of the Theatre, individual contributions and the development of new drama became obsolete.

It was Yeats, ironically, who instigated the move towards an Establishment control of the Abbey. His actions, however, were determined by the inevitable realisation that an era of paternalistic control was finally coming to

50 Maxwell. p135.

51 Fintan O'Toole. "In a State". *Thoughts and Fragments about Theatres and Nations*. A publication to mark the *Whose Nation, Whose Theatre?* Conference. Tramway Theatre, Glasgow. September 1991.

52 Terence Brown. *Ireland A Social and Cultural History. 1922-1985*. (London: Collins, 1985). p97.

an end. Lady Gregory died in 1932 at the age of 80. It was at this point that Yeats accepted that, sooner rather than later, he too would no longer be able to control the Theatre by the imposition of his dominating personality. Hunt states:

With [Lady Gregory's] death there ended what might be called the domestic Abbey; the family theatre whose members were held together by her matriarchal rule, whose green-room with its homely furniture and photographs was the centre of family life... now all that was changing; parental rule was to be replaced by an oligarchy.⁵³

For all the realistic appreciation of the situation, it still seems surprising that Yeats would agree to the transferral of power from individuals to committee, and yet he was confronted with a dilemma that meant that an oligarchy became inevitable. Yeats's problem was that the initial arrangements he had made for the transferral of power were becoming unstuck. Lennox Robinson, the named successor, was experiencing private problems that had led to a weakness in leadership. "It was clear", according to Hunt, "that under Robinson the theatre was in a decline, but he [Yeats] was embarrassed by Lennox's loyalty to the theatre and the genuine friendship that existed between them."⁵⁴ Kavanagh suggests more tactfully that, "Robinson was an artist but had no dominating qualities of a great leader".⁵⁵ What Yeats did next proves that he was still a great tactician, but demonstrates with equal force that he may have been losing his powers of foresight. At a Board meeting held in Robinson's absence in January 1935, Yeats produced an 'anonymous' memorandum, criticising the drop in standards at the Abbey.⁵⁶ The memorandum suggested that an advisory body be set up "to advise and confer with the board of directors on all matters relating to the management of the

53 Hunt. p144.

54 Hunt. p148.

55 Kavanagh. p167.

56 Although it is implied that Yeats himself wrote this memorandum, there were organisations and individuals who at this time were prepared to attack the Abbey for the fall in standards. As has already been stated, Frank O'Connor and Sean O'Faolain were to remain hostile critics of the Abbey during this period. In addition, a collection of individuals, including John Dowling and Mervyn Wall, were anxious to voice fears for the freedom of the arts. Under the editorship of James O'Donovan, this group of young critics founded the periodical *Ireland To-Day*, which provided an outlet for their views. Such a periodical would have been well read by the directors of the Abbey. See Brian P. Kennedy. *Dreams and Responsibilities. The State and The Arts in Independent Ireland*. (Dublin: The Arts Council, 1991).

theatre".⁵⁷ Yeats went on to propose that two of Robinson's bitterest critics, F.R. Higgins and Brinsley Macnamara, become members of this advisory body: a move that suggested that Yeats had been planning and organising behind the Board's back. The short-sightedness of a plan that would put people unversed in the running of a theatre right at the centre of the Abbey's artistic administration seems to have been lost on Yeats. The major damage was averted, according to Hunt, by Richard Hayes proposing that "a more effective way of introducing new blood into the theatre would be to seek powers to enlarge the membership of the Board".⁵⁸

Just what the full intentions of such ideas were is open to question. Yeats succeeded in creating just what he had been battling for years to avoid: a larger Board. Maxwell makes the situation clear: "Yeats proposed the creation of an advisory committee to the Board. Instead, the number of directors was increased, and assumed 'collective management', that is, consensus by disagreement."⁵⁹ For some reason Yeats was letting go, as Lennox Robinson admits himself, "Yeats wanted new, young blood on the Board of Directors".⁶⁰ Kavanagh puts forward a feasible idea. "[Yeats] decided to resolve the problem by doubling the number of directors, hoping the combined intelligence of many lesser men might equal in some way the genius of a real leader."⁶¹ Kavanagh's heavy irony seems appropriate to describe Yeats's way of thinking and the idea may well have worked, but Yeats did not have any control over the people joining the Board, something that he failed to realise at the time.

On 9 March 1935, the Board announced that joining W.B. Yeats, Lennox Robinson, Walter Starkie and Richard Hayes⁶² as directors, would be F.R.

57 Hunt. p149.

58 Ibid.

59 Maxwell. p135.

60 Robinson. p149.

61 Kavanagh. p168.

62 As is shown here, the Board had already grown. Walter Starkie had replaced Richard O'Brien as Government representative in 1927. The appointment of Richard Hayes came about by governmental interference. When de Valera had come to power in 1932, he objected to Starkie on the grounds that he was a fellow of Trinity College. Yeats was forced into a showdown with

Higgins, Brinsley Macnamara and Ernest Blythe. Not one of these new Directors could be said to have been inspirational in the development of the Abbey, but to Yeats, who accepted openly, according to Kavanagh, that he was to be dealing with the minds of lesser men, this did not matter: "It was of little account who was at the helm so long as the captain was on board."⁶³

While none of them had true ability, however, all of them had pretensions to ability, something that Yeats obviously did not account for. Fred Higgins was, according to Hunt, "a master of intrigue"⁶⁴ who set about weakening the influence of Robinson: hardly a positive initial involvement. Blythe, ignorant of the subtleties of dramatic development, was, none the less, a passionate and at times aggressive instigator of the Irish language, believing this to be a cultural policy in itself. Macnamara was a Catholic moralist, whose heart-felt comments on artistic matters were to contribute to the stifling and reactionary climate within the Abbey.

Few risks in programming occurred during the 1930s with the continued development of such writers as George Shiels and Brinsley Macnamara: writers who produced solid drama, but in a conventional and safe structure, that dealt with the issues and told the stories that had been tested during the early years of the Theatre. The term P.Q. or Peasant Quality was coined during the thirties, to determine the correct nature of an Abbey play. As D.E.S. Maxwell puts it: "The 'Abbey style' now was to reduce all plays to a common denominator of farcical comedy."⁶⁵ The best example of the growing weakness of the Abbey's artistic

the Government and appointed Starkie as a normal shareholding member of the Board to replace Lady Gregory. De Valera announced his intention to appoint as Government representative a politician known to be hostile to the Abbey. Yeats responded by threatening to close the Theatre. A compromise was found and Richard Hayes was co-opted. Other little battles were fought between Government and Abbey, including one over the content of plays sent on tour to America. Compromise was again sought and found, but it demonstrates how institutional administration was now becoming the major priority for the Theatre.

63 Kavanagh. p168.

64 Hunt. p150.

65 Maxwell. p136.

freedom is seen through the internal unrest prompted by the decision to present -- finally -- *The Silver Tassie* in 1935.

It was natural, considering the growing conservatism of the time, that press and public reaction to *The Silver Tassie* would be subjective and aggressive. The *Irish Catholic* called, according to Hunt, for the banning of O'Casey's work and attacked Yeats's decision to present the play: "Mr. Yeats is no literary leader for a Catholic country."⁶⁶ Such a reaction was expected and if Yeats's control over the Theatre had been absolute, as in the early years, there would have been little problem. The Abbey would have simply gone ahead with the production, defying all criticism, yet satisfying a clearly defined identity. While the production still went ahead, the decision was to prompt internal turmoil. One Director, Brinsley Macnamara was to voice publicly his distaste for the play. "Not only had nothing been done to reduce the offensive quality of the play", he commented, "but it was more brazenly offensive than when I had seen it in its London production in 1929."⁶⁷ Such comments led to uproar within the Abbey. The actors demanded an apology from Macnamara, who had gone on to criticise the "reverence" shown by the company to O'Casey. The Directors asked him to resign. Macnamara refused, leading to stalemate in the running of the theatre, which was only resolved when the rest of the Directors set up a sub-committee to run the theatre, consisting of all Board members, except Macnamara. At this point, he had no option but to resign.

The episode demonstrates how instinct and individual artistic interests no longer governed the policy of the Abbey. It could be argued that Macnamara's disruptive statements in 1935 were inevitable. By this point, the methods used in the running of the Theatre were mirroring those used to run the country. While de Valera was appointing the 'right' kind of members to his Cabinet -- their position determined by political propriety -- the Abbey, too, was being run by Board

⁶⁶ Hunt, p151.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

members, co-opted not for their theatrical ideals, but for their position within the Cultural Establishment. While at governmental level this led to stability, at the Abbey it led to an incoherent policy for the development of drama. Macnamara's outburst was the first sign of the Board's undue interference in the artistic affairs of the Abbey, prompted by a sincere, yet misguided, belief in the idea of moral respectability determining theatrical policy.

Unlike de Valera's Cabinets during this time, the Abbey Board, with such a collection of opinions, was not going to inspire stability. The major problem seemed to be that, when there was a change in those running the Theatre, the structure of the administration failed to follow suit. While the Board was dominated by the Abbey Theatre's founders, or, at least, with people associated with the development of the artistic repertoire of the past, then artistic control centred on the Board was understandable. When the Board widened its opinions, encouraged none-theatre people to join, with the somewhat negative intention of weakening any dominant force pushing the Abbey in a misguided direction, it should have been made clear that artistic control was no longer the sole responsibility of that Board. Admittedly, Yeats attempted to encourage this, calling for stricter control of rehearsals. A play director was appointed. Bandon Peake came to the Abbey and, despite interesting work, failed to capture an audience. Yeats, in days now past, would have almost encouraged this, but the new Board felt otherwise and Peake was ousted before the year was up. In his place came Hugh Hunt himself. Hunt's book, understandably, fails to deal, in great detail, with the difficult personal relationship he had with the Abbey Board. It is left to Maxwell to sum up Hunt's involvement.

Hugh Hunt succeeded him [Peake] in August of that year [1935]. He established good relations with the players, did the theatre considerable service, and resigned, disheartened by the constant struggle with the board, in November 1938.⁶⁸

68 Maxwell. p135.

If the Board had accepted the importance of the individual taking control of artistic policy, then the Abbey may well have dragged itself away from close association with governmental preoccupations and halted internal Boardroom conflict. Hunt realised that the Abbey needed to concentrate on new drama. While he continued the policy of developing international drama, instigated by Robinson and by Peake, Hunt became aware of the impossibility and irrelevance of competing with the now established Gate Theatre. "Clearly the Irish theatre could not be rescued by challenging the Gate's policy." Hunt realised that what was needed was a return to the original aim "to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature". He continues: "For this purpose greater help and encouragement had to be given to new playwrights, and established writers treated with greater courtesy than had been the case in recent years."⁶⁹ Hunt's intentions, however, were undermined by the struggles for power within the Board room.

Rather than letting their employee get on with the job, Board members were determined to prove their commitment to drama, by getting involved with artistic arguments. These arguments tended to be determined by each Board members' personal preoccupations. After revivals of *The Playboy of the Western World* and *Deirdre*, in 1936, in which Hunt had thought fit to try and rejuvenate the traditional style of peasant and verse acting, there was again uproar in the Board room. Those who controlled the Abbey had got to a stage where they were only concerned with the correct plays in the correct style. There was a "right" way to act in a Synge play and Hunt's attempts to change this were dismissed as "travesties". Higgins believed that Hunt, in his production of *Deirdre*, was going against the way Yeats had wanted the verse to be spoken and, therefore, "stormed" against Hunt, "without, however, having the faintest idea of how to produce the poetic ideas he talked of",⁷⁰ or bothering to contact Yeats for his

⁶⁹ Hunt. p153.

⁷⁰ Hunt. p155.

opinions. In spite of a spirited defence, Hunt was debarred from directing the work of Synge or Yeats. The new Board members seemed to be flexing their muscles in a way they had learnt from a previous era, but had little of the artistic endeavour of the founder's control.

With such an opinionated Board, it was obvious that the new members were unlikely to remain respectfully subservient to Yeats's command, particularly as Yeats, happy with his work, felt able to return to the South of France, where his health was better served. A new leader was due to emerge. The most likely candidate was Ernest Blythe. Described by Hunt as "eminently practical and almost totally indifferent to criticism",⁷¹ Blythe was also the man closest to the powers of government. Never a Fianna Fail supporter, Blythe was, none the less, acknowledged by de Valera and, by the time he took up his post with the Abbey, had become a member of the Irish Senate. What most probably appealed to de Valera was Blythe's interest in the Irish language and its similarity to the de-anglicising nature of the Government's cultural policy.⁷² The direction that the Abbey was beginning to take was underlined by the appointment of Frank Dermody as play director to succeed Hunt.⁷³ Dermody had served his apprenticeship at An Taibhdhearc in Galway and specialised in Gaelic theatre.

Although the first managing director after the death of Yeats was Higgins, his own death in January 1941 led to the inevitable appointment of Blythe as Managing Director: a post he held until the Abbey company was installed in the new building. The spare place on the Board was given to Roibeard O'Faracháin, an Irish language enthusiast and close ally of Blythe. With this appointment, the Abbey moved further away from its role as a writer's theatre and towards becoming a tool for Blythe's preoccupations with the Irish language.

71 Hunt. p150.

72 See Brown. Chapter 5, p141.

73 Dermody was not appointed directly after Hunt. Between January and May 1939, Louis D'Alton served as play director. A short and unhappy episode for the playwright D'Alton, who found the work of play director, totally incompatible with his own writing.

Ernest Blythe, after Yeats, the longest serving Managing Director in the history of the Abbey Theatre, and therefore an important influence on the development of the drama in Ireland, was given due opportunity to expand on his opinions about the Abbey in Lennox Robinson's 1951 book, *Ireland's Abbey Theatre. A History: 1899 - 1951*. The two pages Blythe contributed were entirely devoted to Irish Language drama. To the Managing Director of the Abbey for nearly thirty years, nothing else was important. Blythe proudly mentions a resolution at Board level, made in 1938, "that the performance of Irish plays in the future, as well as being one of the Theatre's objects, should become a regular feature of its work".⁷⁴ In May 1942, according to the article, the Abbey was asked to take over the work of An Comhar Dramaiochta, or the Drama Co-operative, a small group that received a Government Grant for the production of plays in Irish. The Abbey took over the Co-operative's small grant and became formally part of the Government's attempts to de-anglicise the country. Popular and, no doubt, worthwhile projects were put into practice as part of the Abbey's Gaelic work. The annual pantomime, started in 1945, became an imaginative annual event. Less popular and certainly very damaging was the decision that, after 1942, no new players were to be taken on who had no knowledge of Irish. Just how damaging this policy was for the development of Irish actors at the Abbey Theatre will never be known, but it is fair to assume that talent in acting became less important as a requirement in joining the company. *The Irish Times* was to comment that the present Board members had "forsworn the exacting standards of Yeats, Lady Gregory and the Fays, and ... now are prepared to admit to the Abbey stage any untried novice provided his knowledge of Irish meets their requirements".⁷⁵

Kavanagh describes the Gaelic preoccupation and the almost inevitable lowering of standards at the Abbey as a "betrayal".⁷⁶ Many were to share his

74 Robinson. p150.

75 Gerald Fay. *The Abbey Theatre. Cradle of Genius*. (London: Hollis and Carter, 1958). p 10.

76 Kavanagh. p179.

view. It was what Maxwell calls "this complacent shoddiness", which provoked Valentine Iremonger into making an interruption of a performance of *The Plough and the Stars* in November 1947.

When the poet Yeats died, he left behind him to the Irish nation as a legacy his beloved Abbey Theatre, then the first theatre in the world in acting, in production and in the poetic impulse of its tradition. Today, eight years after, under the utter incompetence of the present directorate's artistic policy, there is nothing left of that fine glory.⁷⁷

By now, however, the Abbey was firmly aloof from such criticism. It had become a tool for a Gaelic language policy that had little to offer the drama of Ireland during the post-war era.

It was at this point, during the 1940s, that the Abbey found itself to be at its closest to Establishment control and at its most distant from playwrights. All hope that playwrights would be the ones that would make the changes in policy within the Theatre was now no more than a far-off ideal, forgotten by all but the playwrights themselves. To them, the Abbey remained their one hope of presentation. No theatre had been created to compete for the acquisition of new scripts and while the monopoly continued, the Abbey was able to accept and reject as they wished. One writer who may well have become a new champion for Irish drama was Paul Vincent Carroll, whose plays, *Things that Are Caesar's* (1932), *Shadow and Substance* (1937) and *The White Steed* (1939), brought what Maxwell calls "a rebellious, ambitious imagination" to the Abbey stage. By the late 1940s, however, Carroll was not producing work for the Abbey: as Maxwell continues, his talents were "never wholly sought out".⁷⁸ A frustrated man, Carroll found that the Abbey refused to acknowledge his contribution or that of other playwrights. After Iremonger's protest in 1947, Carroll wrote of a need to reprioritise the work of the dramatist. "The Abbey, like any other Art Theatre, must be a playwright's theatre, for great acting precedes from great play

⁷⁷ Fay. p9

⁷⁸ Maxwell. p136.

writing."⁷⁹ He continued his statement with the rather too honest suggestion that the Abbey would be better served, in the future, by the dismissal of Blythe and the pensioning off of Robinson. Such statements failed to increase the importance of the playwright within the Abbey: indeed, it reduced the number of dramatists whose work was seen at the Abbey by one.

Some of the criticism, however, seemed to be making an impact within the insulated Abbey Boardroom. In 1948, Ria Mooney was appointed as a play director, with the special brief of paying attention to experimental work "which might encourage new dramatists". Such an appointment would suggest positive intentions, but as Mooney discovered, the action was superficial.

I wanted the public to have colour and excitement in their theatre - the kind of theatre I had known outside the Abbey, except that now I wanted the colour to flow from the work of Irish playwrights. I did not have to wait long before I realised that however much I might strive to implement my theories, which were viewed as being 'grandiose', my engagement in the theatre was looked upon as being a 'holding' position until such time as Irish-speaking directors could take over.⁸⁰

As Gerald Fay comments, if the decision to appoint Mooney alone " was regarded as the outcome of the poet's [Iremonger] protest, it was almost as effective against the stony silence of Mr. Blythe as Seanachan's sit-down strike in *The Kings Threshold*" .⁸¹

The intransigence of the Board was magnified by the fact that the Gaelic language policy, even in a conservative and insular country, was beginning to look out of date. What the Abbey Board failed to accept -- realised by many at the time, and realised by almost everyone today -- was the impossibility of trying to impose Irish as the first language within the Republic. Roibeard MacGorain, the present director of Gael Linn, while dedicated to the development of Irish Language culture, realises the reasons for the failure of any attempt to replace English with Irish.

79 Fay. p10.

80 Hunt. p174.

81 Fay. p11. *The Kings Threshold*, a play by Yeats, tells the story of Seanachan, who leads a protest to protect the right of the poets within the ancient land of King Guaire. Seanachan dies from his efforts and the King ignores the protest.

During the 1930s, it was rather hopefully believed that Irish would become the first language in real terms and not just on official terms. A programme of education was put into action. The problem was that children who were learning it at school would come home and speak English to their parents who naturally only spoke the one language. So, in real terms the language was not becoming instinctive. If anything it was becoming contrived: a mere educational exercise. To a lot of children, English was the 'real and grown-up' language, used in the work-place and the real world. The instinct was to forget the Irish after school.⁸²

MacGorain outlines a feeling within the Irish people that was to grow after the War into a clear cultural policy that was to be in direct conflict with the "rural isolation" ideals of de Valera and Blythe. This growing instinct led to the gradual evolutionary change in the economic and social policy of the country, embodied by the Lemass Government of the late 1950s and the 1960s.⁸³ The growing instinct failed, however, to transform the rather less democratic Board of the Abbey Theatre.

A widening of influences, both for the nation as a whole and specifically for theatre, led to the continued isolation of new drama from the Abbey Theatre during the 1950s. This did not mean, however, that new playwrights were not getting a chance to see their work produced. For the first time, a viable alternative for the budding dramatist had been created.

In 1953, Alan Simpson and Carolyn Swift created a theatre, converted from an old warehouse near the Grand Canal in South Dublin. The tiny theatre was to have just fifty seats and became known as the Pike Theatre. The aim was "to stir up the theatrical lethargy of post-war Ireland".⁸⁴ In the next ten years the

82 Interviewed in Dublin, 29 August 1989.

83 See F.S.L. Lyons. *Ireland Since the Famine*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971). Chapter 4. J.J. Lee. *Ireland 1912 - 1985. Politics and Society*. Chapter 5. In 1957, Sean Lemass became Taoiseach, replacing de Valera, with the former leader's full blessing. Lemass was to preside over a period of rapid economic expansion. Under the guidance of T.K. Whitaker's document, 'Economic Development, 1958', Lemass's government started a programme of external expansion, including a trade agreement with Britain, economic measures to halt the tide of emigration and unemployment as well as social policies designed to improve the education system. Although these policies were put into practice in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the tide of public opinion, away from the insularity of de Valera's rule, was becoming apparent during the early 1950s. In one referendum in 1955, designed to reform the electoral system, which de Valera expected to win, the people rejected their leader overwhelmingly. *The Irish Times* was to comment: "Irish democracy has come of age; its political maturity is no longer in doubt"(Lee p311).

84 Alan Simpson. *Beckett and Behan and a Theatre in Dublin*. (London: Routledge, 1962). p1.

Pike offered Dubliners a mixture of modern cabaret, international drama and new plays. Never a company to take the moral respectability of drama into account, it was to offer a real threat to the domination of the Abbey, causing irritation to both the Abbey Board and the Establishment. At one point, during the 1957 production of Tennessee Williams's "immoral" play, *The Rose Tattoo*, irritation boiled over and Simpson was arrested and charged with "presenting for gain an indecent and profane performance".⁸⁵ On this occasion, as with other moments of difficulty, the Abbey did little to support its fellow theatre. Micheál O hAonghusa, an Abbey actor at the time, took great delight in the situation and in the presence of Carolyn Swift, "muttered about people who hogged publicity so that London critics didn't even bother visiting the National Theatre".⁸⁶

This bitterness, resulting from what Ulick O'Connor described as the Abbey's "fall from grace",⁸⁷ and the constant comparisons between the established and conservative National Theatre and the new and vibrant Pike, demonstrates just how entwined with the Establishment Blythe and his colleagues had become. The excitement of challenging order that had been apparent even in Yeats's later years was lost on the new Directorate, meaning that further down the infrastructure of the organisation, few were excited by the experiments of new writers. In 1954, the Abbey missed the perfect opportunity to bring its repertoire up to date with new drama relevant to the expanding times in Irish society. Brendan Behan -- the most vibrant of Irish playwrights since O'Casey -- slipped through their grasp, and the Pike became the new playwright's first theatrical home.

After writing his first play, provisionally called *The Twisting of Another Rope*, later to be named *The Quare Fellow*, Behan had, like the majority of Irish

85 See Carolyn Swift. *Stage by Stage*. (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1985). Chapters 15 and 16. This play was deemed indecent, due to the showing of a condom on stage. In the play, the condom is never taken out of its packet, which was just as well for the Dublin production as the producers were unable to get hold of a real one: you could not get them in Dublin.

86 Swift. p261.

87 Swift. p191.

playwrights, sent his work to the Abbey. Maxwell comments that the "'respectable' managements were dubious about Behan",⁸⁸ and were only prepared to comment on the weaknesses of the play. It is true that when it was first submitted, this new play needed work, but, again, the Abbey demonstrated its ineptitude as a new writer's theatre, by sending the playwright away to revise the work on his own. Behan's response was that of any other playwright in this position: he took the manuscript elsewhere. At the Pike Theatre, Behan was to find an organisation prepared to work with the writer, welcoming him in as a member of the company. Speaking in 1992, Carolyn Swift remembers how their theatre suited the new playwright.

Although we only did a few plays by original authors, Beckett and Behan being chief among them, we were constantly presenting reviews which demanded a degree of patience with unfinished work. When we came to work with Behan, this appreciation of what could be achieved with contact and discussion helped enormously. It was a delight to work so closely with a man like Behan -- very exciting -- and I doubt if the Abbey could have worked in this way.⁸⁹

Ulick O'Connor comments that upon submission of *The Quare Fellow*, "Carolyn Swift immediately set to work on the script to pare it down and make it suitable for a theatrical performance. Behan was extremely co-operative. He approved the changes and quickly re-wrote any passages that he was asked to."⁹⁰ Behan was present at the rehearsals and was willing to clarify any points within the text. At times, however, Behan became drunk and caused problems. Rather than showing stiff disapproval, Simpson and Swift were prepared to go to great lengths to preserve the self-respect of their playwright.⁹¹

Upon the successful presentation by the Pike of Behan's *The Quare Fellow* in 1956, the Abbey's response was to present a revival of the play in 1958. Rather than this being an honest rectification of initial failure in judgement, this production did nothing to bring playwright and Abbey closer together. No

88 Maxwell. p155.

89 Carolyn Swift, interviewed, 30 April 1992.

90 Ulick O'Connor. *Brendan Behan*. (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970). p 176.

91 Swift. p147.

attempt was made by the National Theatre to present Behan's second play, *An Giall*, even though it was written in Irish. This play, or, at least, its English version, *The Hostage*, was considered by Blythe to be "filthy rubbish".⁹² The 1958 production of *The Quare Fellow*, therefore, can be seen as being part of a wayward policy that responded to new drama only in hindsight. The similarity with this and the 1935 decision to present a belated production of *The Silver Tassie* proves that a depressing acceptance of being second in the presentation of modern work was now ingrained within the Abbey. Upon the presentation of O'Casey's play, twenty-three years before, the public response had been one of outrage. This time around, the Abbey was subjected to contempt. Ken Gray, in the *Times Pictorial*, wrote an article entitled: "Should we Cheer or Jeer?"

Where is the pioneering spirit that once upon a time sent the name of the Abbey Theatre ringing round the world?... Today such tributes belong to Alan Simpson, director of the tiny Pike Theatre.... It was he who jumped at the chance of giving Brendan Behan's play *The Quare Fellow* its first production. So great a success was it that it transferred to London's West End, where it opened last week and was acclaimed by the London critics.... At this stage, the Abbey steps in, apparently convinced at last that Mr Behan's play is worthy of their stage.⁹³

Whereas it could be said that the Abbey had moved on from the fame of Synge and embraced the fame of O'Casey, by 1958 the acceptance of evolving development, what Yeats called "the recurring celebration of Irish genius",⁹⁴ had stopped short. Irish theatre, in general, had moved on from O'Casey to Behan and the "celebration" was for a new generation. This generation, however, had no place in the Abbey. All the old theatre could do was to catch up with new drama once the celebrations had died down and, for that, they received ridicule from the viewing public.

It could be argued, however, that, at the time, the Abbey Theatre had an excuse. Since 1951, the company had been in exile in the Queen's Theatre, Pearse

⁹² Maxwell. p155. *The Hostage*, one of the most famous post-war Irish plays, was not produced at the Abbey until 1970.

⁹³ Swift. p212.

⁹⁴ W.B. Yeats. Speech to the Abbey audience during *The Plough and the Stars*, 11 February 1926.

Street. The fire that gutted the old building in Abbey Street had left the company homeless. The wayward policy of the company during the 1950s can, at least in part, be explained by the nomadic existence they were forced to endure.

The fifteen years in which the Abbey was away from Abbey Street have been considered the darkest days of the company. One Director of the theatre, according to Tomás MacAnna, said that the years at the Queen's were "the years of purgatory". Hugh Hunt puts it another way:

The Abbey did not die; but the years of its exile radically altered its character and reduced its standing as a leading European theatre. The fire destroyed more than a building, it destroyed an atmosphere, a sense of dedication to an ideal, however tarnished it had become through the passing years.⁹⁵

D.E.S. Maxwell puts the blame for this, however, entirely at the door of the Board: "In it [the Queen's] the Abbey Board managed with unimaginative conservatism a self-perpetuating repertoire of realist plays - 'parish-pump Ibsenism', Hugh Leonard called it".⁹⁶

Recently, however, Tomás MacAnna, a play director with the Abbey throughout the time at the Queen's, has tempered the idea that production at the stand-in home was impossible.

There was no difficulty in working at the Queen's Theatre. There's no purgatory were you have a good stage, good lighting, good auditorium, an intimate theatre. The idea put forward by many, that the time at the Queen's provided impossible working conditions is a lot of nonsense.⁹⁷

MacAnna, therefore, rejects the belief that no good work could be produced at the Queen's. He points out that at the time, the ideas about staging plays were much more simple. Design was straightforward, the company had an ongoing repertoire. Further to this, he rejects the long held view that the Queen's had no intimacy: the one thing that, in the old theatre, had shaped the style of acting. Arthur Pritchard, in the early 1960s an undergraduate at Trinity, remembers the old Queen's Theatre with affection.

⁹⁵ Hunt. p176.

⁹⁶ Maxwell. p 158.

⁹⁷ Tomás MacAnna. Letter received: 5 January 1992.

The Abbey company, at the Queen's was still a source of great pride to Dubliners. I remember taking American friends over the road, from my rooms at Trinity, to the theatre, with a self-conscious pride that I was taking a stranger to something that was bound up in the real traditions of Irish culture. Sure, it was traditional: traditional staging; traditional design, but it was done well, very well, particularly the O'Casey plays.⁹⁸

It seems more accurate, therefore, to consider the Abbey company's time at the Queen's to be a time of treading water. Nothing moved on, but nothing regressed. Few new plays were put into production, but the traditional repertoire was still produced to a high standard. What else was expected of the National Theatre? There were few new plays and little contact with new playwrights, but the Directorate of the Abbey had their hands and their minds elsewhere. From the moment the old Abbey Theatre had turned to ashes, the Board pledged their commitment to the raising of finance and the building of a new theatre. For all his faults, Ernest Blythe was central to the rise of the new building: his abilities in financial matters cannot be doubted. Without his energy to continue the journey along what was to be a difficult road, the new Abbey would never have opened in 1966. Here, the Abbey Board was active in what can be identified as the correct role for such a body. Blythe and his colleagues were not interested in the repertoire or other artistic considerations, they were concerned with securing the correct facilities and proper funding to provide Ireland with a National Theatre. The institutional controllers of the Theatre had something to be justifiably responsible for.

Just as the efforts of Yeats and Lady Gregory to create a stable future for their theatre in the early 1920s brought about the end of the private literary theatre and introduced the Abbey to institutional responsibility, the efforts of Blythe to create a modern, purpose built theatre, brought about an end to unjustified, Establishment interference in artistic affairs and introduced the Abbey to a new internationalism, where the play director became the individual executive, responsible for artistic policy. This was to drag the Abbey into the modern era,

98 Arthur Pritchard. Interviewed in Wakefield, 28 January 1992

with more exciting, experimental direction and design. The playwright could perhaps look forward to a period in which contact could be made with an individual concerned closely with the repertoire and with the company, whose only responsibility was for the artistic development of the Abbey. Playwrights, however, were to be disappointed, as, for the first tentative years of the artistic director, within the Abbey, they remained firmly outside the Abbey.

Chapter Three: The Abbey Theatre 1960 - 1978. The Playwright and the Artistic Director

Who knows what 'type' of play any theatre needs? The age of O'Casey, Synge, Yeats, was a different time. You had all the drama of poverty, insurrection, patriotism, Irish mythology. These are different times. They will provide themes, which our playwrights will have to search out for themselves..... No person can become a really good playwright overnight. It takes time. But there must be somewhere that he can see his plays performed, so that he can learn from them to do better.¹

This statement made by Walter Macken on the occasion of his appointment as Artistic Advisor to the Abbey Theatre, six months before the opening of the new building, suggests a new beginning in terms of the Theatre's relationship with playwrights. A writer himself, Macken was to appreciate that a new repertoire was not going to evolve through reflection in the past, but through active association and encouragement. He went on to comment: "I don't think enough is being done to encourage new writers. Having once been a new writer myself, I can sense what should be done in the way of encouragement, and will try and do it." Such stated views seemed to bode well for the Irish dramatist, who had been denied access to the National Theatre through the distance of committee management, since the death of Yeats.

During the late 1960s, control of artistic policy would again fall into the hands of the individual, but unlike Yeats, the new play directors were to have few literary preoccupations. Macken, as already stated, was a playwright, who had also acted with the company. Tomás MacAnna, who followed him into the job, had been a play director with the Abbey since 1947 and had become interested in developments in direction and design throughout Europe. Alan Simpson, who held the post for a year in 1968/69, was previously the director of the Pike

¹ Walter Macken. "The New Abbey Theatre". Interview by Colm Cronin. *Irish Press*. 27 January 1966.

Theatre, a company which had shown the way in pioneering theatre in Dublin during the 1950s.² Hugh Hunt returned to the Abbey in 1969, after an extensive career as an academic and theatre practitioner. Leila Doolan, who became director in 1971, was a pragmatic woman, whose skills as a critic and radio producer outweighed any inexperience as a theatre director. All these professionals had the potential to make contact with the playwright and, yet, it was only Macken who expressed any real enthusiasm for true association with the playwright. Confidence in the Abbey's future was high; a new theatre was being built; more money was available to the company; a wider repertoire was being contemplated and, above all, individuals with artistic experience were beginning to gain control. And yet, still, the playwright was to remain on the outside of the Abbey.

The changes in artistic policy at the Abbey Theatre which evolved during the 1960s and early 1970s did little to encourage the active involvement of the playwright. The new theatre's design led to a preoccupation with a repertoire of international plays, adaptations and what I term as "international Irish" plays, bringing short-term success to the Abbey, but limiting development of new drama, even in the small Peacock Theatre. The introduction of director's theatre at the Abbey did not bring writer's theatre with it.

The evolution of a radical and international policy at the New Abbey, which ignored the needs of the dramatist, can be seen to have its roots at the beginning of the decade. The planning and building of the new theatre was part of the changing cultural attitude within the country³ that had until this point been resisted within the Abbey by a Board of Directors concerned with distinctly Irish culture.⁴ In the first instance, the project to build a new theatre is a good example

2 See previous chapter.

3 See previous chapter.

4 There was considerable resistance from Board members to the changes that were to be enacted during the 1960s. Inevitably, Blythe was the fiercest campaigner for the preservation of the old principles. In 1964, he wrote a booklet entitled simply *The Abbey Theatre*. (Dublin: 1964). Here, he outlined his vision of the future, in chapters entitled "The Creation of a Tradition" and

of the corporate and governmental philosophy of expansion. Money for such projects was to be found by a Government determined to be part of an expanding, post-war Europe. In the second instance, the building was to have an international design. While the construction company, A.J. Jennings and Co., and the architect, Michael Scott, were Irish, the consultant, Pierre Sonrel, was French and had experience in a wider perception of theatrical architecture. The designs submitted and accepted at the time may well have been misguided in the long term, but proved a determination to resist complacency, even if it was taken to extremes.⁵ No one can argue that the design for the New Abbey was not exciting and brave. The size of the auditorium, again criticised for being too expansive for the kind of drama the Abbey invariably produced, demonstrates a rising confidence in the role of Irish theatre in the international world. The country demanded a theatre that looked like a national theatre, according to the definitions of the world looking in. Size and grandeur were important, at least within the tastes of the time, and the New Abbey provided this.⁶

Through the project to rebuild the Abbey, therefore, it could be argued that external influence was forcing its way into the Abbey, with a wider perception of the World than had been seen in the years before. Ireland wanted a national theatre that could compete with the drama that was developing throughout Europe. Such an attitude was demanded further by the Abbey's disappointing contribution to the World Theatre Season in 1963.

"Holding to the Course". Blythe, who had done so much to build the new theatre, never understood the inevitability of change such a new building would bring.

5 It is now accepted by actors, directors and critics, working closely with the Abbey Theatre, that the design for the new building was totally unsuitable for the kind of theatre the company had traditionally produced. The acoustics have been criticised and the size of the auditorium is considered too big, while the stage has little depth. It is viewed by many, that it was wrong for the Abbey to have been re-built on the same site, where lack of space was always going to cause a problem. Joe Dowling makes the point that few artists, working in theatre at the time, were consulted about the design. See later in the chapter for a consideration of how the difficulties were overcome.

6 While the New Abbey was being planned and built, a similar project was being contemplated on the South Bank in London. The New National Theatre of Great Britain was to be the largest and grandest theatre ever contemplated in the country. Although its size and grandeur were to cause suspicion when it finally opened in the 1970s, during the planning stages, there was an idea that theatre's importance could be manifest in the size of the building.

This invitation to contribute to an international festival brought the conservative nature and poor quality of Abbey productions to world attention. When Peter Daubeny, the director of the World Season, first saw the productions of O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars*, which the Abbey intended to contribute to the festival, he was to express "dismay". As he states: "The productions seemed crammed with faults, some poor acting and very poor sets. ... I argued bitterly with the Abbey directors, insisting that changes be made before the productions came to London."⁷ Press reaction to the productions upon reaching London was muted, and resulted in O'Casey criticising Blythe, still Managing Director of the Abbey: "He hasn't the faintest idea what Drama is, and less about the art of the actor; he has become a human limpet fastened to the Abbey Theatre."⁸ Such observations were to bring more than mere embarrassment to the Abbey: internal revolt was imminent. The players threatened to strike over the conditions of work and a long delayed pay increase, which forced Blythe into accepting an investigation into the state of the acting company. The Court of Enquiry, set up in 1964, under the chairmanship of Dr C. S. Andrews, suggested that wider representation was required: a larger body of shareholding members of the society and one more Governmental representative at Board level. This implied that those who were providing the money for a modern theatre required the running of the organisation to reflect the widening interest.⁹ The wider body of thought, without the sense of institutional responsibility inherent within the Board, was determined to satisfy the demand for artistic quality, before that for cultural propriety. New repertoire was to be determined through closer consideration of artistic ideals.

⁷ Peter Daubeny. *My World of Theatre*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971.) p288.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See Hunt. p189-90. In July 1964, a group of twenty-five new shareholders was selected, all were to have interest in literature and the arts. The Articles of Association were amended on 23 February 1965, to allow for this to happen. In July 1965, a second governmental appointee, Walter Macken, was co-opted to the Board.

Redefinition became a priority for the Abbey. In the period leading up to the opening of the new building, the Board was forced to accept radical changes in the production of drama. Slowly, through the creation and acceptance of the Players Council, the company was to have a greater say in the artistic direction of the Abbey, and by the time the new theatre opened, the Board had accepted the demand that there should be longer rehearsal time and the occasional engagement of outside directors.¹⁰ The demand for an artistic director was to take a little longer. Blythe insisted that only a consultative, artistic "advisor" would be acceptable. The idea that this compromise was an example of the continuing restrictive domination of the Board is often overstated. In the first instance, it brought theatre practitioners into a position of power within the organisation, regardless of the title of the job. Tomás MacAnna, who became Advisor in 1966, always accepted the term, believing that if he demonstrated a degree of tact and respect for his employers, "it would not diminish my responsibilities in the artistic sense".¹¹ In the second instance, it provided a focus for the ongoing discussion and redefinition that was central to the future of the Abbey Theatre, as it contemplated its repertoire for the new building. Through in-depth discussion, it became obvious that the Abbey was to run as a major national theatre, with one individual in control of defining artistic policy. Would the attempts at redefinition, however, take into account the initial aim to build a school of dramatic literature, and formulate a coherent and specific policy to put such aims into action?

The question is pertinent because many saw the Abbey's role in the creation of new work only in the context of a broader policy, expected of national theatres throughout Europe. While those who have come to be associated with the Abbey during the 1980s focus on the importance of a policy for new writing,¹² few directors at the time saw this as a major priority for the new Abbey. Macken,

10 Hunt. p193.

11 Tomás MacAnna. Letter received: 5 January 1992.

12 See Introduction and Chapter Four.

Figure Five. Tomás MacAnna.



upon his appointment as Artistic Advisor, seemed determined to acknowledge the contribution of playwrights, but he was only in the job for six months. Macken's problem was that he had little experience as a director. Such practical experience was seen as being essential for the job and with justification. To instigate a coherent policy on artistic grounds, whether such a policy was to include the involvement of the playwright or not, required the skill and sensitivity of someone adept at realising drama in practice. Macken resigned, stating that he "was not the man for the job".¹³ There is little doubt that Tomás MacAnna, Macken's successor, was the right man for the job -- in terms of directorial skill -- and yet his priorities of theatrical development tended to exclude the playwright.

MacAnna, born in 1926 in Dundalk and a graduate of the National College of Art, had been appointed director of Gaelic plays at the Abbey in 1947. In the first twenty years after his appointment, he had served as general play producer, designer and writer of pantomimes.¹⁴ By 1966, MacAnna was an established figure within the Abbey, but had an understanding of the wider issues within drama, which he used to good effect in many of the international and experimental plays that were to be seen on the Abbey stage in the following years. His wide knowledge of theatre and his appreciation of the need for change, coupled with his loyalty to the Abbey in general and Blythe in particular, who had after all given him his first break, served to establish an evolutionary progress towards modern practices. MacAnna's tact and understanding of the traditional preoccupations of the Board members meant that he never had to confront them in the same way that every other Artistic Adviser and Director has had to do. Like Lennox Robinson before him, Tomás MacAnna was, and is, a true servant of the Abbey, but one with a vision beyond the confines of Irish cultural responsibility.

Throughout his two-year appointment as Advisor and later, as director of plays at the Peacock, during Hunt's tenure as Artistic Director, MacAnna was

¹³ Hunt, p191.

¹⁴ *Who's who in the Republic of Ireland*. (Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1973).

responsible for many successful productions at the Abbey Theatre. Very few were of new plays, however, as he shared with Robinson the curious and passive belief that new Irish theatre would be stimulated merely through the influence of internationalism.

Looking back in recent years, MacAnna identifies his aims and intentions upon taking the job of Artistic Advisor in 1966. "My ideas were to broaden out the scope of the repertory and therefore, to stimulate new forms of playwriting." MacAnna would do this by "putting on plays from abroad, from America, from Continental Europe, with a particular viewpoint that related to an Irish company".¹⁵

Broadly speaking, the wider issues at work in creating a national theatre were becoming clear. It should show the best quality work, provided by the best facilities and it should contribute to the theatrical education of the community by presenting the best of national and international theatre. It was hoped, as MacAnna suggests, that new drama would be served by this brief, through the enthusiasm and stimulus of seeing contrasting work of good quality. A non-interventionist philosophy, which implies that a national theatre has no direct responsibility towards the encouragement of the novice playwright.

In the week of the opening of the New Abbey, the Irish media, and the *Irish Times* in particular, devoted considerable space to the prospects for the new theatre. An important contribution to the coverage in the *Irish Times* was the reporting of a group discussion entitled "The Abbey and the Future".¹⁶ This discussion was printed over three days and dealt with the wider issues facing the Abbey. The discussion group consisted of prominent members of the profession and journalists, including Tomás MacAnna, Hilton Edwards, Seamus Kelly and Jim FitzGerald. Time and again, during this discussion, the issue of international plays comes up. Jim FitzGerald, in the first instance puts forward a view that was

¹⁵ MacAnna. 5 January 1992.

¹⁶ *Irish Times*. 18, 19, 20 July 1966.

to be central to the programming policy at the Abbey in the ensuing years and clearly defines a non-interventionist approach to the encouragement of new writing.

A National Theatre should keep abreast of developments, especially in a small country where experimentation is limited to some degree by finance. It should keep abreast by doing European plays which we haven't seen - Dürrenmatt, Frisch and so on. ... It must encourage Irish playwrights and the way you encourage them is to show them techniques which our country is too small and too poor to develop ourselves.¹⁷

This view is backed up by the group as a whole, suggesting that support of, and interest in European theatre was fashionable at the time. T.P. MacKenna, comments that the Abbey "... can bring European theatre to the doorstep here and allow the Irish writers to get into the mainstream of European writing".¹⁸ When asked to name specific plays, several members of the group mention *Marat/Sade* and almost everyone suggests plays by Brecht. All the suggestions, specific or general, appear to make sense and would be justified in the policy and programming of any national theatre, and yet they demonstrate a vague and detached understanding of the future of the Abbey: there is nothing specific and practical that the management of the Abbey could have grasped hold of as foundation to policy and there is, put simply, nothing new. This is clearly demonstrated when Hilton Edwards, long-standing director at the Gate Theatre, a theatre that traditionally brought international theatre to Dublin, answers Tomás MacAnna's grand announcement that the Abbey was aware of the modern epic idea of theatre, by stating that he, and, therefore, the Gate had "been aware of this for thirty-five years...".¹⁹ Whether the views expressed in this debate were new or not, they demonstrate a commitment to international theatre not seen at the Abbey in previous years and was to be the principle change in policy for the next few years.

¹⁷ *Irish Times*. 19 July 1966.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ *Ibid*. See previous Chapter. In 1936, Hunt, then employed as play director at the Abbey, was to comment that, "clearly the Irish theatre could not be rescued by challenging the Gate's policy". (Hunt. p153).

During September and October 1967, the Abbey held an International Theatre Seminar, organised by the former director of the Pike Theatre, Carolyn Swift. "The object of the Seminar", as the programme announced, "is to explore the value and influence of the National Theatre idea on the International Theatre Scene".²⁰ In a formal and official situation, therefore, the Abbey was allying its discussions on its national responsibility closely to its position in international theatre. In spite of Ernest Blythe's attempts to stress the national focus of the Abbey's history, in his lecture "Nationality and the Theatre",²¹ the general opinion held by those attending the Seminar was that the Abbey's future lay in its relationship with other countries. Hugh Hunt, speaking at the Seminar, made, according to the *Irish Times*, "... a plea to the Abbey to achieve an international repertoire". Hunt was quoted as saying: "The theatre today is international and every theatre must be judged by what it gives, within its own style, to the world."²² Tyrone Guthrie added weight to this view, saying he disagreed "... that a National Theatre should present nothing but nationalistic plays. It must be stimulated by what is on the outside."²³ Only one session in the week-long seminar was devoted to the contribution of the playwright.²⁴ Whether the demands of the playwright were being met or not, there is no question that the Abbey, through such conferences, was widening its international contacts. As Hugh Hunt states: "In calling together this distinguished gathering, the Abbey was extending its role to that of an international theatre."²⁵

Hugh Hunt chronicles how "this new role was manifested" through the next year, with a second contribution to the World Theatre Season in London by what he calls "... one of the highlights of the theatre's long history".²⁶ The Abbey's Dublin Theatre Festival production, opening on 8 October 1968, was *The*

20 *An International Theatre Seminar*. Abbey Theatre Programme, September/October, 1967.

21 30 September 1967.

22 *Irish Times*. 4 October 1967.

23 *Irish Times*. 5 October 1967.

24 6 October 1967.

25 Hunt, p203.

26 *Ibid*.

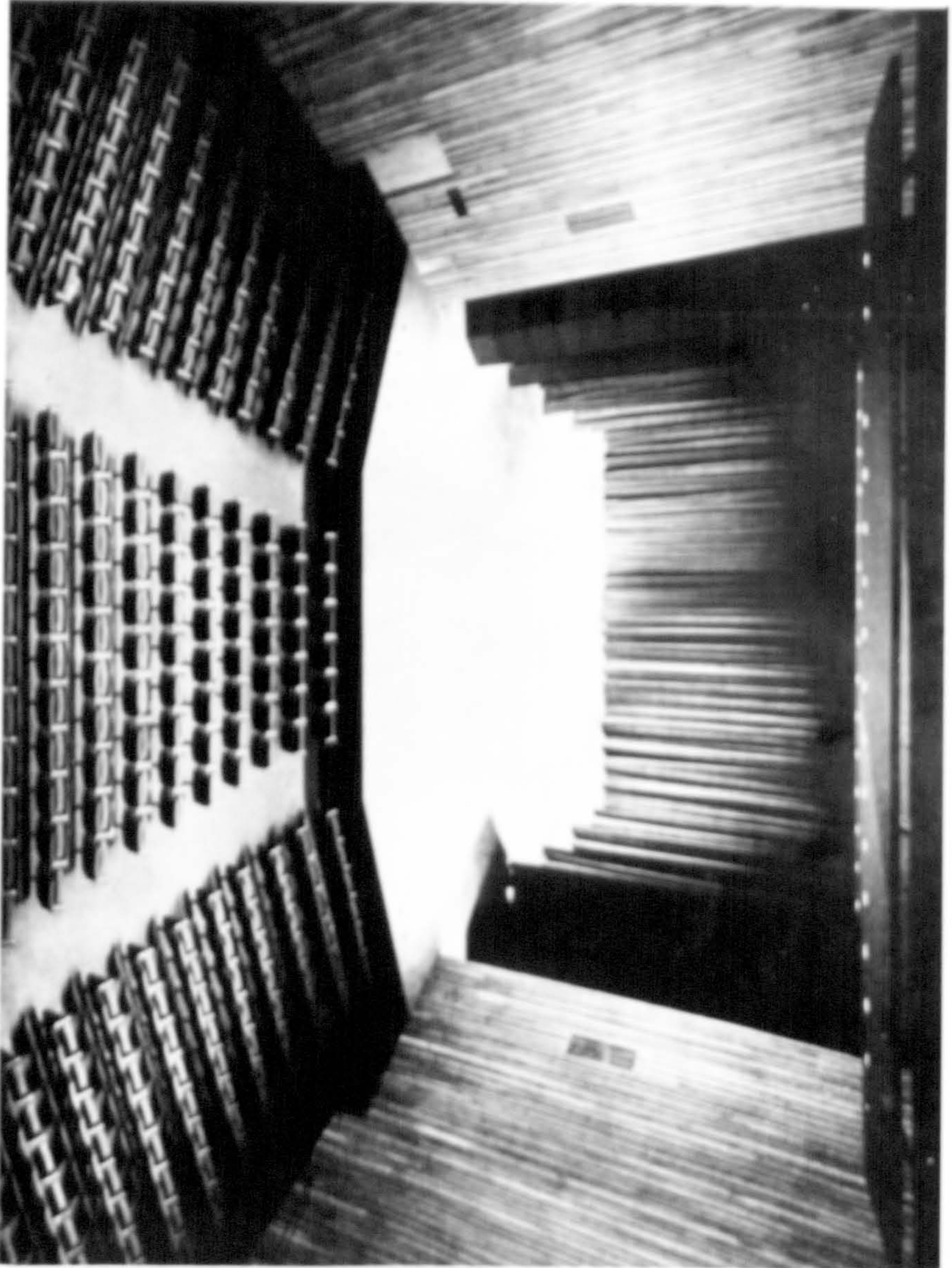


Figure Six. Interior of the New Abbey Theatre.

Cherry Orchard, directed by Maria Knebel of the Red Army Theatre, with returning guest actors Siobhan McKenna and Cyril Cusack, playing the leading roles. Maureen O'Farrell, in the *Evening Press*, commented: "This production is the most beautifully staged, the best acted, and need I say, the best play we have seen."²⁷ Internationalism seemed to be meeting the wider demands of the new National Theatre.

The new internationalism embraced by the Abbey was not only satisfying the intentions of those seeing a wider role for the Abbey as National Theatre. In many of the international plays the Abbey was to produce during the first few years, the company was being given a chance to explore the needs and demands of the new Abbey stage. Tomás MacAnna believes that part of the realisation of a new approach to the Abbey repertoire was due to the practical consideration of the bigger stage. "With the size of stage, one was always on the look out for Epic plays to fill that space."²⁸ MacAnna's desire to find plays to suit the space he was working with seems justified. When one considers how extreme a change the new stage was, not only for the Abbey company, but for Irish theatre in general, then the desire to find different and more suitable drama becomes a necessity, and yet, paradoxically, restricts the possibilities of the National Theatre, rather than widening the vision. Hugh Hunt has identified the restrictions to a company that had been used to plays with naturalistic interiors.

The wide stage with its seventy-two foot opening has a depth of only twenty-eight feet from the curtain line. Moreover, the position of the front curtain causes a large area of the frontstage to become isolated when a traditional box-set with its ceiling and walls has to be set behind it. As a result the play's action tends to be remote from the audience. The new Abbey seemed to have turned its back on the old naturalistic stagecraft, and now demanded the poetry of light and sculptural forms of Appia and Craig. To some extent this has had its influence on the type of play presented, being one of the reasons why many of the plays from the old repertoire seem out of place in the new theatre.²⁹

27 Ibid.

28 MacAnna. 5 January 1992.

29 Hunt. p196

Between 1966 and the end of 1978, a mere 16 productions out of a total of 102 productions created in the main house at the Abbey were from the traditional repertoire. Twelve of these productions were of plays by either Synge or O'Casey, that even the most revolutionary Abbey administration would have felt duty-bound to produce. If the old repertoire could not work on the new stage, then it was necessary to find other work and it was natural that if the new stage "now demanded the poetry of light and sculptural forms of Appia and Craig", then the company was going to look to the European theatre that embraced these forms. It is important to stress that this understanding of the needs of the theatre did not suddenly manifest itself with productions of Brecht, Weiss and Ionesco. *Marat/Sade*, in spite of initial enthusiasm, was never produced, and the first Brecht play, to be produced at the Abbey, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1974), has been only one of two productions by the German author.³⁰ Plays from foreign countries, however, have taken an increasing share of the Abbey's time that, if not directly serving the design of the theatre, have at least moved the company away from the specific identity of the early repertoire. Plays by Chekhov have been seen regularly,³¹ as well as plays by Eugene O'Neill.³² Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* was produced in 1971 as was *Macbeth*, the first play by Shakespeare to be produced at the Abbey since the 1930s. All these influences can be seen to be positive in expanding the Abbey's perception of the whole potential of drama. The international repertoire, however, seemed to be influenced by the need to exploit the demands of the open stage rather than any desire to stimulate the Irish playwright. Indeed, the Irish contributions to the Abbey's repertoire, during the early years of the new building, seemed equally concerned with satisfying the new facilities.

30 Brecht's *The Life of Galileo* was produced by the Abbey in February 1981, with Tom Hickey in the named part.

31 *The Cherry Orchard*. (1968, 1984); *The Seagull*. (1970); *Three Sisters*. (1974); *Uncle Vanya*. (1978); *Ivanov*. (1978); *The Bear*. (1984).

32 *Long Day's Journey into Night*. (1967, 1985, 1992); *Before Breakfast*. (1968); *The Iceman Cometh*. (1972); *Desire under the Elms*. (1976).

Until 1978, and particularly during the initial years after the opening of the new theatre, the Abbey programme was dominated by two kinds of Irish play, influenced by both the internationalist commitment and the demands of the new stage. These were adaptations and "international Irish" plays: plays that had Irish links, but were written under the influence of the international repertoire.

Adaptations were to have an important contribution to make to the new Abbey repertoire. Hugh Hunt writes: "The first really successful production of the opening year was an adaptation by P.J. O'Connor of Patrick Kavanagh's novel, *Tarry Flynn*."³³ Hunt, chronicling the initial efforts of the new theatre, continually highlights adaptations as plays that were successful for the company. Hunt's observations about *Tarry Flynn* reveal possible reasons for the selection of such a play:

In this picture of rural life, with its multiple scenes, the particular characteristics of the new stage were used to their best effect by the play director, Tomás MacAnna, in a production that frankly recognised the stage as a place for acting rather than scenic adornment.³⁴

Through the necessities of staging material originally created in prose, with the inevitable multiple focus of such a form, MacAnna had found it necessary to create a production ideally suited to the workings of the new stage. In the next year, 1967, two productions seen as "the greatest popular successes of recent years",³⁵ were produced with a similar commitment to the stage.

Frank MacMahon's adaptation of Brendan Behan's biography, *Borstal Boy*, is a play much revived and deserves consideration in its own right.³⁶ The original production ran for 171 performances, the longest run in the history of the new Abbey and is seen today, by D.E.S. Maxwell, as being the "true debut" of the new theatre. To Maxwell, the fact that the first true success in the new building

³³ Hunt. p200.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *Borstal Boy* has become a favourite within the Irish repertoire. It has been revived many times, providing Niall Toibin, playing the role of the elder Brendan, a vehicle for his ironic delivery. The most recent production was presented by the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, in 1989, directed by Joe Dowling.

was "by a dead writer and not originally written for the stage" was paradoxical, but there is little doubt for him that the production, again directed by Tomás MacAnna, was a "triumph". "Brilliant use of the Abbey's lighting transported a bare stage through multiple shifts of place, time, and mood, honouring a new theatrical style."³⁷ Again, the new Abbey stage contributed to the success of a production.

The other great success of 1967, a production that was to be seen in London as part of the World Theatre Season in 1968, was a play of Irish origin, but can hardly be seen as part of the traditional Abbey cannon. If there is a paradox in the Abbey producing a play by a dead writer and with material not originally meant for the stage, then the production of Boucicault's melodrama, *The Shaughraun*, adds weight to the irony. To produce in the first instance and, more importantly, to find success with a play that Yeats would identify as being the very epitome of the "buffoonery and easy sentiment"³⁸ the Abbey was meant to dismiss, demonstrates that the institution was programming to fit the needs of the time, rather than the traditions of old. Like the growing European repertoire and the rise of adaptations, *The Shaughraun* can be seen to serve the needs of the new Abbey. With the play's speed and energy, the heightened quality of character, the rushing from scene to scene, the Abbey had found, within an Irish play, all the ingredients suitable to show off the design of the stage. The qualities of Boucicault's play, written in 1874, reach out beyond the restraints of the Irish literary plays -- to be defined some thirty years after its first presentation -- and encompass a universality that made the success of its revival in the late twentieth century inevitable. As Hugh Hunt puts it:

Boucicault's superbly irreverent mixture of farce and melodrama, spectacle, sentiment and suspense, his panache and totally shameless exploitation of the most improbable coincidences, defy all the high-flown

³⁷ Maxwell, p160.

³⁸ From initial Manifesto for the Irish Literary Theatre, 1897. See Chapter One.

tenets held by the purists, appealing directly to the willing suspension of disbelief that lies at the heart of all true theatre.³⁹

With *The Shaughraun* the Abbey had found an international Irish play, suiting the wider spectrum of the role of a National Theatre, in the same way as the foreign plays in the repertoire. The idea was repeated with productions of plays by Brendan Behan -- *The Quare Fellow* in 1969 and *The Hostage* in 1970⁴⁰ -- and of Samuel Beckett. Of the first Abbey production of *Waiting for Godot* in 1969, Gus Smith wrote: "Historians may well mark down Monday December the first [the date of the opening] as the night when the 'modern' Abbey Theatre became a truly National Theatre in the widest sense of the word."⁴¹

Perhaps the best example of the adoption of international Irish plays, suiting the demands of the new theatre and serving the identity of the Abbey as national theatre, was seen in the presentation of the later plays of Sean O'Casey. Between 1967 and 1978 five of the major plays written by O'Casey after he left the Abbey were produced by the company, in homage to the greatest Irish playwright of the twentieth century and without the bitterness that had existed in previous years. Only one of these plays, *The Silver Tassie* (produced in 1972), had been performed at the Abbey before.⁴² The others were: *Red Roses for Me* (1967); *Purple Dust* (1975); *Cock-a Doodle Dandy* (1977) and *The Star Turns Red* (1978). According to Hugh Hunt, who had directed the renowned production of *The Silver Tassie* in 1972, Tomás MacAnna was the main instigator of this irregular season: "[MacAnna] had long cherished the hope that the time would come when O'Casey's later plays would find a receptive audience in Dublin".⁴³ This says much for the growing ability for individual directors to make specific artistic decisions within the Abbey, due to some extent to the breaking down of

39 Hunt, p201.

40 *The Quare Fellow* was directed by Alan Simpson, who was Artistic Advisor to the Abbey during 1969. As is stated in the previous chapter, Simpson was a pioneer in the presentation of an international repertoire at the Pike, during the 1950s.

41 *Sunday Independent*, 7 December 1969. This landmark was achieved 13 years after Alan Simpson's Pike Theatre production of the play.

42 In 1935, See previous chapter.

43 Hunt, p225.

the Board's intransigence. It says just as much, however, for the positive programming of the new theatre in relation to the facilities the new theatre provided. MacAnna makes this point clear:

I brought on the later O'Casey plays because we owed that to O'Casey, but also because we had the means at our disposal to do what O'Casey always dreamt of and that is to give him the colour and the music and the theatricality in our new theatre, that those plays demanded.⁴⁴

There is little doubt that the programming of the Abbey to meet the growing demands for an internationalist National Theatre and to satisfy the design of the new theatre meant that the early years of the new Abbey's life, until 1969/70, were remarkably successful. With productions like *Tarry Flynn* (1966), *The Shaughraun* (1967), *Borstal Boy* (1967), *The Cherry Orchard* (1968) and *Waiting for Godot* (1969) and with prestigious events like Carolyn Swift's International Seminar and tours to London for the World Theatre Season and to Italy,⁴⁵ the Abbey was not only boosting its profile abroad, but raising confidence at home. The actor Tom Hickey, looking back in 1991, recognised the tremendous enthusiasm in Dublin for the Abbey in the last years of the 1960s:

The Abbey seemed like an oasis at the time, after all those years at the Queens. It was new and exciting and everyone wanted the Theatre to do well. I suppose it was a honeymoon period in a way.⁴⁶

Reflecting on his time at the Abbey, MacAnna considers the first two years after he was appointed as Artistic Advisor in the new building to be his happiest: "1967 and 1968 were very good years."⁴⁷

The Abbey was a success, but it was a success in a way that reduced the possibilities for the development of the playwright. A period of transformation, whereby the Abbey established itself as an international theatre and used already existing plays to experiment with the intricacies of the new stage, seems justified. But during this time, there was little acknowledgement of the role of the Abbey as

44 MacAnna. 5 January 1992.

45 In 1968, the Abbey presented *The Shadow of a Gunman* in Florence for the city's annual festival.

46 Tom Hickey. Interviewed in Dublin. 5 April 1991.

47 MacAnna. 5 January 1992.

a home for new writing and there were few active policies enacted to assist this role. As the discussion on "the Abbey and the future", in the *Irish Times*, implies, the philosophy regarding new Irish drama was that playwrights would be encouraged and influenced by the implementation of an international and catholic repertoire, encompassing foreign work, exciting adaptations and interesting Irish plays not seen at the Abbey in previous years.

In advocating such a *laissez-faire* approach to the encouragement of new playwrights, MacAnna and his fellow internationalists may have been blinding themselves to the still yawning financial and structural gaps between Ireland and the rest of Europe. In effect, such a non-interventionist philosophy may well have worked in Britain during the late 1960s, where the National Theatre's broad role was to produce the best of World theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company's role was to celebrate the work of the Bard. In addition to these two subsidised giants, however, was the Royal Court, a smaller, yet equally prestigious theatre, dedicated to the development of new writing.⁴⁸ In Britain, there was not one, but three "national" companies, each with a different set of priorities. Surrounding these London based companies was a system of established repertory theatres that have been in existence since the turn of the century. In the late 1960s, smaller "alternative" theatre companies were beginning to be formed and, with the repertory theatres and the Royal Court, were providing opportunities for new writers and new ideas, leaving the National Theatre and the RSC free to pursue higher and less direct contributions to theatre development.⁴⁹

Dublin specifically and Ireland generally, however, had never had the financial freedom found in Britain and, at the time, had few institutions able to form an alternative to the Abbey. During the late 1960s, there was only one other

48 See Introduction for a discussion of the role of the Royal Court and its similarities to the Abbey during the 1980s.

49 Sean McCarthy reflects on his time in Britain during the late 60s and early 70s. "At this time, with someone of my standing, - which was not that high, - all I had to do was inform the Arts Council and suggest a project and they would hand me a cheque." (Interviewed: 3 April 1992). Taking into account any exaggeration, it is a fair indication of the lack of parity between the two countries.

producing theatre, the Gate, and it had been set up clearly as an institution to provide Dublin audiences with international theatre, precisely the role that the Abbey was adopting at this time. The Pike Theatre had attempted to provide an "opposition" to the Abbey during the 1950s and had served well the theatre of Brendan Behan and Samuel Beckett, but had finally closed in 1964 and the directors, Alan Simpson and Carolyn Swift, had found themselves working at the Abbey. Deirdre O'Connell's Focus Theatre had been in existence since the early 1960s, but had never seen its role as that of a writer's theatre. The Dublin Theatre Festival attempted, once a year, to stimulate the Irish writer, but its infrequency hardly allowed for ongoing development. Peter and Jim Sheridan had yet to establish themselves at the Project, leaving the Irish playwright with just one place to turn to: the Abbey.

On turning to the Abbey, the playwright would find it filled with successful productions of plays that underlined its status as an international national theatre. Far from being encouraging, the Abbey was glorifying the might of the international repertoire of the twentieth century. The playwright was being confronted with statements from Tyrone Guthrie, suggesting that "the National Theatre should be presented with nothing but works in the masterpiece class",⁵⁰ and Joe Dowling remembers an incident whereby the Abbey seemed to agree with him:

MacAnna had said in an interview in the late 1960s that any new play that went on at the Abbey would have to be of the quality of Synge and O'Casey.... It was a silly remark and not really meant. Knowing the man as I do, he didn't mean to say what it sounded like. He wanted to say that he was aiming for plays of a high quality. But it made many writers feel that they hadn't got a chance: the Abbey was never going to do their plays.⁵¹

The playwright was put off not only by the European repertoire, but by the series of adaptations and for similar reasons. While the form of the material may be different, the potential playwright saw that the content of the play was already

⁵⁰ *Irish Times*. 5 October 1967.

⁵¹ Joe Dowling. Interviewed in Dublin, 15 November 1991.

established, normally with a celebrated reputation. Further to this, there is a negative interpretation for the reasons behind doing adaptations, what Richard Hands has defined as a post-modernist belief that there is nothing new to be created: art can only develop with the reinterpretation of the old.⁵²

By the end of 1969, it was evident that the Abbey was not encouraging new writers to submit new drama. Of thirty new plays produced between 1966 and 1969, nine were adaptations. This still leaves twenty-one original plays, but of the writers, only three were to make any long-term impact on Irish drama: Thomas Kilroy; Liam Lynch and Tom Murphy. Of these three, only with Murphy, who had three plays presented in these years,⁵³ was there any suggestion of continuity and development. Any implied continuing association between Murphy and the Abbey, however, is weakened by the fact that, as a playwright, Murphy had been struggling to establish himself since the beginning of the 1960s. The Abbey acknowledged his talents in 1968, with their production of *Famine*, but when he needed support, encouragement and development, the Theatre was aggressive in its rejection.

Tom Murphy was forced to undergo his writing apprenticeship in England during the mid 1960s. The rejection of his first play by the Abbey, in 1961, had been uncompromising, an example of the Board's inability to appreciate the changing reflection of Irish drama.⁵⁴ It could be argued, therefore, that the three Murphy plays the Abbey produced in the first three years of their residence in the new building, under a comparatively new regime, was an attempt to redress the

52 Interviewed in Glasgow. 14 May 1992. Richard Hands is Lecturer in English at the University of Humberside in Hull and is completing a PhD on dramatic adaptations of novels at Glasgow University.

53 *Famine* (1968); *The Orphans* (1968) and *A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer's Assistant* (1969).

54 Fintan O'Toole begins his book, *The Politics of Magic. The Work and Times of Tom Murphy*. Dublin: 1987, with Ernest Blythe's response to *A Whistle in the Dark*, when he finally saw it. "I never saw such rubbish in my life"(p7), was how the Managing Director chose to view the play confirming in his own mind his initial reaction when rejecting the play. Murphy had, no doubt, sent the play automatically to the Abbey, for first refusal. That "first refusal" was given to Murphy with what O'Toole calls "an abusive denunciation". O'Toole outlines Blythe's comments. "The characters of the play, he said, were unreal, and its atmosphere was incredible. He did not believe that such people as were to appear in *A Whistle* existed in Ireland".(p42)

balance and yet it could, with equal justification, be implied that the Abbey produced new work by Murphy only because he had an already established record. No development was needed; no investment required, and yet, the National Theatre was to receive a substantial return from Murphy. Since 1968, the Abbey has provided a home for the plays of Tom Murphy. Of the eighteen original or adapted plays Murphy has written, between then and the present day, the Abbey has produced twelve. During the early 1980s, Murphy was a member of the Board of Directors and in 1986, he became the first Abbey Theatre Writer in Association. A portrait of him now hangs proudly in the foyer of the Theatre. Murphy has become a playwright within the Abbey Company, but such association has evolved without any risk on the part of the National Theatre.

If the Abbey's claim on Tom Murphy is weak, then its claim on Brian Friel is compromised completely. None the less, Friel's portrait hangs opposite that of Murphy's in the foyer, as another living writer, whose company the Abbey proudly courts. Indeed, the portrait of Friel has been hanging there longer than that of Murphy's, representing the wider impact the former playwright has made, not only for himself, but for the Abbey. In terms of fame, Friel is in a different league to Murphy. Maxwell comments that in the years from 1964, "Friel has written the most substantial and impressive body of work in contemporary Irish drama".⁵⁵ He is perhaps the only Irish dramatist, since Behan, who has made a serious impact in Britain and America: his most recent play, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), has won the major theatre awards on both sides of the Atlantic. Frank Rich in the *New York Times*, commented that "this play does exactly what theatre was born to do, carrying both its characters and audience aloft on those waves of ecstatic release".⁵⁶

The Abbey has received a degree of reflected glory from this. In January 1992, on the triumph of *Dancing at Lughnasa* on Broadway and the continued

⁵⁵ Maxwell, p201.

⁵⁶ Re-printed in "Rich Hymn to Friel's play". *Irish Times*. 31 October 1991.

success of the play in London, Peter Lewis in the *Sunday Times*, asked: "Why is Dublin's Abbey Theatre so consistently successful?"⁵⁷ The implication is that any success the Abbey might have is entwined with that of Friel: an argument accentuated by Garry Hynes's insistence, within Lewis's article, that "... it was the commitment of the Abbey to Friel and Murphy in the 1960s and 1970s that has led to the present flowering".⁵⁸ The Abbey, therefore, continues to put forward the view that Friel and his work are part of Abbey history and, yet, his contact with the Theatre during the early years of his career was slight even compared with that of Murphy. Admittedly, the Abbey did produce Friel's first play, *The Enemy Within* in 1962, and yet no attempt was made to follow this up. This was unfortunate, because it was not until Friel's second major play in 1964, that he received wide recognition: as Richard Pine suggests, "Contemporary Irish drama begins in 1964 in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*".⁵⁹ This play was produced for the Dublin Theatre Festival, by the Gaiety Theatre. Like Murphy's situation, it could be argued that Friel's lack of contact was due to the Abbey's dated administration, prior to the move to the new building. Apart from a revival of *The Loves of Cass McGuire*, in 1967, a play that was premiered in New York, however, Friel did not have work produced at the National Theatre until 1973, when the Abbey contributed to a joint production, with the Royal Court, of *The Freedom of the City*. In the nine years before, Friel had produced *The Loves of Cass McGuire*, in New York (1966); *Lovers*, at the Gate Theatre (1967); *Crystal and Fox*, at the Gaiety Theatre (1968); *The Mundy Scheme*, (1969) and *The Gentle Island*, (1971), both at the Olympia Theatre. A prolific period for Friel, matching the years of success experienced at the Abbey, but not once did their paths meet.

57 Peter Lewis. "Upstaging the West End". *Sunday Times*. 19 January 1992. This glorification of the work of the Abbey by the British press had been preceded in the three months before, by almost total abuse towards the Theatre by the Irish press. See Paddy Woodworth and Gerry Colgan. 'Drama at the Abbey'. *Irish Times* 26 October 1991. Such discrepancies between Irish and British media perception of the Abbey are not uncommon and tend to exemplify the simplistic view, on the part of Britain's media, that Irish drama's single role is to contribute to the London repertoire.

58 *Sunday Times*. 19 January 1992.

59 Richard Pine. *Brian Friel and Ireland's Drama*. (London: Routledge, 1990). p1.

Not producing one original work by Friel during the late 1960s makes the Abbey's professed link with this playwright seem very tenuous. This attenuation is not weakened by attempts to justify this distance by the assumption that Friel required very little support from outside association. It is a stated fact that through these years, Friel built up an impressive cannon of work, crafting his plays in what Patrick Mason calls "... the best literary tradition", away from the theatre and in "complete secrecy, not letting the script out of his hands until it was finished".⁶⁰ It is implied, therefore, that the Abbey cannot take the blame for its limited contribution to the development of Friel's skill as a playwright, because Friel himself never wanted help. It could be argued, however, that such an isolated approach to creating drama was forced upon Friel, due to the inactivity of the Abbey. When in New York for the unsuccessful première of *The Loves of Cass McGuire* in 1966, Friel professed a commitment to writing within an organisation. "The best theatre was always done, in history, with a writer working with a director and a resident company."⁶¹ Indeed, close analysis of the production details of Friel's new plays during the 1960s exposes the fact that he did associate with one particular theatre company: the Gate. While not all the 1960s plays were premiered at the Gate itself, every production, including the one in New York, was directed by Hilton Edwards. While the Abbey stood by, Edwards and Micheál MacLiammóir nursed the work of the greatest dramatist of the time, as they had done on various occasions, when the National Theatre had failed in their responsibility. Friel is quick to acknowledge the education he received through his work at the Gate.

I know that they [Edwards and MacLiammóir] came into my life at a point when their practical skill and their vast experience and their scholarship were of most value to me. I am not aware that I have any theatrical pedigree; but if I had to produce documentation I would be pleased to claim - to paraphrase Turgenev's comment on Gogol - that I came out from under the Edwards-MacLiammóir overcoat.⁶²

60 Patrick Mason. Interviewed in Dublin. 30 July 1992.

61 Ulf Dantanus. *Brian Friel. A Study*. (London: Faber, 1988). p107.

62 Peter Luke (ed.). *Enter Certain Players. Edwards and MacLiammóir and the Gate 1928-1978*. (Dublin: Dolman, 1978). p21.

The Abbey may well have the portrait of Brian Friel, but the Gate have the production photographs.

What is highlighted by an evaluation of the Abbey's dubious early association with both Tom Murphy and Brian Friel is the fact that little development or encouragement was given to the two living playwrights most associated with the Abbey since the opening of the new building. The Abbey started to include both writer's plays once their reputations were established, contributing to a repertoire that seemed to demand nothing less than masterpieces. For those writers who had not yet developed a coherent understanding of the technique of writing drama, there was little practical assistance available at the Abbey. Thomas Kilroy comments: "My sense of the Abbey in those days was that they had no structure whatsoever for the writer. Once my play was accepted, there was nothing but enthusiasm and encouragement, but beforehand, one experienced nothing more than polite distance."⁶³

Tomás MacAnna was coming to realise by the end of 1969, that the Abbey's duty towards the playwright was being neglected. In an *Irish Times* article published in August 1969, called "New Abbeys for Old", MacAnna reflected on the first three years of the New Theatre's existence and admitted that few new scripts were coming to the Abbey and of those that were, he rather ironically states that he was "fed up with imitations of Pinter and Brecht".⁶⁴ A week previously, the critic Seamus Kelly had indirectly supported the idea that few new playwrights were becoming established by stating at a drama summer school, that "Eugene McCabe, Brian Friel, Hugh Leonard and John B. Keane

63 Thomas Kilroy. Letter received, 6 May 1992. Kilroy's play mentioned here, was *The O'Neill*, produced in the Peacock in 1969. As a playwright he had already achieved success with *The Death and the Resurrection of Mr Roche* in the 1968 Dublin Theatre Festival and later at the Hampstead Theatre Club, but he was still struggling to establish his work within the Irish repertoire. Thomas Kilroy (1934 -) is, in many ways, the most interesting playwright to emerge during the late 1960s. The contrast between the aggressive naturalism of his early plays and the surreal quality of his later plays, in particular, *Talbot's Box* (1977), demonstrates an advanced and exciting theatrical imagination. His creative skill, along with his insight as Script Editor at the Abbey (see later in the chapter), suggest that Thomas Kilroy is one of the more underrated influences on Irish theatre during the past quarter century.

64 Tomás MacAnna. "New Abbeys for Old". *Irish Times*. 4 August 1969.

were the major dramatists writing in and about Ireland at the moment": hardly a list of young and new prospects.⁶⁵ The reasons for such deficiencies were summed up clearly by the playwright Wesley Burrowes in an article entitled, "Writers are not Encouraged", that "there is nothing in Ireland to encourage anybody to write a play, except his own dedication".⁶⁶

A non-interventionist approach to the support and encouragement of the playwright was failing at the Abbey. What was needed was practical support. It could be argued that the Abbey, with its determination to expand its role as a national theatre and with the unsuitability of the new stage, had few practical resources to assist the playwright. Below the foyer of the main house, however, was the obvious place for Irish dramatists to explore their craft and it was the inability of the Abbey to exploit this place, the Peacock Theatre, that was the major reason for the limited success in developing the playwright.

Without the Peacock Theatre, there is little doubt that the Abbey Theatre could never have developed as a writer's theatre. The term "home of the living writer" was a term Dowling coined "... largely in relation to the Peacock, rather than the Abbey itself, because the Abbey would have to do the Synge and O'Casey classics".⁶⁷ It was this simple sub-division of the roles of the Abbey and the Peacock, that allowed for the development of a writer's theatre in the years that were to come. Such a simple clarification, however, was never determined when the Peacock first opened in 1967, and this led to an incoherence in policy regarding the role of the studio.

Before the Abbey was opened and the Peacock was completed, the high-flown statements from the Board regarding the Peacock's role did little to clarify what it was there for. In the booklet published to celebrate the opening of the Abbey, the Board looked forward to the opening of the smaller theatre.

⁶⁵ *Irish Times*. 30 July 1969.

⁶⁶ Wesley Burrowes. "Writers are not Encouraged". *Irish Times*. 18 March 1968.

⁶⁷ Dowling. 15 November 1991.

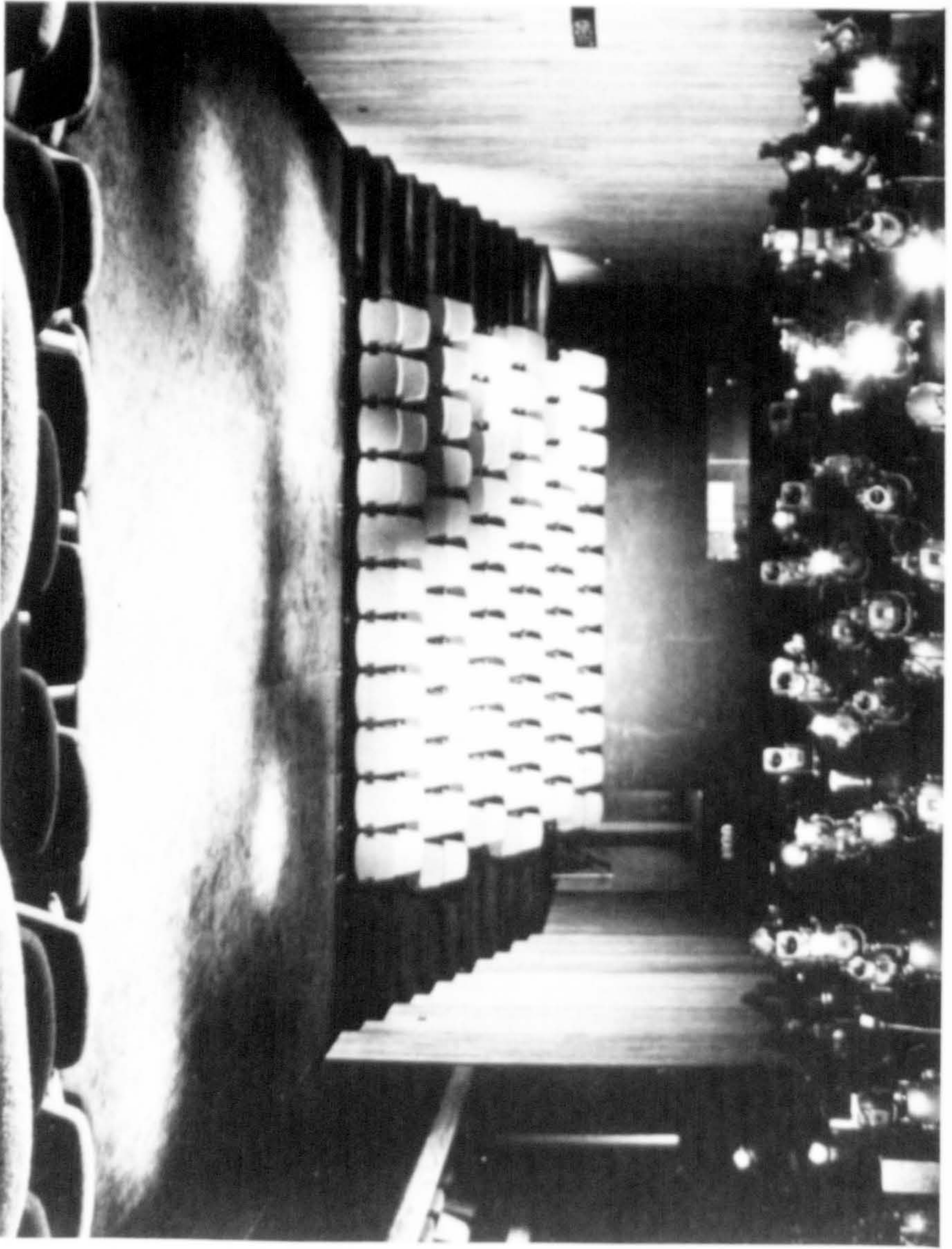


Figure Seven. Interior of the Peacock Theatre.

Inevitably, they stress the importance of Irish language theatre and verse drama, but expand upon their intentions, only with enigmatic rhetoric:

The Peacock Theatre -- the experimental arm of the Abbey, in which the fledgling Irish playwrights, players and others may find the warm nest for their future soaring -- and in which all may find model and tutelage from foreign classics and experimental daring.⁶⁸

Hugh Hunt, commenting on this statement, suggests that it "indicates a somewhat confused policy for the theatre to embark on" and continues:

The very variety of tasks it is expected to undertake would seem to deny the Peacock any consistent or unified policy. ... Its purpose has been further complicated by adding to its functions those of a workshop for the actors, home for a theatre in education team, a showcase for the finalists of Gaelic drama competitions, a lunch-time theatre and a venue for 'pop' concerts.⁶⁹

Perhaps the limited understanding of a studio's usefulness is best highlighted by the fact that when the new Peacock opened on 23 July 1967, the company chose not to present a play. Instead, there was a demonstration of some of the flexible features of the theatre: the Peacock was all dressed up, but had no where to go.⁷⁰

The programme of the Peacock, in the first four years, underlines only too clearly the lack of a coherent identity. The first production was an adaptation of Myles na gCopaleen's *An Beal Bocht*. Irish language drama accounted for three of the nine productions in 1967; four productions were by old Abbey writers; there was one international production of Samuel Beckett's *Play* and one original Irish play in English: *At Bantry* by James MacKenna. Between 1968 and the end of 1970, the Peacock was home to thirty-seven productions: six were of plays in Irish; seven were from the international repertoire; ten plays were previously presented Irish plays and fourteen productions were of new plays, but of these, only seven were from original sources and by playwrights. The rest were either

68 "The Second Spring. A Manifesto for the New Abbey Theatre". *Abbey Theatre 1904 -1966*. Celebration booklet for the opening of the New Abbey Theatre. (Dublin: 1966).

69 Hunt. p199.

70 It could be argued that the new Peacock was disadvantaged by a similar lack of clarity regarding the role of the Old Peacock, upstairs in the old building. See previous chapter for discussion on the opening of the previous incarnation.

adaptations or collaborations. It was as if the Peacock could not admit to be favouring one specific form of theatre.

From 1970, the then Artistic Director Hugh Hunt, demonstrating his acute understanding of the incoherence of the Peacock programming, attempted to find a more clearly defined identity, by implementing a degree of administrative independence for the studio. He appointed Tomás MacAnna as director of the Peacock with Joe Dowling as his assistant, and from this point until 1978, when Dowling became Artistic Director, the smaller Theatre always had separate direction. MacAnna launched into his role with tremendous enthusiasm:

I was very happy as director of the Peacock, with Joe Dowling in the early 1970s. During that period in that little theatre, with a young company we did the most extraordinary things... we experimented with various forms of theatre, both in English and in Irish and managed to establish some work of great quality and tremendous variety.⁷¹

Hunt was to call this season under MacAnna's direction "adventurous"⁷² and there is little doubt that the separate director raised the quality and widened the variety of the theatre and, yet, the standard and variety of work at the Peacock was not really in doubt. Appointing a virtually separate executive for the studio hardly invigorated the relationship between the Abbey and Peacock: there was less chance of a complementation of programmes which is the most difficult yet essential aspect of any two-house theatre. Joe Dowling and Vincent Dowling, who was director of the Peacock in later years, acknowledge the tremendous education of running the small theatre and, yet, there is a danger that this will reduce the influence of the studio, as Hunt readily admits: "Too often the designation of 'experimental theatre' is a cover for the not quite good enough."⁷³ Joe Dowling, as is discussed in the next chapter, realised that if the Peacock was to contribute to the development of the playwright, it not only had to be designated for this purpose, but it had to take equal importance with the Abbey:

71 MacAnna. 5 January 1992.

72 Hunt. p239.

73 Hunt. p199.

When I became Artistic Director I abolished the notion of a separate director for the Peacock... I simply knew that if we were going to have a concerted policy of developing new writers, there had to be a sense that the central authority of the Abbey made that choice, rather than a hived-off version, which gives people the chance to say: 'it's not really Abbey policy, they're just doing it down there'. ... During my time at the Abbey, the two theatres had equal standing: there was no difference, except we were using the Peacock as a writer's theatre.⁷⁴

The inability to commit the Peacock to a specific role and thus give practical assistance to the playwright was very much due to the philosophies that had determined the development of the Abbey, in general, as an international theatre. Concessions had been won from the restrictive traditions of the old Abbey and the director was free to choose his/her programme as he/she saw fit. The epic theatre imported from Europe may not have been new, but it was new to Ireland and the director felt liberated by the chance to experiment with these new forms, particularly as the National Theatre now had a stage to suit the form. It was inevitable that the Peacock and, therefore, new writing would take second place in directors' preoccupations, as they enjoyed the challenge of reinterpreting established plays, within the context of the adventurous main house design. The artists' bias towards the main house at the time was glaringly obvious, at least to Hugh Hunt, but his attempts to overcome this through separating the direction of the smaller theatre from the main house merely gave the Peacock the same preoccupations as the Abbey, but on a smaller scale. Between 1966 and 1974, no practical contribution to the lot of the dramatist was made and the idea of a writer's theatre seemed far away.

In 1974 the Abbey made its one practical move to assist the playwright by accepting a recommendation by a sub-committee of shareholders to appoint a Literary Editor. The creation of this post cannot be overestimated in the revitalising of the playwright's contribution to the repertoire of the Abbey. When Sean McCarthy came to be appointed in 1979, he had the background and the experience, not just as a writer, but as a dramaturg to define clearly what the post

⁷⁴ Dowling. 15 November 1991.

should mean in practical terms.⁷⁵ It took from 1974 until 1979, however, for the Abbey to realise fully the potential of this job and, so, held up the development of a writer's theatre for a further four years.

As with the establishing of a studio theatre, it seemed that the Board of the Abbey realised the vague desirability of the post of Literary Editor -- looking, no doubt, to the work of Kenneth Tynan at the British National Theatre -- but had few ideas as to what the working arrangements should be. As Hunt puts it: "As often happens at the Abbey when new appointments are made, good intentions become dissipated by half-hearted implementation."⁷⁶ This comment could with fairness be directed specifically at MacAnna. As with most of the reforms that transformed the Abbey into a modern theatre during the late 1960s and early 1970s, MacAnna must take the credit for acknowledging the need for intervention in the development of new drama and, therefore, seeing the need for a Literary Editor. Thomas Kilroy states: "Tomás MacAnna was in fact hugely supportive of writers. I personally owe him a great debt, particularly in the setting up of the production of my play, *Tea and Sex and Shakespeare* (1976)."⁷⁷ Sean McCarthy shares the view that MacAnna must take credit for much of what developed: "Even before Joe came, the administration for new writing was changing. The change was started by Tomás MacAnna who saw the great importance of working in the European way."⁷⁸ MacAnna may have seen the importance, but, in setting up the working structure of the post, failed to understand the implications in practice. Hunt outlines the job description:

The new post was to be offered to established playwrights on a part-time basis, as a one year appointment, the occupant to have no voting power in the acceptance or rejection of scripts.⁷⁹

75 See Chapter Four for details of Sean McCarthy's experience and contribution to the development of the Abbey as a writers' theatre.

76 Hunt. p232.

77 Kilroy. 6 May 1992.

78 Sean McCarthy. Interviewed in Dublin. 3 April 1992. By the term 'European way', McCarthy is referring to the Continental methods of practice, that had, for the best part of the century, acknowledged the role of the artistic director, rather than to a European repertoire.

79 Hunt. p232.

The first appointment of Denis Johnston demonstrated how an established playwright could never really work in the post.⁸⁰ Within the year, Johnston had to resign because of commitment of work and yet the Abbey did not seem to realise that established playwrights would be too busy with their own work to commit themselves to the development of others. The next appointment was of the successful and established playwright, Hugh Leonard.⁸¹ There is little doubt that Leonard understood the importance of the post and did his best to reach out to new writers. His work is recognised by both MacAnna and Kilroy. MacAnna believes that Leonard was very good with the younger writers,⁸² while Kilroy believes that Leonard had done "... a terrific amount of work in his time and was a very generous and very careful reader of scripts".⁸³ Leonard saw that if he was going to have a chance to develop what Hunt has called "an organic and developing policy",⁸⁴ the role of the Literary Editor had to be strengthened. This, unfortunately, led to a rather tense incident that underlines the vagueness of the post. Leonard comments:

They asked me to report on my work, and in the course of my report I said that the play editor should be allowed to vote on the acceptance and rejection of a play, not as a piece of power, but as a responsibility, since he was the one who was pushing the play. They turned this down totally at the meeting. There was a leak from the meeting, and Tom Murphy made some remarks about why I had taken the job.⁸⁵

This incident led to moves by fellow established playwrights to remove him from the post. Leonard jumped before he was pushed and the Abbey lost, if not the most adventurous playwright, certainly a sensitive script editor. A loss accentuated by the "half-hearted implementation" of the position.

80 Denis Johnston, 72 at the time of appointment, was the doyen of Irish playwrights. He had been writing for the Irish stage since 1929, when *The Old Lady Says No!*, was produced by the Gate Theatre. Other plays include: *The Moon in the Yellow River* (1931); *The Golden Cuckoo* (1939); *The Dreaming Dust* (1940) and *The Scythe and the Sunset* (1958).

81 Hugh Leonard was born in Dublin in 1926 and started writing plays in 1957. His first big success came in 1973 with *Da*, which won a Tony Award for best play. His other major plays include *The Patrick Pearse Motel* (1971), *Time Was* (1976) and *A Life* (1979).

82 MacAnna. 5 January 1992.

83 Kilroy. 6 May 1992.

84 Hunt. 232.

85 Quoted by Fintan O'Toole. "The Man in the Rolls Royce with a Cigar in his Mouth". *A Mass for Jesse James. A Journey Through 1980s Ireland*. (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1990).

Perhaps the best explanation of the limitations of the post of Literary Editor is given by Thomas Kilroy, who was to hold the post from the beginning of 1978 to the beginning of 1979, when Dowling had already become artistic director.

I was appointed Script Editor in succession to Hugh Leonard by Tomás MacAnna, and my understanding was that it was to be one or two days a week and I would be responsible only for dealing with submitted scripts. There was no real discussion of ideas with writers or anything of that nature, which I came to realise should be an important part of a script editor's job. So I went into it really, under a certain amount of pressure, trying to cope with my own work and my teaching, while trying to do this Abbey job. I went into it with a very vague sense of what was involved: I didn't have any kind of specific aims. ... I have very mixed feelings about what I did succeed in doing there: I don't think I succeeded in doing a whole lot.⁸⁶

Kilroy, in expressing clearly the aimlessness of the post, is very negative about his own contribution, but it is acknowledged by many that he identified the way forward, not only in terms of job description and the practical needs of the appointment, but also in terms of the emphasis of the job's intentions.

In July 1978, when coming to the end of his contract, Kilroy submitted a paper to the Abbey that was to become an important document in the foundation of a writer's theatre, for in the words of Joe Dowling it "... was the basis on which the whole modern process and the relationship between the playwright and the Abbey was founded".⁸⁷ In this paper, Kilroy put into perspective the importance of developing the Abbey as a national theatre, along international lines.

To provide a technical excellence in the service of classical or modern, foreign plays is itself a splendid thing and essential to the theatrical life of this country. In the end, however, a theatre will cease to be creative in any enduring sense unless it can draw upon the imaginative writing of its own culture, in its own time.⁸⁸

Kilroy continued by attempting to draw the attention towards the traditional intention to be a writer's theatre: a role that he felt had been neglected.

86 Kilroy. 6 May 1992.

87 Dowling. 15 November 1991.

88 Thomas Kilroy. "The Literary Editor". Private Memorandum to the board of the Abbey. 8 July 1978.

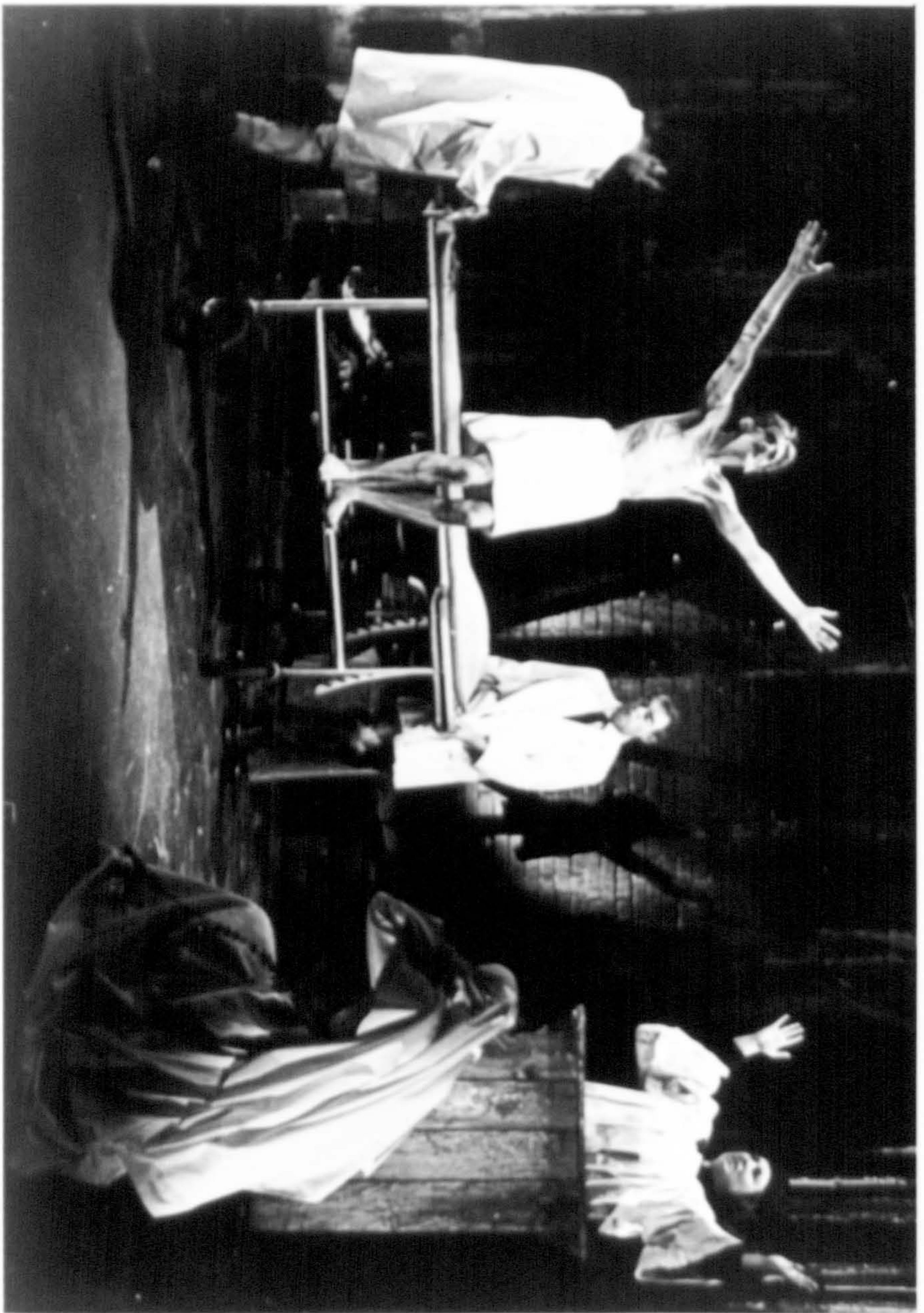


Figure Eight. *Talbot's Box*, by Thomas Kilroy. Peacock Theatre, September 1977.

Few will dispute the assertion that the relationship between the Abbey Theatre and contemporary writers has not always been a happy one. This is particularly disheartening since the Theatre was founded by writers as a writer's theatre and its main claim to fame continues to rest upon the plays which it has produced.⁸⁹

Kilroy went on to make certain recommendations: that the Literary Editor should become a full-time and central member of the theatre's staff and should become active in wider developmental projects in the pursuit of new drama. When the Board accepted these recommendations the way was made clear for Sean McCarthy's true exploitation of the post for the benefit of writers. Kilroy went further, however, than simply setting up the proper working conditions. As MacCarthy was to demonstrate with the enactment of Dowling's policy, there was a growing realisation that a change of emphasis was required within the Abbey, as to what exactly was meant by the idea of a writer's theatre. Kilroy mentions that he was only meant to process the scripts already submitted. MacAnna, in his enthusiasm for supporting the writer, exposes a major problem in his attitude towards the new writer: "When a new script came in, I made sure that the writer attended some rehearsals and took part in discussion of the play and was available for a certain amount of new writing of the play."⁹⁰ MacAnna's enthusiasm seems very positive once "a new script came in", but what about before then? Kilroy knew and stated that discussion of ideas was necessary, reaching out beyond the theatre, to establish a link with potential dramatists: the embryonic basis of a writer's theatre. MacAnna did not appreciate the distinction. Joe Dowling clarifies MacAnna's differing vision:

The introduction of a Script Editor was certainly MacAnna's idea: I think that it was something that he felt was needed, but didn't eventually fulfil, due in many ways, to the nature of the time, but also to the nature of the man himself. MacAnna would put a new play on, as it was, it either worked or it didn't work. Whereas I saw the thing as being more developmental.⁹¹

89 Ibid.

90 MacAnna. January 1992.

91 Dowling. 15 November 1991.

MacAnna saw the concept of new writing in terms of the script, whereas Dowling saw it in terms of the playwright. According to Dowling, Kilroy had seen a whole selection of scripts in the pipeline, with certain potential, that were never going to be seen on stage. Under MacAnna, therefore, the role of the Literary Editor was still caught up, to a certain extent, with the non-interventionist attitudes to new writing that had been central in the years previous to the establishing of the post.

None the less, it was Thomas Kilroy who laid the foundations for an attempt to make the Abbey "the home of the living writer". Whether a coherent policy was actually established under the guidance of Joe Dowling and Sean MacCarthy in the early 1980s is the subject of the next chapter.

What can be seen during the years 1960 to 1978, therefore, is that changes in emphasis and attitude were to be as important to the establishing of a writer's theatre as reform of administrative structure at the Abbey. There is little doubt that the sweeping changes in the relationship between the artistic director and the Board, and the Theatre and the outside world established a system in which individual stage directors were given the freedom to consider artistic policy given the attitudes of the time. While the attitudes of the time, however, were preoccupied with a consideration of European theatre and the directorial needs of the new stage, new playwrights were not being developed. There is little doubt that the establishment of the post of Literary Editor brought the issue of new writing back to the centre of the Abbey's preoccupations. But while these preoccupations were focused on the individual script, already on the desk of the Literary Editor, rather than on future development and potential, a coherent school of playwrights was not being created.

Chapter Four: The Abbey Theatre 1978 - 1982. Joe Dowling, Sean McCarthy and 'the Home of the Living Writer'.

One of the things I am proud of is that during my time at the Abbey, we did actually make it the home of the living writer.
Joe Dowling.¹

In the next two chapters I examine the positive changes the Abbey Theatre made in its approach towards playwrights, during the early 1980s. In this chapter I examine a series of policy decisions made by the Artistic Director Joe Dowling, during the first four years of his reign, which actively encouraged the creation of a writer's theatre within the Abbey, similar to that at the Royal Court, allowing for a professional, two-way relationship between company and writer. I go on to examine how the working methods of Sean McCarthy, who was Script Editor from 1979 until the end of 1982, not only consolidated the move towards a writer's theatre, but facilitated an attempt by him to make the Abbey a true playwright's theatre, in which the creation of the play script was seen as being part of the day-to-day work of the Theatre. Finally, I consider the breakdown of this work through the seemingly inevitable return of the wider concerns and financial restrictions familiar to the National Theatre, but also through the suspicion of the playwrights themselves, who felt that their individual integrity was close to being compromised.

I start with an outline of the development of new plays produced between 1978 and 1982, drawing attention to the rising impact of three writers associated with the Peacock Theatre, in order to give a clear understanding of the Abbey's achievement during this time.

¹ Joe Dowling, Interviewed in Dublin, 8 August 1990.

There is no doubt that during the four years after Dowling took over as Artistic Director of the Abbey, new drama had a higher profile in Ireland than it had had in the years immediately before. Between 1979 and 1982, three playwrights emerged with critically acclaimed new work. Bernard Farrell,² Graham Reid³ and Neil Donnelly⁴ were to become the first representatives of a new wave of playwriting in Ireland, later joined by Frank MacGuinness,⁵ Aodhan Madden⁶ and Tom MacIntyre⁷. This new wave of playwriting was centred around the Peacock and unlike the prominent new writers of the early 1970s, such

² Bernard Farrell was born in Sandycove, County Dublin and educated in Dublin. A keen amateur writer, Farrell had contributed to short story and poetry magazines, both in Ireland and in England, and, between 1974 and 1976, he was assistant editor of *The Beacon* literary magazine. Since 1974, Farrell had been a member of the Lantern Theatre Workshop and had had a one-act play, *Good-bye Smiler, It's Been Nice*, produced for the company in 1975. While not exactly new, therefore, to either the discipline of creative writing or the world of theatre, Farrell had yet to commit himself to the challenge of a major work or the vulnerability of professional writing and so his interest in creative writing was unknown to more than a handful of close friends. *I Do Not Like Thee, Doctor Fell*, changed this. (Information on Bernard Farrell: Interview in Dun Loaghaire, 29 August 1991; programme notes, provided by the Abbey; introductions to play scripts, for details see bibliography. Further information provided by interviews from other individuals, see separate notes.)

³ Graham Reid was born in Belfast and left school at the age of fifteen. He took a variety of jobs before returning to full-time education at the age of 26: first at the College of Business Studies in Belfast and then at Stranmillis College of Education, graduating with a BEd degree in 1976. In 1979, he was still teaching at a boys secondary school in Bangor, County Down and the first production of *The Death of Humpty Dumpty* was programmed so as to coincide with his long vacation. (Information on J. Graham Reid: Interviewed in London, 28 March 1992; programme notes, provided by the Abbey. Further information received from other individuals, see separate notes.)

⁴ Neil Donnelly was born in Tullamore, County Offaly and educated locally by the Christian Brothers. After school, he left for London and took a variety of jobs before he decided, like Reid, to return to full-time education, with the intention of becoming a teacher. He graduated from St Mary's College of Education, London in 1972 and started to teach. In 1975, Donnelly founded, with Martin Houghton, Wheels Theatre in Education Company, which was based in Hertfordshire. Having had limited success with writing plays, while in England, it was not until *Upstarts* was accepted by the Abbey and he focused his writing for his home country's audience, that he began to establish himself as a writer of note. (Information on Neil Donnelly: Interviewed in Dublin, 6 April 1992; programme notes; other interviews, etc....)

⁵ Frank MacGuinness's first play, *The Factory Girls*, opened at the Peacock Theatre on 23 November 1982, directed by Patrick Mason. Three years later, in 1985, the Peacock produced *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, considered by many to be the finest Irish play of the decade. *Sons of Ulster* proved to be the last new play programmed for the Peacock, during Dowling's directorate: a fitting end to his reign. For a more detailed discussion on MacGuinness's work, see the concluding chapter.

⁶ Aodhan Madden is a Dubliner who worked as a journalist for the *Irish Press* and continues to contribute articles to various publications. He has written a number of plays for the Abbey, including *The Midnight Door* (1983), *Remember Mauritania* (1984) and *Sensations* (1986). Writing a sharp and more cynical form of naturalism, Madden was the precursor to the rise of new Dublin playwrights: Sebastian Barry, Dermot Bolger and Roddy Doyle.

⁷ See next chapter.

as Stewart Parker⁸ and Tom Kilroy, who had become recognised as playwrights only after a slow and careful consolidation of work, the three new writers managed to establish themselves as dramatists of note in a very short time, contributing collectively nine plays to the Abbey repertoire in just four years.

The first play from one of these writers to be produced at the Abbey was Bernard Farrell's *I Do Not Like Thee, Doctor Fell*, which opened at the Peacock Theatre on 15 March 1979. A play that sets out to satirise the fashionable encounter groups and their jargon of communication and contemplation, it was directed by Paul Brennan, and the cast included Garrett Keogh, Eileen Colgan, Tom Hickey and Kathleen Barrington. The play opened to a generally positive critical response. Desmond Rushe, in the *Irish Independent*, described it as "a cleverly-written piece with a good share of comedy and its slightly sinister overtones keep interest at a high level".⁹ Colm Cronin, in *Hibernia*, commented that "it is the type of work for which the Peacock should be a platform" and suggested that "it is one of the most entertaining plays currently on view".¹⁰ David Nowlan, in the *Irish Times*, went so far as to suggest that "it is one of the best-wrought full-length first plays to come from an Irish dramatist in donkeys' years".¹¹ Before the end of the year, on 19 November, *I Do Not Like Thee, Doctor Fell* transferred to the main stage of the Abbey. Even before this, on 6 September 1979, a new play from another new writer opened on the Peacock stage: *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*, by J. Graham Reid.

Directed in its first production by Patrick Mason, *Humpty Dumpty* is a play about the struggle to come to terms with physical disaster, based around the

⁸ Ulsterman Stewart Parker, who died tragically in 1988, contributed plays to the Abbey during the 1970s, including *Spokesong* (1976) and *Catchpenny Twist* (1977). From the 1980s, however, Parker tended to commit his plays to other companies and perhaps his greatest play, *Pentecost*, was produced by Field Day in 1987. In 1989, The Stewart Parker Trust was set up with the intention of encouraging new playwriting in Ireland and each year presents the Stewart Parker Award which provides funding for a new dramatist. The first recipient in 1989 was Sebastian Barry.

⁹ *The Irish Independent*, 15 March 1979.

¹⁰ *Hibernia*, 22 March 1979.

¹¹ *The Irish Times*, 16 March 1979.



Figure Nine. *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*, by Graham Reid. Peacock Theatre, September 1979.
From Left: Colin Meaney; Clive Geraghty; Liam Neeson.

realistic situation of a violent encounter in Northern Ireland's Troubles. The starkness of Reid's message and the directness of his methods of communication were at times a little strong for the critics. Desmond Rushe found some of the scenes "revolting in their raw and gratuitous crudity".¹² David Nowlan described the play as being "raw and rough".¹³ While there were reservations about the rough nature of the work, with some comments on the uneven structure, Reid was acknowledged as a new and exciting force in Irish writing. Rushe observed that "Mr Reid shows much talent both in writing and in the creation of characters",¹⁴ while Nowlan described Reid as "a most promising new Irish playwright".¹⁵ *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*, followed *Doctor Fell* into the Abbey, on 3 December 1979.

In spite of the problems of his first play and his limited experience, Graham Reid confirmed his position as a new playwright of note by following up *The Death of Humpty Dumpty* with a new play within seven months. *The Closed Door*, directed by Art O'Bríain and starring Kevin MacHugh and Kathleen Barrington, opened in the Peacock on 24 April 1980. The play took a more direct political line, moving away from the personal horrors of *Humpty Dumpty*. In doing so Reid showed a progression in his writing, detaching himself from the dangers of indulgence in highlighting personal experience. *The Closed Door* observed wider issues and Reid allowed the situation to make the statement. This development led to a better critical response, with Tony Hennigan commenting in the *Irish Independent* that "the economy of writing in this play is what makes it a believable and sustained piece of theatre".¹⁶ David Nowlan saw the play as confirmation of Reid's "position as one of the foremost of this country's serious contemporary dramatists".¹⁷

¹² *The Irish Independent*, 7 September 1979.

¹³ *The Irish Times*, 7 September 1979.

¹⁴ *The Irish Independent*, *ibid.*

¹⁵ *The Irish Times*, *ibid.*

¹⁶ *The Irish Independent*, 25 April 1980.

¹⁷ *The Irish Times*, 25 April 1980.

Within two months of the end of the run of *The Closed Door* in the Peacock, a first play by the third new playwright to be seen in just over a year: *Upstarts*, by Neil Donnelly, opened in the same theatre on 7 August 1980. In spite of some critical concern for the shallowness of the play, Colm Cronin was to comment in *Hibernia* that "*Upstarts* is one of the most entertaining and satisfying new plays for ages and elevates Donnelly up there with those other successful Peacock protégés, Bernard Farrell and Graham Reid".¹⁸

The association between the Abbey and these three writers continued, without much of a pause, until the end of 1982. Within two months of *Upstarts* closing in the Peacock, *Canaries*, by Bernard Farrell, had the honour of following the first Abbey production of *Faith Healer*, by Brian Friel, onto the main stage. It was considered that the light-hearted nature of Farrell's plays would prove to be a success in the main house. This was confirmed by *Canaries* playing to capacity audiences¹⁹ and in the future all Farrell's work was to be premiered in the main house. Productions of Farrell's *All in Favour Said No!* in 1981 and *Petty Sessions* in 1982 confirmed his position as the most successful, popular dramatist in Ireland since Hugh Leonard.

On 5 October 1981, just over a year after the opening of *Upstarts*, Neil Donnelly's *The Silver Dollar Boys* opened in the Peacock. Considered by the author to be his best play, *The Silver Dollar Boys* paints a far deeper and more complex picture of rural Irish life than *Upstarts*. Concerned with the fortunes of a collection of boys from a Christian Brothers School, Donnelly allowed the action and inter-action of the characters to develop the messages and to draw the parallels, prompting the periodical, *Studies*, to comment: "Perhaps Donnelly's most singular achievement was to treat such a tragic theme with such comic compassion."²⁰

¹⁸ *Hibernia*, 14 August 1980.

¹⁹ Farrell, 29 August 1991.

²⁰ Back Page. *Modern Irish Plays 1. The Plays of Neil Donnelly*. Co-op Books, Dublin 1992.

On 22 April 1982 Graham Reid had his third play to be produced at the Abbey in four years staged at the Peacock Theatre. *The Hidden Curriculum*, directed by Sean McCarthy, had similar intentions as Donnelly's *The Silver Dollar Boys*. Reid was concerned with the influences of paramilitary activity upon the children of West Belfast. Two months before this Reid had become acknowledged in a medium that was to suit better his adopted style of journalistic naturalism. In February 1982, *Too Late to Talk to Billy*, the first of a trilogy of television plays, was transmitted by the BBC. This presentation was to mark the beginning of a gradual easing up of the relationship, not only between the Abbey and Reid, but also between the Abbey and both Farrell and Donnelly. Bernard Farrell had had a play produced every year between 1979 and 1982, but the first of his final two plays written for the Abbey, *All the Way Back*, was not produced at the Abbey until 1985. Donnelly had a one act play, *Flying Home*, produced in the Peacock in 1983 and he followed this with a major work, *Chalk Farm Blues*, in 1984. After this, however, Donnelly had to wait five years to see a further new work produced at the Abbey. Reid himself had only one further play produced at the Abbey: *Callers*, in 1985.

Reid, Donnelly and Farrell, as established writers, went on to explore other media, but it was their continued presence within the Abbey, between 1979 and 1982, which enabled them to become established. By the end of 1982, these three playwrights had contributed collectively nine plays to the Abbey repertoire. This amounted to twenty-five percent of new drama produced at the Theatre at the time, demonstrating an ongoing relationship between writers and theatre company.²¹ The fact that twenty-five percent of the new work programme was concentrated on these three writers suggests that the Theatre was committed to identifying itself with the preoccupations of specific writers. Such a suggestion

²¹ Of the other playwrights who contributed new plays for the Abbey during these years, only one, Eamon Kelly, had more than one play produced: *English That For Me* (1980) and *A Rogue of Low Degree* (1981).

implies that the Abbey was close to becoming a writer's theatre: less concerned with the individual play script and more concerned with the ongoing development of chosen playwrights.

By 1982, at least one critic was beginning to see a link between the work of new playwrights and the National Theatre. Fintan O'Toole, at the time theatre critic for *In Dublin*, showed a degree of objectivity by commenting on a group of writers, Farrell, Donnelly, Reid and MacGuinness, who:

have managed to establish themselves [on the Dublin stage] only because of a change of policy with regard to the Peacock brought about by the Abbey's Artistic Director, Joe Dowling, and particularly its Script Editor, Sean McCarthy.²²

O'Toole returned to his subject, in a review of the Co-op publications of the first plays by Reid, Farrell and Donnelly²³ and clarified his opinion of the important position of the Abbey administration in the success of these playwrights.

In our reverence for the notion of the playwright as a solitary figure we in Ireland tend to disregard the importance of the theatrical institutions in which the writer does his business. It is no exaggeration to say that each of these writers would be very different if it were not for the change of policy which took place in the administration of the Peacock under Sean McCarthy in the last few years. Without the Peacock as in some sense an 'alternative' to the Abbey as a forum for new work, and above all as a platform for expressing in theatre urgent ideas about the nature of our society, about where we are and where we might be going, the context for the work of these writers would be radically altered.²⁴

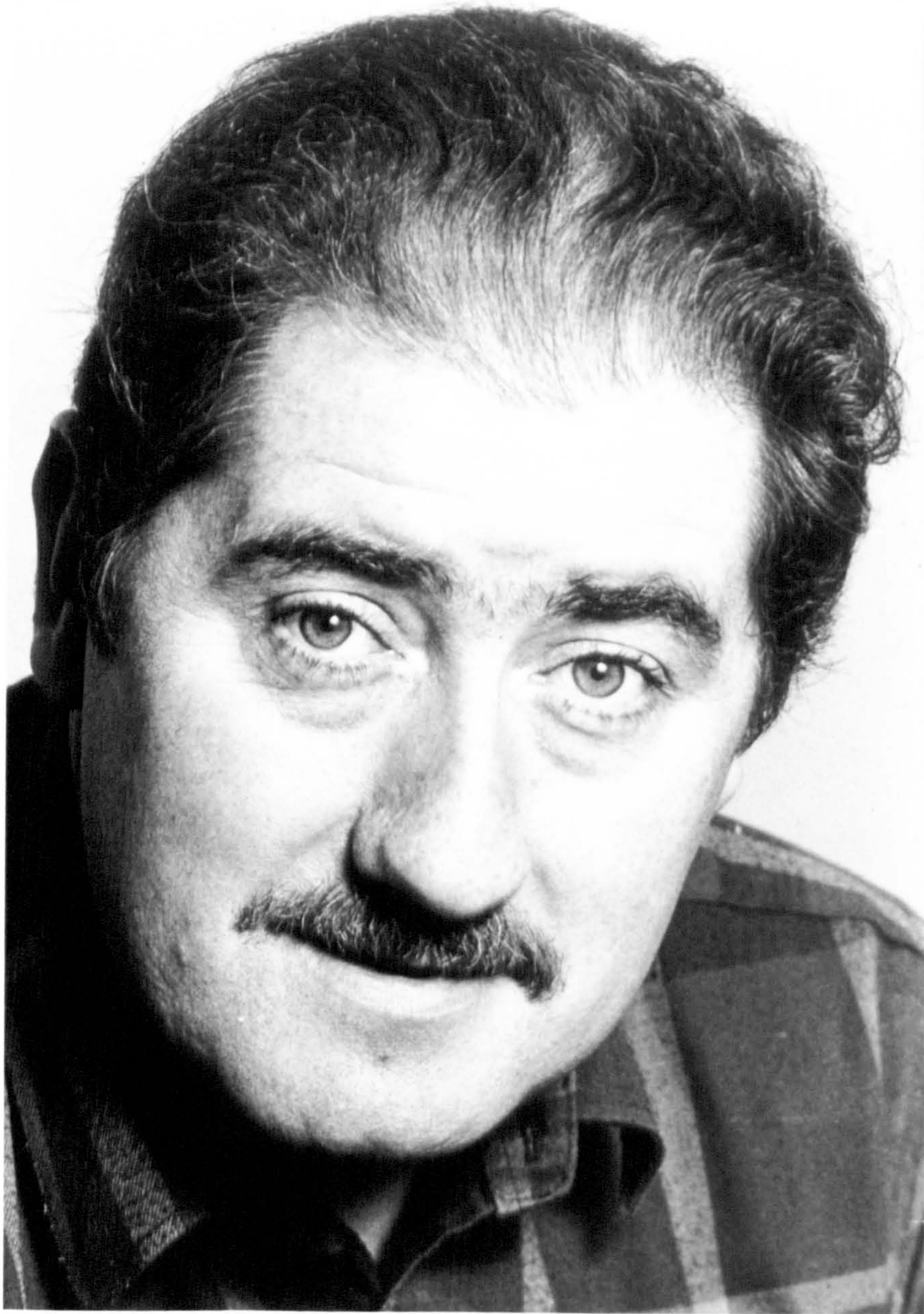
O'Toole is accurate in assuming a contribution by the Abbey to the development of the work of Reid, Donnelly and Farrell and, yet, no detailed evidence is brought to identify what exactly the Theatre provided these playwrights. In the remainder of this chapter I aim to examine the specific policy decisions made by Joe Dowling as Artistic Director and Sean McCarthy as Script Editor during the first four years of Dowling's reign, that justify the idea that the Abbey had become a writer's theatre. What becomes clear is that these two

²² Fintan O'Toole. "Today: Contemporary Irish Theatre - the Illusion of Tradition". Tim Pat Coogan (ed.), *Ireland and the Arts..* (Dublin: Quartet, 1982). p135.

²³ *The Plays of Neil Donnelly . The Plays of Graham Reid. The Plays of Bernard Farrell.* All part of the *Modern Irish Plays Series*, (Dublin: Co-op Books, 1982).

²⁴ Fintan O'Toole. "Book Reviews". *Theatre Ireland* 2. January / May 1982.

Figure Ten. Joe Dowling.



individuals had very different visions of what theatre should be. Dowling was concerned with the Abbey as a whole, seeing new drama as a part -- albeit an essential part -- of the wider role of the National Theatre. McCarthy was concerned solely with new drama, having been brought up in a system of theatre whereby the playwright was central to the creative force of the drama. Though these differing visions were to cause friction towards the end of McCarthy's contract, the two were able to work together to create an atmosphere which was conducive to the creation of new drama.

Joe Dowling slipped quietly into office during the last week of March 1978. There was, at first, little impact made on the press -- in contrast with his resignation, seven years later -- and what comment there was focused on the facts that during the same week, he was seen acting on television in a series on the early life of Brendan Behan and that at 29, he was the youngest ever artistic director to be appointed.²⁵ Fergus Linehan, in *The Irish Times*, observed at this time:

Joe Dowling is quiet, neat and unobtrusive. Passing him in the street you might take him for a school teacher, or a civil servant, but hardly for what he is, the youngest ever Artistic Director of the National Theatre.²⁶

There were no fanfares, no manifestos, little rhetoric: Dowling was not making a triumphant entrance through the gates of his Jerusalem, but lifting the latch on the back door of what had already become a second home.

Born in Dublin in 1949 and educated at the Catholic University School and University College Dublin, Dowling had first joined the Abbey in 1968 as a student of the Abbey School of Acting. He graduated fairly rapidly to the company and joined the Players' Council as a representative of younger actors in 1970. Dowling's transition from actor to director evolved gradually, starting with his involvement in the creation of the Young Abbey, the first T.I.E. company in

²⁵ *The Guardian*, 31 March 1978. While Dowling was the youngest ever *Artistic Director* to be appointed, it should be stated that Hugh Hunt was 24 when he became play director in 1935.

²⁶ *The Irish Times*, 17 May 1978.

Ireland, later to be renamed outside the Abbey as Team.²⁷ This was followed by a period as assistant to Tomás MacAnna, then director of the Peacock Theatre. Between 1973 and 1976 Dowling established, through his work at the Abbey, what Fergus Linehan called in 1978, "probably the best track record of any Irish director in recent years".²⁸ Dowling was praised in particular for productions of *Twelfth Night* (1975) and *Much Ado About Nothing* (1976) and later became noted for his productions of the work of Sean O'Casey and Brian Friel: associations that have continued to the present day. For two years between 1976 and 1978 Dowling took over as Director of the now defunct Irish Theatre Company,²⁹ a touring company with national status, which gave him a wider vision of Irish theatre, from outside the Abbey, and also responsibility in command of a major company. In spite of his youth the announcement in July 1977, that Dowling would take over from Tomás MacAnna as Artistic Director at the National Theatre, when the latter's contract ended in early 1978, caused few surprises.³⁰

Prior to his appointment as Artistic Director, therefore, Dowling had spent only two years of his professional career outside the Abbey. "Joe Dowling is above all an Abbey man"³¹, wrote Joe Joyce in 1978, a view shared by Dowling himself, even after his resignation:

I had been in the place for 18 years: actor; director; artistic director. It was a major part of my life. In the years since, I've gone on to do other things

²⁷ Today, Team is the premier TIE company within the Dublin area and has led the recent rise of interest in Youth and Educational theatre throughout Ireland. For a full, if not up to the minute, account of the state of TIE in Ireland, see *Theatre Ireland* 12. "Youth and Community Issue". Spring 1987.

²⁸ *The Irish Times*, 17 May 1978.

²⁹ The Irish Theatre Company was set up in 1975 with the intention of taking up the slack of large scale touring within Ireland brought about by the commercial limitations of the Abbey and the Gate, who felt unable to move outside their bases. Along with the similar state-funded Irish Ballet Company, founded in 1973, the Irish Theatre Company developed its own touring circuit and created new audiences. Apart from Dowling, other leading Irish directors have worked for the company, including Patrick Mason, Ben Barnes and Christopher Fitz-Simon. In 1984, funding for the ITC was withdrawn and the company closed. A lot of the work of the ITC has been taken up by the rise of smaller companies throughout Ireland (see Chapter Six), but there is little doubt that the ITC made an active contribution to the wider realm of Irish theatre during the late 1970s.

³⁰ Information gathered from articles by Fergus Linehan, *The Irish Times*, 17 April 1978 and by Joe Joyce, *The Guardian*, 31 March 1978

³¹ *The Guardian*, 31 March 1978.

and I'm perfectly happy, but at the same time, I have a tremendous affection and respect for the place: I couldn't not have.³²

Any reflection of his time at the Abbey, less glowing than the above, would seem that Dowling was biting the hand that had fed him. What one sees, therefore, is a quiet and modest succession and a determination to prove his respect for the place. Dowling took the opportunity of modest media interest in his appointment, not to spell out radical change, but to defend the recent history of the Theatre.

A lot of the changes here [in Ireland] in the past 10 years have come through the Abbey. It's alive and it has a great vitality which you don't find in other places.³³

Joyce points out that "his style of leadership will be evolutionary rather than revolutionary. There will be no sudden changes"³⁴ and indeed there were not. In talking to Fergus Linehan³⁵, Dowling continues the cautious approach to the start of his reign, outlining a season containing Hugh Leonard's Joyce adaptation, *Stephen D*, Friel's play, *The Loves of Cass Maguire*; Chekov's *Uncle Vanya*, a revival of *Hatchet*, by Henno Magee and Goldini's *The Servant of Two Masters*. Linehan points out the conservative nature of the first attempt at programming by suggesting "that it's a list that seems to lean heavily on new productions of work seen fairly recently".³⁶ Dowling's response is typical: "there are no new plays at present ready for production, and until there are, there's no point rushing things".³⁷

While such comments tend to suggest that Dowling, in spite of his youth, was prepared to wait for things to happen rather than actively instigating them, they could also imply a pragmatic understanding of the nature of the Abbey. If Dowling had launched his youthful energy towards an all out attack on all that had gone on in the past, then he may well have gone the same way as Leila

³² Joe Dowling, 8 August 1990.

³³ *The Guardian*, 31 March 1978

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *The Irish Times*, 17 May 1978

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Doolan and become the victim of stored-up resentment.³⁸ Dowling realised that sudden change would alienate many people who could harm future projects and he was determined for this not to happen. There is little doubt that for all his respectful compliments and acknowledgements of the glorious Abbey tradition, Dowling never accepted the non-interventionist attitudes of his predecessor. To this day, Tomás MacAnna sees the rise of the new playwrights during the late 1970s and early 1980s merely as a high point in an ongoing cycle of Irish writing that produces largely barren periods followed by considerable activity.³⁹ Dowling realised that if the Abbey did not take a direct interest in the welfare of the playwright, then there would be little new drama produced at a time when MacAnna's cycle of new drama was going through a barren period. MacAnna would have argued that during such a barren period there was little that the Theatre could do, but Dowling tended to agree with the Literary Editor at the time of his appointment, Thomas Kilroy, who in his memorandum to the Board on the role of the literary editor, commented that "... [t]he plays will be there when Irish writers generally feel that they have an intrinsic place in the building".⁴⁰

Dowling's support of this statement was clearly expressed at the beginning of his reign. Amidst the cautious tributes to the recent past of the Theatre, collected in the interview with Linehan, there were clear, new ideas: all connected to new drama. Dowling was aiming to have "two good new plays" every year produced in the main house. Praising the efforts of the Sheridans to develop new playwrights at the Project, Dowling makes a prophetic statement that demonstrates a realistic understanding of the problems of producing new drama: "New works tend to have a high failure rate and you can't therefore encourage

³⁸ See Hunt, p240. Doolan, Artistic Director during 1972, had attempted to reform the outdated system of permanent company contracts. Her efforts were dismissed at the time as being idealistic and caused resentment from the acting company. She resigned within a year of taking up her appointment.

³⁹ Tomás MacAnna. Letter received, 5 January 1992.

⁴⁰ Thomas Kilroy, "The Literary Editor"; private memorandum to the Board of the Abbey Theatre. Submitted, 8 July 1978.

them without money."⁴¹ Without actually stating it, Dowling implies that the Abbey is the only theatre in Ireland which has the money to carry the burden of developing a true writer's theatre and for the first time he uses the term that he was to repeat many times during the early years of his directorate: to become the bedrock of his commitment to new drama. Linehan reported that:

He hopes to make the Peacock "the home of the living writer".⁴²

While Dowling set up the principle of "the home of the living writer", as part of wider considerations surrounding the repertoire of the National Theatre as a whole, he was still the central enthusiast in new drama. Through a pragmatic understanding of theatre production, he realised that in the years before he took over, the Abbey had not managed to craft a working policy for playwrights. As he states:

Before I became Artistic Director in 1978, you had 'X' number of play readers and a Board of Directors taking a vote on whether a play would go on or not, and it led to a ludicrous situation in which a play could be in the theatre anything up to two years before it went on. I mean what's a writer supposed to do? He writes a play and two years later it gets put on ... and then it's a flop.⁴³

With such a definite and sympathetic understanding of the frustrations of playwrights in their association with the Abbey, in the years before he became Artistic Director, there seems little doubt that the rapid development of the playwrights, Reid, Farrell and Donnelly, could not have been pure coincidence. Dowling was prepared to balance any commitment to new writing with a respect for the traditional repertoire; he was determined to take an evolutionary approach to any policy changes, anxious that he should not upset any of the more traditional Board members. And yet, his commitment to new writing was total and this is borne out by a gradual application of policies that allowed for the development of a writer's theatre.

⁴¹ *Irish Times*. 17 April 1978.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ 8 August 1990.

Dowling's artistic policies, which allowed for the development of a writer's theatre can be divided into three areas. First, there was his contribution to the ongoing debate surrounding the balance of power between the artistic director and the Board. Secondly, there were the practical changes in policy specifically relating to the development of the playwright, including the realisation of a division between the roles of the Peacock and the Abbey main stage and an upgrading of the playwright's contract. Finally, there was his commitment to delegation and the setting up of a young team of associates who created a dynamic atmosphere, encouraged a new approach to direction and allowed ultimately -- through the appointment of Sean McCarthy -- for the individual development of the playwright.

The principle of the artistic director having control over play selection, which MacAnna and his predecessors had sought and secured to varying degrees of success, was to become clearly defined under Joe Dowling's control. Further to this, however, was the delicate issue of guest artists. As the numbers of the permanent company had slipped during the latter years of the 1970s, it had been essential that more and more visiting actors and artists on temporary contracts were hired. By December 1978, there were 40 associate artists, of whom only 18 were on permanent contract.⁴⁴ The reduction had been made as a direct result of a motion put forward by a sub-committee of the shareholders, in February 1974, that permanent contracts should be discontinued. The reasons for this decision were linked directly to the desire for a higher standard of production that had been missing in the years previous, as Hunt was to observe: "in a small country where opportunities are limited to observe and benefit from the work and ideas of others, permanency can lead to stagnation".⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Hunt. p289. By 1993, at the time of writing, the number of Abbey players still on permanent contract had been reduced to 11. (Abbey Press Office)

⁴⁵ Hunt. p235.

Such a policy, while being important to the programming of all plays, was essential for new drama. If new plays and playwrights were to be encouraged to the Abbey, the playwright had to be offered the director and actors suitable for the work: such people may not have been available within the company.

One of the actors closely associated with the development of new drama is Tom Hickey. Hickey reckons that the majority of the considerable work he did for the Abbey was of new drama.⁴⁶ What he terms as a "fresh input of new plays" suits him well. Like many of his contemporaries, Hickey feels more comfortable with being freelance and has never joined the Abbey Company, even though he worked for it consistently between 1981 and 1985 and believes it to be his theatrical home.⁴⁷ Hickey's situation demonstrates that close association between theatre and actor can occur without a permanent company. While there are advantages in principle to having contracted artists, when considering the possibilities of dramaturgy through workshopping, the artist who takes satisfaction in securing wider influences from other companies will show the correct degree of patience and enthusiasm needed for new drama. Indeed, when dealing with actors and their contribution to workshopping, Sean McCarthy found that their complacency and cynicism made the actors on permanent contracts less willing to get involved.⁴⁸

For a policy on new drama to develop, the need for the artistic director to have full responsibility for the selection of plays was even more essential. Dowling's understanding of the reasons for this demonstrate a growing respect for the development of a writer's theatre. As Dowling states,

If you have a procedure whereby a vote has to be taken at board level whether a play should go on or not, it meant that before you put a play on or decided to put a play on, it had to be in this completed state, for those who were unfamiliar with the notion of workshop readings and things

⁴⁶ Tom Hickey, interviewed in Dublin, 5 April 1991. For a more detailed account of Hickey's contribution to new Irish drama, see Chapter Five.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Sean McCarthy, interviewed in Dublin, 3 April 1992. This issue is considered in detail later in the chapter.

being changed and developed through rehearsal, to make a choice. The play would have to be at a stage in development that would make them convinced that it would work on stage and you must remember that the Board members were essentially amateurs, with little understanding of how a play developed. Sometimes you had to wait three months for a Board meeting to discuss the play, by which point we may have lost the play: if the play was good, the writer might be frustrated.⁴⁹

Even if Dowling did not instigate the changing policies on programming and the company, he certainly saw them as essential. A central condition to his acceptance of the job of Artistic Director was the continuation of the policy whereby the artistic director had the right of selection, not only of plays, but of players. The Board, however, were still reluctant to renounce their seemingly unreasonable degree of artistic involvement, particularly as the Chairman was Micheál O hAodha: a knowledgeable and intelligent man, but a traditionalist, who had been on the Board at the time of Ernest Blythe. The policy, therefore, had still to be made official. In the first few years of Dowling's reign such a process was seen finally to be obsolete. As Dowling suggests, "events had overtaken the procedure",⁵⁰ and it was with this realisation that the Board finally acted to make what had been accepted as working practice defined as official Abbey policy. In September 1981, a special Board meeting took place, whereby an agreement was made that the policy of artistic director making the final decisions over programming and personnel should become officially acknowledged. Without the catalyst of Dowling's policy, such an agreement would not have been made and it was the clear breach of this agreement by the Board in 1985 that led to Dowling's resignation.⁵¹

With the final acknowledgement of the autonomy of the artistic director, the Abbey had the foundation to develop a clearly defined artistic policy. What was needed were specific actions and gestures to cement the involvement of the living writer in the repertoire of the Abbey. Two changes in the day-to-day

⁴⁹ Dowling, 15 November 1991.

⁵⁰ Dowling, 15 November 1991.

⁵¹ The issue of Dowling's resignation is dealt with in the final chapter.

running of the Abbey, made by Dowling, were specifically beneficial to the living writer and are clear indications of his actual contribution to the rise of a writer's theatre. First, Dowling was behind the improvement of the playwright's contract; secondly, he was clear, right from the start, of the need to find an accurate and workable relationship between the Peacock and the Abbey main stage.

Dowling talks of his determination to improve conditions for writers and to improve fees for writers. While the rise in fees was not implemented until Sean McCarthy was appointed, Dowling was committed right from the start of his reign to having clearly defined and binding arrangements with new writers. While Thomas Kilroy was still Literary Editor, the writer's contract was amended so that when major new work by an unknown writer was accepted, the recipient knew exactly where he stood. One of the first writers was Graham Reid, who came into contact with the Abbey at Easter 1979. Reid admits that, at the time, he knew nothing about the workings of theatre, but looking back, he believes that "it was an excellent contract which gave me tremendous rights and protection: the Abbey set a sort of benchmark by which we've been able to set our standards ever since".⁵²

Further to the usual rights of copyright, the new Abbey contract gave the writer unprecedented control, including the right to be present at rehearsal, the right of veto and the right to select actors and director.⁵³ Such conditions demonstrate a true sincerity towards writers who knew little about the workings of the theatre. In other theatres these are the conditions that the playwright, once established, will demand and extract from the company. For the Abbey to grant this freely, not only for established writers, like Friel and Murphy, but for the most inexperienced of writers, demonstrates that the Company was not going to take anyone for granted, would do much to attract new writers and refused to

⁵² Reid, 28 March 1992.

⁵³ Dowling, 15 November 1991, supported by Sean McCarthy, 3 April 1992 and Graham Reid, 28 March 1992.

assume that the reputation of the Theatre would be enough to keep the writer involved in the Theatre.

What was not enough to keep the writer in the Theatre was the money. Reid got paid £180 for the rights of *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*: hardly a fortune, even to a Belfast teacher.⁵⁴ By not providing, in the initial changes to contracts, adequate payment to support the playwright, the Abbey's commitment to the concept of a writer's theatre can be questioned. If the playwright is to be linked to a professional theatre, he/she must in turn be professional. The Abbey bent over backwards to accommodate Graham Reid, arranging rehearsals to coincide with his school holidays, but they did not, at first, encourage him to give up his job: something that Sean McCarthy believed to be essential. Reid managed to give up teaching, not through adequate payment from the Abbey, but through a £5000 bursary from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.⁵⁵ Soon after Reid's first play, however, adequate payment for scripts became part of Abbey policy. By the time Farrell and Donnelly followed Reid into becoming professional writers in 1980, McCarthy and Dowling, who had put considerable pressure on the Board to raise the amount of money available to writers, were insistent that the playwright would be paid a realistic sum for professional work. By 1980 the payment for rights had risen from £180 to over one thousand pounds.⁵⁶ "If you wrote a play for the Abbey", says McCarthy, "it was worth at least seven months living at the time."⁵⁷ A very pragmatic contribution to the ideal of professional dramatists.

Perhaps the most obvious contribution Dowling made to the development of the playwright was the designation of the Peacock to the service of the living writer. This decision demonstrates positive intentions, both for the development

⁵⁴ Reid, 28 March 1992.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Information provided by the Abbey Theatre Press Office. In 1989, Christopher Fitz-Simon stated that a playwright receives a fee of IR£3000, plus £2000 as an advance on royalties (*Theatre Ireland*, 21 December 1989, p44). In 1993, at the time of writing, the option fee has risen to £5000, with a guaranteed royalty payment of 10%. (Abbey Press Office). This implies that, today, Sean McCarthy's identification of payment being on par with seven months salary is barely justified.

⁵⁷ McCarthy, 3 April 1992.

of the playwright and for that of the Theatre as a whole: demonstrating his attempt to balance the traditional role of the Theatre with new ideas. In the first instance, by making a clear designation for the Peacock, Dowling was solving a problem that had been a thorn in the side of the Abbey's artistic structure since the opening of the new building: just what was the Peacock's role? As was stated in the previous chapter, a vague directive that the Peacock was to explore experimental theatre was unable to exploit the full potential of the studio as Hunt aptly suggests: "Too often the designation of 'experimental theatre' is a cover for the not quite good enough."⁵⁸ Hunt's response to the vagueness of the Peacock's identity was to appoint a separate director. This implied that the Peacock was a separate entity, external of policy made by the National Theatre, negating the point of having a studio. In the first instance, Dowling gave a specific description to the experimentation within the Peacock -- new drama -- simplifying intentions and then, in the second instance, guarded against ghettoisation through abolishing the notion of a separate director for the Theatre. This allowed for a rise in the profile of the Peacock and, therefore, brought new writing higher on the agenda, as Dowling states:

I simply knew that if we were going to have a concerted policy of developing new writers, there had to be a sense that the central authority of the Abbey made that choice rather than a hived off version making that choice.⁵⁹

In this way the profile of new writing was raised, but, more importantly to Dowling, the Peacock had found a specific role that eased the vagaries of programming. While his designation of the Peacock as the home of the living writer was the most obvious and the most practical contribution to new drama, it also demonstrates his concern for the company as a whole.

In place of a director Dowling appointed an administrator, Douglas Kennedy, for the Peacock Theatre at the end of 1978. Just 23, he personified

⁵⁸ Hunt, p199.

⁵⁹ Dowling, 15 November 1991.

Dowling's commitment to youth and was to continue the development of the Peacock's growing reputation. In the two years since leaving his native New York and before his appointment at the Abbey he had proved an exciting yet practical and realistic administrator, through his work with Robert McNamara in the Dublin Stage One Company. This small company managed to combine radical theatre with business-like administration, at a time when small scale companies were unheard-of in Dublin.⁶⁰ The combination of youth and pragmatism suited Dowling's administration, with Kennedy's personality serving to make the Peacock a dynamic place to produce and view theatre. Graham Reid and Neil Donnelly both talk of Kennedy's tireless enthusiasm and sociability, making the Peacock the kind of theatre you wanted to come back to. It is Joe Dowling's ability to delegate important jobs to enthusiastic assistants, while preserving his own individual vision, that created a more conducive atmosphere for the development of a writer's theatre.

Perhaps the most important employee at the time, committed to developing the Abbey's vision and concerned with creating the right atmosphere, was Deirdre McQuillen, who first joined the Abbey in 1974 and worked initially very closely with Joe Dowling in his attempts to attract a wider audience to the Peacock.⁶¹ McQuillen's official title was Public Relations Officer, but as Joe Dowling states, "she was far more than that". Dowling continues:

She had a far more significant voice in the choice of plays and in the way that plays would be done and, through her commitment to policy making, her enthusiasm and dedication in the way she then sold them to the public was raised.⁶²

Dowling expresses pride that during his time at the Abbey people were able to contribute across the board, irrespective of job descriptions, making for a youthful and forward thinking company. Dowling's directness and openness rubbed off on the organisation as a whole. McQuillen took her work very seriously, pushing the

⁶⁰ *The Irish Times*, 11 April 1978.

⁶¹ Hunt, p244.

⁶² Dowling, 15 November 1991.

boundaries of what traditional administration had provided. The term arts administration was only just coming in at the time and McQuillen insists that "there were things to learn about marketing the theatre: how to get people into the theatre".⁶³ Complacency was set aside through the appreciation of new ideas in administration that had swept through Britain, encouraging a new, less exclusive audience into the theatre. McQuillen's particular role model was Richard Condon, who had taken over the Theatre Royal, Norwich and transformed it into a viable community asset.⁶⁴

Deirdre McQuillen, looking back, remembers how the Abbey became less formal, upon the arrival of Dowling. "We worked as a team, in a truly exciting manner. Everyone was looking forward, thinking of new ideas." This, according to McQuillen, led to a

... tremendous positive feeling and great atmosphere at the Theatre during Joe's years. We started calling the Abbey the National Theatre, which of course it had always been, but we felt that for the first time, we were justified in calling it so, because we were busily trying to make the place more accessible.⁶⁵

Although not associated directly with the work of developing the playwright's role within the theatre, McQuillen's efforts to make it more accessible broke down barriers and made the Abbey as a whole a better place to visit. Seat prices were reduced; special Monday evening events were instigated; writers were invited to hold talks: all contributing to the lightening of the atmosphere. This was in itself essential to the development of a writer's theatre as McQuillen points out:

The atmosphere was so very important, in order to encourage shy new writers who must have found the theatre somewhat overwhelming. Familiarity was important in order to contend with this.⁶⁶

⁶³ Deirdre McQuillen, interviewed in Dublin, 1 April 1992.

⁶⁴ Richard Condon, an Irishman, who had started his career promoting music in Ireland, took over the Theatre Royal in Norwich in the late 1970s. He proceeded to reduce barriers between the theatre and the city, by introducing a populist approach to marketing, believing that a theatre could be sold in the same way as a soap powder. A lot of his simple ideas, such as discounts for particular nights and season tickets, were to be taken up by many marketing managers during the 80s, but were conceived as radical at the time. Richard Condon died in 1990.

⁶⁵ McQuillen, 1 April 1992.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Deidre McQuillen is one of the individuals who allowed her own personality to influence her contribution to the work of the Abbey. Her friendly and lively personality allowed for the breaking down of austere reputations. For a writer contributing work during what Graham Reid has called "the great days of Deirdre McQuillen",⁶⁷ the Abbey became a home.

It is through Dowling's appointment of enthusiastic and sociable associates and the consequential reduction of formality that transformed the idea of 'the home of the living writer' into a working reality. Writers believed that the Abbey was truly a second home and this had a tremendous psychological effect on the relationship between the institution and the individuals concerned. The atmosphere created by this situation is described enthusiastically by Bernard Farrell.

At the time, I just felt that the Abbey was wonderful: it was a home away from home. I just went there to have my lunch, I would amble to the place and if any of my friends were in town, I would take them to the Abbey and I would show them around and bring them back stage: I could walk anywhere that I liked. I think that it was terribly important and it was something that Joe Dowling stressed. We used to have conversations in the auditorium: we'd leave his office and come down to the theatre which had a tremendous psychological effect: it was wonderful. For about four years, I just regarded it as a second home. Neil[Donnelly] and Graham[Reid] felt the same.⁶⁸

The fact that Farrell knows of other writers' feelings, implies that there was ongoing contact between the writers. This was encouraged and maintained by the Abbey: Douglas Kennedy, according to Graham Reid, was particularly insistent on ongoing association and contributed to the three major writers, Donnelly, Farrell and Reid, becoming firm friends.⁶⁹ Such a situation may seem trivial, but it highlights clearly the achievement of the Abbey in its attempt to become a writer's theatre: the writers were part of a team, firmly on the inside of the institution.

⁶⁷ Reid, 28 March 1992.

⁶⁸ Farrell, 29 August 1991.

⁶⁹ Reid, 28 March 1992.

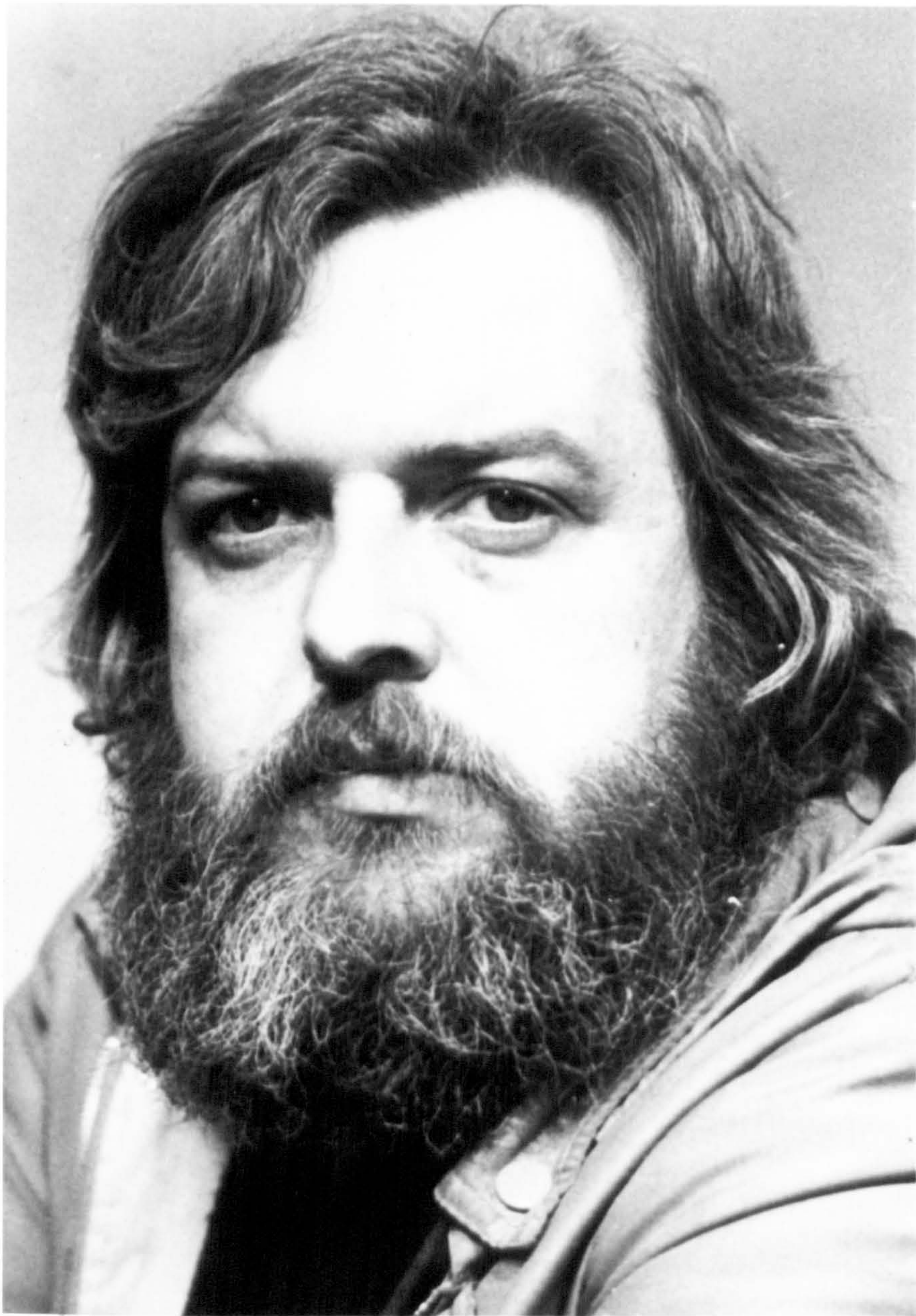
These policies, leading to a sense of active, day-to-day involvement for these playwrights, were instigated by Dowling and prove his commitment to new drama. The fact that he was an artistic director of a national theatre, committed to more than developing new drama, never got in the way of that development because he was willing to encourage others to make their own individual contribution to the process, leaving himself free to give overall guidance.

The creation of an atmosphere whereby the playwright felt he was an active member of the company and designating a theatre for the development of their work gave a sense of security not given to the Irish dramatist in the years prior to his appointment. These actions were very similar to those made by George Devine, at the Royal Court, during the late 1950s. The Theatre was making firm commitments to the writer and, in doing so, was providing the starting-point for a true writer's theatre. Like the Royal Court, however, Dowling was determined to go further. Providing a singular artistic control, greater respect and remuneration, as well as a friendly environment, constitutes encouragement for the writer, but does not demonstrate true dramaturgical assistance. Perhaps encouragement was the only thing the playwrights desired from the Abbey and yet for one man appointed by Joe Dowling, Sean McCarthy, a more active and creative relationship was required.

Dowling, in line with his general understanding of the importance of new drama as well as his belief in delegation, acknowledged the potential contribution that the Abbey Literary Editor could make. Accepting the recommendations of Thomas Kilroy, the Literary Editor at the time of Dowling's appointment, whose paper on the role of the post had been presented to the Board in July 1978, Dowling changed the name of the post and appointed a full-time script editor, with a contract of three years. In Sean McCarthy, who joined the Abbey in the spring of 1979, he had a man with experience in active script development.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Information on Sean McCarthy: interviewed in Dublin, 3 April 1992. Backed up, by articles and interviews (acknowledged when used).

Figure Eleven. Sean McCarthy.



Sean McCarthy was born in Cork in 1945 and started his theatrical career as an actor for the Abbey in 1963. A man whose political and social views determined his understanding of theatre, McCarthy realised quickly that at the time of his joining the Abbey "wasn't a good place for a young actor to begin his career".⁷¹ As an actor with an objective interest in the development of theatre he realised that few writers, and therefore few actors, were given a chance to express themselves at the Abbey.

John McCann was really the main Abbey playwright and it must be admitted that he made money for the theatre.⁷² But there was no cohesive group of writers working for the Abbey; writers seemed to be regarded as a threat rather than an asset.⁷³

Sacked "for being too tall", McCarthy set Ernest Blythe's company firmly behind him and set out on a career that was to provide him with an education in the possibilities of developing new drama, within theatre companies.

McCarthy left Ireland for England in 1968, where he first got work in the unlikely setting of Henley-on-Thames. It was not long, however, before he was working in Edinburgh, a town that became his adopted home for more than a decade. At the Traverse Theatre he continued to act before becoming involved with John McGrath, with whom he developed an understanding of collaborative theatre creation. McCarthy contributed to the co-operative musical, *The Great Northern Wellyboot Show*, which proved to be a great success, transferring to London. From this base he started writing plays, the first of which were produced at the Edinburgh Lyceum Theatre, where he became Literary Manager and first developed his understanding of the work of the dramaturg. He continued his understanding of collaboration in playwriting by becoming Artistic Director of the Young Lyceum Theatre Company, and then, in 1978, with Joint Stock, who

⁷¹ *Hibernia*, 6 September 1979.

⁷² John McCann was, according to D.E.S. Maxwell, "a prolific and successful writer of soap operas: revivals; safe new works; pot-boilers". (Maxwell, p154). His most successful play was *Twenty Years A-Wooing*, produced at the Abbey in 1956: a title that sums up his impact on Irish theatre.

⁷³ *Hibernia*, 6 September 1979.

produced his play, *Next*. In spite of considerable success as a television writer at the height of the BBC's *Play for Today* series, with plays like *Travelling Free* (1975) and *The Thin End of the Wedge* (1977), McCarthy always remained loyal to theatre, due in part to the excitement he felt for his discovery of the possibility of putting the playwright at the very heart of creation.

This commitment to a theatre that has the playwright as its central component determines a belief in the concept of playwright's theatre. This central commitment is supported by three further stated convictions on the work of the playwright. In the first instance, McCarthy believes that the playwright should always be professional:

My opinion always was that we needed to develop a school of professional playwrights, - who were playwrights first and foremost - not teachers or architects, who wrote the odd play, or even novelists and poets, who wrote the odd play. We needed dramatists.⁷⁴

His commitment to the playwright as a professional, therefore, was determined by a second belief: that the playwright should be an ongoing member of the company producing the theatre. This belief is determined by both political and artistic considerations. Politically, his work for 7.84, and to a certain extent, his work for the Young Lyceum, instilled a commitment to the idea that the writer responded to the issues that determined the existence of the company:

I was coming from a theatre that was grounded in its most extreme in agitational propaganda, where what mattered was the intervention you were making in society about a particular issue.⁷⁵

Artistically, McCarthy's association with Joint Stock, through work on his play, *Next*, determined a realisation that the playwright who worked in a process of collaboration with actors and directors, was no less valid than one who "lived in a cottage in Donegal or West Cork and sent in manuscripts to the theatre by post".⁷⁶

These initial two convictions correspond to the development of the Abbey's relationship with the playwright, instigated by policies already

⁷⁴ McCarthy, 3 April 1992.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

mentioned. If Dowling came from a different theatrical background, he shared the general principles that McCarthy had learnt and gave the latter confidence in the sincerity of the Abbey's commitment towards new drama. McCarthy's final conviction, however, had yet to be considered by the Abbey.

McCarthy was committed to the dramaturgical contribution that the script editor could make to the potential play. He believed that through discussion and workshopping, the play could be developed from being a rough collection of dialogue or a piece of prose into a valid, theatrical *mise en scène*. Joe Dowling, therefore, was not just appointing a literary manager who was concerned with advising the artistic director on programming new plays. He was appointing a dramaturg, whose only concern in theatre was for the development of the professional playwright. So far, the Abbey had encouraged writers within a system that demanded balanced programming under the control of an artistic director. Was the appointment of McCarthy enough to transform the Abbey into a playwright's theatre?

By examining McCarthy's actions and working methods, one is left in no doubt of his commitment to the three new writers who had submitted work at the same time as his arrival. McCarthy's first action, upon his appointment in the spring of 1979, was to pick up the scripts that were already at the Abbey. These included Farrell's *I Do Not Like Thee, Dr Fell* and Reid's *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*. Farrell's play was already in rehearsal and programmed for opening on 15 March, so there was little McCarthy could contribute, but Farrell remembers McCarthy going out of his way to make contact. In doing so McCarthy was contributing to the overall policy within the Abbey of creating a welcoming atmosphere for the writer, which was to benefit his specific working relationship with the writers. Bernard Farrell sums up an opinion shared by all the playwrights who came into contact with McCarthy at this time:

McCarthy was this patient father figure, even though he looks like God: huge man with this big grey beard, looking down on you from on high. But whereas Joe was really punchy and energetic, wanting to know what

was going on all the time, Sean was very laid-back, giving you the impression that you had all the time in the world. He was like a father and a mother: very patient, at any time of the day he would drop anything to see you, invite you over the house, making friends all the time. He even helped out with your personal life: he certainly wanted to know how things were going, believing, no doubt, that your personal stability was related to your work. So there was real nurturing.⁷⁷

McCarthy's foundations to the job, therefore, were to establish a personal relationship with the writer, but the intentions were more than simply to encourage the writer. McCarthy required trust and respect from the writer if his time-consuming working method was to work. He was determined not to dominate the writers work: radical changes might be needed, but McCarthy realised that the last way to encourage new writers was to do the work for them.

As he has states:

There is a danger, particularly in someone like myself, who has written plays, and then becomes a dramaturg, to start writing plays for other people or to impose his or her ideas on what the plays should be about. It's a question of being able to listen to people and to get to know people and understanding what they feel and finding ways to help them express what they want to express.⁷⁸

This method of working -- relaxed, yet detailed discussion -- may sound simplistic, but as McCarthy stresses, "it is important to keep it as simple as possible".⁷⁹ Its simplicity, yet its attention to detail and the time it took, must have reassured the most novice of writers. This was certainly the case in the first instance of detailed contact between McCarthy and a playwright. Graham Reid first came into contact with McCarthy and the Abbey generally through his play, *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*. This was during Reid's Easter vacation from school.

I spent, I think, about a week with Sean, simply talking and working through the play. I thought McCarthy was marvellous, because he was determined not to impose his ideas on you. He would talk about a scene at great length and then he would discuss with you what he felt was wrong with the method, and why you were not conveying what you thought you were conveying. He would ask you, time and again, what it was you were trying to say and, time and again, you would explain it to him. But each

⁷⁷ Farrell, 29 August 1991.

⁷⁸ McCarthy, 3 April 1992.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

time you talked, it would be clearer in your own mind, until such point as Sean would say, 'well that's perfectly obvious'. Then a new stage would start, because Sean would explain that one would not get the chance to justify the point to the audience: it would have to come from the text. And I would say, 'well what do I do?' And he would say, 'well I don't know, it's not my job' and we would start all over again. This went on for about a week, non stop.⁸⁰

This initial work at the Abbey, involving simple discussion, was adopted by McCarthy for a number of reasons. In the first instance, it contributed to the development of trust between the theatre and these new writers. In the second instance, it created the foundations for the most obvious method of dramaturgical assistance. Finally, it fitted in with the already established system within the Abbey, without too much transformation, radical upheaval or suspicion. Even though Joe Dowling was Artistic Director, McCarthy saw the need to tread very carefully in his attempts to develop the playwright as a member of the company. During the first months in office, McCarthy felt tremendous pressure from the traditions of the Abbey:

The Abbey is a tradition and a system that had been established for 50 or 60 years before I arrived. It was a tradition that was rooted in this literary revival and had created a system whereby it was assumed that a writer was someone who lived in a cottage in Donegal or West Cork. It's very difficult to change that. It's much easier to find an empty space and gather a group of people together for the first time and start creating theatre.⁸¹

McCarthy's last point is ominous. Could such an established theatre, rooted in a tradition that was so alien to the concept of playwright's theatre, be the right institution for committed development of playwrights? The Abbey had so many roles to play. Could an aim to bring the playwright back to the centre of the Theatre's focus actually fit into the wider and more varied roles of a national theatre? This issue was to have increasing significance towards the end of McCarthy's contract as he attempted wider and more detailed methods of dramaturgical development. In these early days, however, McCarthy had the advantage of constant support from Dowling, who was enthusiastic about long

⁸⁰ Reid, 28 March 1992.

⁸¹ McCarthy, 3 April 1992.

term development. Indeed, Dowling was of great assistance during McCarthy's next stage of playwright's development.

What McCarthy started to do, even before the first plays from the new playwrights had been produced, was to encourage them to think onwards to their next play and to consider the idea of becoming professional writers. This was, perhaps, the most important part of his work as script editor, if the Abbey had the success of the playwright, rather than the individual play in mind. McCarthy, as an established playwright, realised that it was important to encourage these playwrights to write as many plays as possible in as short a time as possible. To write one play is hard enough, to write a series of plays, many writers find impossible as initial inspiration and motivation are exhausted. Of the seventy-three writers who contributed new plays, produced at the New Abbey Theatre between 1966 and 1977, fifty-four of them, seventy-four percent, only wrote one play for the Abbey.⁸² Sustained understanding of the techniques and skills of producing drama can only be imposed if the new writer is encouraged to build upon initial efforts. Recently, this principle has been acknowledged elsewhere. Ella Wildridge, appointed dramaturg at the Traverse Theatre Edinburgh in 1992, believes that one of the problems in attempting to define a clear body of Scottish drama is that "many individuals who write a play fail to follow this up and do not attempt to build up a coherent body of work".⁸³ As McCarthy suggests, "the momentum needed to be sustained".⁸⁴

The communication between McCarthy and the playwrights, therefore, extended beyond the specific difficulties of a particular play onto the wider issues surrounding the playwright's craft and possible ideas for future drama. In this wider task, McCarthy was ably assisted by Dowling, whose authority, McCarthy felt, made the discussions more legitimate.⁸⁵

⁸² Abbey Theatre play lists.

⁸³ Ella Wildridge. Interviewed in Edinburgh, 10 November 1992.

⁸⁴ McCarthy, 3 April 1992.

⁸⁵ Dowling, 15 November 1991 and McCarthy, 3 April 1992.

Dowling was keen to become involved in this stage of the process, believing it to be important for the general development of the playwright: according to him it led to specific projects being conceived. A particular example being Neil Donnelly's *The Silver Dollar Boys*. Dowling states:

Immediately after *Upstarts*, Sean and myself invited Neil to lunch. The conversation was allowed to range beyond normal business. Neil talked about his time as a teacher in England and I suggested immediately that there must be a play in his schooldays and about teaching in general. We talked this through, but on a general basis: we were having a chat. Two days later Donnelly sent the Abbey a scenario for *The Silver Dollar Boys*: which became one of our biggest hits.⁸⁶

Through this contact, therefore, the development of the playwright rather than the individual play was seen to be the priority of the Abbey. Without Dowling's support, however, such discussions would have been seen as being worthless because the presentations of ideas needed to be followed up with quick decisions. As Dowling adds, in respect of *The Silver Dollar Boys*: "Once I had seen the scenario and once I realised that we had talked enough to make me feel that Neil could write this play, we immediately accepted the play."⁸⁷

Such an instant response to ideas demonstrates a clear link between the policy put forward by the Abbey Theatre and the speed in which all three playwrights managed to follow up their initial efforts with second plays. This clearly found favour with McCarthy, who believed in the possibility of a play evolving while in the theatre, believing that "the writer was an integral part of the whole system of theatre-making".⁸⁸ The obvious danger of such early acceptance is that the play will not be up to the standard one expects from the national theatre. The responsibility of preventing this danger becoming a reality belonged again to Sean McCarthy.

McCarthy's communication with playwrights over work that had been commissioned in this way constitutes clearly a second level of dramaturgical

⁸⁶ Dowling, *ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ McCarthy, 3 April 1992.

assistance. In the first instance, the method of working was still to discuss the staging difficulties of a completed play. This time around, however, the play was not finished. The theatre, through the script editor, was in attendance when the work was undergoing its process of evolution: the very epitome of playwright's theatre. There is evidence to suggest that Dowling and particularly McCarthy were looking for writers who could work in this way: who were prepared to be open in their drafting of a play. Graham Reid believes that initial discussion for his first play was "an exercise in sussing out whether I was capable and willing to take the objections given to me and to respond in an open manner".⁸⁹

According to Dowling, McCarthy would work through drafts.

In the first instance, the writer would go away and write. He would produce a draft, but a very rough draft. Sean would look at this and work through it. Together they would produce a second draft. At some point I, as programmer of the theatre, would see it, but only when Sean and the writer involved felt happy for me to see it.⁹⁰

In spite of the fact that McCarthy was the only one involved with this process, there was a danger that the writer felt that the theatre was close to defining the nature of the work. As Reid states: "You sometimes felt that the Abbey was looking over your shoulder."⁹¹ McCarthy would deny that he ever intended to do this, as he states: "I don't believe that there is any one way of writing a play."⁹² The Abbey's protestations of the writer's integrity is supported by Farrell who states: "Nobody ever said write a play about this or that."⁹³ While it was natural that at this stage certain writers were going to find the relationship with the Abbey more involved and therefore, at times, more difficult, it is clear that there were obvious advantages for all three playwrights.

In the first instance, the playwright had the obvious psychological boost of knowing that they were not working in isolation. The Abbey had made a

⁸⁹ Reid, 28 March 1992.

⁹⁰ Dowling, 15 November 1991.

⁹¹ Reid, 28 March 1992.

⁹² McCarthy, 3 April 1992.

⁹³ Farrell, 29 August 1991.

commitment and so the playwright had the luxury of having someone to turn to who had an active interest in their problems. In the second instance and far more importantly, the theatre was taking equal responsibility for the development of the work. The playwright was being asked to respond to the needs of the theatre, a theatre that had produced their previous work and shared, therefore, any such criticism that might have been directed at the previous work. The playwright felt, therefore, that there was an active interest in their success: a confidence boost in their desire to expand and experiment.

Such a positive association is seen clearly, in terms of the development from all three playwrights' first plays to their second. Farrell's first play *I Do Not Like Thee, Dr Fell*, was a small cast, one set play, which seemed suitable for a tryout in the Peacock. What was surprising, considering the nature of the content of the play, was the commercial success. This was rooted, not so much in the observations of the piece, but in the way the observations were made. The Abbey found themselves with a satirical comedy writer of tremendous insight and ability and because of the ongoing relationship between playwright and theatre, Farrell was given the support to think on a much larger scale. After an initial, tentative tryout, with *Dr Fell* on the main stage, Dowling supported a move to encourage Farrell to write for the main house. This gave the playwright the opportunity to create in his second play, *Canaries*, something with a much larger cast, and with a more adventurous setting and with a less intense line of action. Farrell remembers encouragement from McCarthy for these developments. "During rehearsal, Sean said that I had written a different play for my second: it was not 'Son of Dr Fell'."⁹⁴ Clearly this support was important, as Farrell acknowledges the tremendous pressure he felt after his first play:

When *Dr Fell* was in rehearsal, I was working for Sealink and, so, nobody had any expectations. Once it was a success, there was immediate

⁹⁴ Farrell, 29 August 1991.

pressure, as Friel says in *The Faith Healer*: 'to do it again and to do it better'.⁹⁵

Graham Reid was to make the most obvious development, at least in view of critical reaction. As is highlighted in the outline of the development of his work, earlier in the chapter, *The Death of Humpty Dumpty* was considered by some to be a rather crude and indulgent play. *The Closed Door*, his second play, takes the strengths of his direct naturalism, that so offended the critics in *Humpty Dumpty*, and uses them to great effect in a more general analysis of the issues of the conflict in the North. The new play turned away from the victims of violence, towards those who instigate it and in doing so Reid found that the aggressive interaction of his characters generated a brutal understanding of the issues involved. What secures the effectiveness of the dialogue in *The Closed Door* is a noticeable reduction of unnecessary phrases: a more economic approach to writing that implies dedicated dramaturgical assistance.

Neil Donnelly allowed himself to be influenced by the Abbey in initial ideas for his play and, of all the playwrights, was the most susceptible to an ongoing development from the Abbey. Both Dowling and McCarthy identify this. Dowling comments that "he [Donnelly] was the kind of writer that needed the kind of encouragement we were able to give him: a seed of an idea; developing that idea and then producing it together".⁹⁶ McCarthy states that "Donnelly needed that support all the way through his writing".⁹⁷ In commenting on his work, Donnelly refers many times to the confidence needed in writing and the support needed to develop ideas, as he says of his relationship with McCarthy: "I think he gave me the confidence to believe in my own opinions, which is what real teaching is about: to lead people to their own conclusions."⁹⁸ In *The Silver Dollar Boys*, Donnelly shows a confidence in his own theatrical skill, as he states:

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Dowling, 15 November 1991.

⁹⁷ McCarthy, 3 April 1992.

⁹⁸ Donnelly, 6 April 1992.

Upstarts was quite a naturalistic, traditional play. I had got away from the small scale educational drama I had been required to produce for TIE and managed what might be seen as a traditional Abbey play. In *The Silver Dollar Boys*, probably my best play, I feel I managed to confront a wide variety of thought and feeling. The play starts off in the past, moves forward, has voice-overs, moves back again: theatrical excitement. I suppose I was just showing off, proving I could do the other stuff, but it worked.⁹⁹

There is little doubt that this kind of encouragement helped to relieve the pressure of the playwright's development and yet, it was still only encouragement. Discussion of this sort proved that the Abbey was prepared to destroy its image of exclusiveness, but in spite of valuable commitment to ideas in early stages, it does little more than give advice that the average playwright would have found from other quarters if it had not been available in the Theatre. Sean McCarthy wanted more than this: he wanted the playwright to develop his creative skills within the context of drama.

If the institution was encroaching on the domain that traditionally might have been seen as exclusively that of the playwright, then the Abbey, through McCarthy's insistence, attempted to compromise its dominance in its traditional place of creativity: the rehearsal room.

The idea of the playwright's constant presence within the rehearsal room was in itself at the time a radical move for the Abbey Theatre. Taken for granted today by even the most inexperienced of playwrights within Ireland, it was considered by some, according to McCarthy, to be an infringement of defined theatrical roles.

When I first arrived at the Abbey you had people who were still motivated by Tomás MacAnna's famous phrase, that the best writer is a dead one and the easiest one to cope with. There was a reaction against the writer's presence in rehearsals, because the actors certainly, and some of the directors, not the likes of Patrick Mason, but others, who felt that the rehearsal was their domain, their place, and wanted no intrusion: basically they felt that the writer had no place there.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ McCarthy, 3 April 1992.

This view was, of course, not shared by Joe Dowling and, as McCarthy states, Patrick Mason. Mason was to play an important part in the realisation of this aim, sharing McCarthy's belief that "the writer should have the right to attend all the rehearsals, because he or she is invaluable to the whole process".¹⁰¹ Mason states:

One of the things that I have always insisted on with any writer that I'm working with is that they are in the rehearsal and the work continues in the rehearsal. ... What I have is a detailed knowledge of stage craft and some vision, the writer has vision, but less technical know-how. Combining the two, in rehearsal, is an essential balance. I think I was instrumental in introducing a whole generation of writers to the rehearsal room.¹⁰²

Mason, here, raises two issues surrounding the need for the playwright to be present in rehearsals. First, the idea that the playwright is present as the person who has the vision of the piece and his/her job is to make sure that that vision is being realised: a role that almost all playwrights would accept. Secondly, the idea that "the work continues in the rehearsal": a far more interesting concept regarding the development of a playwright's theatre. It was this second possible role of the playwright that was the ultimate aim for McCarthy, but as in all his work, he was conscious of taking time over this work.

Before anything, I had to teach writers how to conduct themselves, I had to introduce them to the rehearsal process and what the discipline of the rehearsal room was, because it is difficult for someone outside the business, coming in, to appreciate what the ground rules are.¹⁰³

This situation of inexperience within the rehearsal, from the writers point of view, is summed up by Graham Reid who found the experience of putting on his first play overwhelming.

Looking back on it now, of course, I had a hell of a lot to learn. It's likely that I learned more from Patrick [Mason], who was directing it, than I was able to give, but he was an ideal director for that. He was painstaking over the writer's work, wanting to get it right and taking me along with it. I first went to the Abbey two weeks into rehearsal, which was quite a shock, because I walked into a rehearsal room full of people who had become established in the work. When I spoke to the stage director [Bill Hay], years later, and asked him what they all thought of me, he said that they

101 Ibid.

102 Patrick Mason, interviewed in Dublin, 30 July 1992.

103 McCarthy, April 1992.

thought that I was an arrogant fucker. I was, of course, actually terrified. I didn't know what I was doing, I had never set foot inside a rehearsal room before, apart from limited involvement in amateur dramatics and once or twice I simply lost my nerve, when these actors started to fill me in on the weaknesses of the play. Patrick was great, backing me up totally. But it was still terrifying.¹⁰⁴

Such anxiety, similar for all the playwrights, was eased by McCarthy, who was aware of the likelihood of such pressure. Reid comments: "As you would expect Sean was always around, never in the way, but always in the background. He made you feel that there was complete back up."¹⁰⁵

McCarthy saw this introduction to the rehearsal as a stage in the playwright's development towards a complete understanding of the theatrical process, in order to break down the rigid definitions of respective roles. As with the active commissioning policy, McCarthy found that there were some writers who found the progress to this method of working more difficult than others. As he states:

There was always the question of finding the balance. Someone like Graham Reid -- a terribly stubborn man and very defensive about his work, particularly in the context of Dublin -- would give way to absolutely nothing, on a point of principle. You would get someone like Bernard Farrell, who was flexible to a point where his work would disappear: he would give far too much away. Those are the two extremes. It was a question of helping them find a balance in the rehearsal process.¹⁰⁶

Both Reid's stubbornness and Farrell's flexibility in the rehearsal room are also identified by Dowling,¹⁰⁷ but McCarthy's summation of their attitudes is an oversimplification. Both Reid and Farrell found their feet and found their own balance, when working in the rehearsal room. Reid's intransigence, as has been stated, can be put down to a lack of familiarity. The same could be said of Farrell's flexibility. Farrell has stated recently that there comes a point whereby he would stress his right of veto. "A lot of directors will try to convince you that a play is never finished and you have to tell them that the finished script is, indeed,

¹⁰⁴ Reid, 28 March 1992.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ McCarthy, 3 April 1992.

¹⁰⁷ Dowling, 15 November 1991.

finished."¹⁰⁸ Both Farrell and Reid are cautious to admit that they would, in fact, concede any of their creative vision in the rehearsal: a view in conflict with the aims put forward by McCarthy. Donnelly is more willing to see the importance of ongoing creativity in the rehearsal room and yet he sees this, today, as being a weakness. "In a way, you shouldn't need a script editor or a director or for that matter, an actor, to hold your hand. The play has to come out of the belief of the writer."¹⁰⁹

McCarthy would never have wanted the play to have come from anywhere else but the belief of the writer: he expressed this continually and the initial trust in the early work between him and the individual playwright was based on the fact that he never told them what to do. It is perhaps natural that, ten years on, these playwrights would be reluctant to imply that their early plays -- work that made their respective reputations -- came from any other source than their own imagination. In doing so, however, the playwrights seem to be implying that they misunderstood the concept of a playwright's theatre: as Patrick Mason stresses, no matter how exploratory the process might be,

[t]here is such a thing as vision and meaning and as a director, in the presence of this you need what I think Stein has called a certain courtesy. As a director coming to someone else's script, be it an immaculate script like those of Friel or a rambling scenario, like those of MacIntyre, then I think you need a certain professional courtesy: to stress, 'I am entering your world'.¹¹⁰

If these writers are cautious about developing their work during rehearsal, in spite of Mason's protestations, and if McCarthy was prepared to respect the rights of those who did not share his vision for a playwright's theatre, then it seems that there was a lack of clarity as to what the Abbey was trying to achieve. Reid, Farrell and Donnelly had developed as playwrights because of active encouragement from the Institution, but in the final instance, they refused to accept that what they were part of was an attempt to bring the playwright back to

¹⁰⁸ Farrell, 29 August 1991.

¹⁰⁹ Donnelly, 6 April 1992.

¹¹⁰ Mason, 30 July 1992.

the centre of theatre, developing ideas in partnership with those who were responsible in the practical sense for realising those ideas. Ultimately, like the playwrights at the Royal Court, they were still working in a system that defined their role as being freelance. They still felt obliged to stand their ground and stress their individualism. In effect, what the playwrights hint at is that they found the idea of being an isolated artist, with a singular focus and independence, more seductive than the idea of being a craftsman within a team. The literary image of the Abbey, with its history of independent writers got in the way, finally, of any attempts to instigate the Abbey as a playwright's theatre.

As with Joe Dowling, in his more general attempts to reform the Abbey, McCarthy realised the traditions of the place and was prepared to accept them. In doing so he developed a personal relationship with the playwright, that helped both individual and institution. When he wanted to go further, not just acknowledging the playwright as an individual, but including that individual in the actual day-to-day work of the institution, he met resistance from both sides. During the last years of his contract McCarthy struggled to go even further, by bringing in workshopping, the ultimate working example of playwright's theatre, but as he states, "there just wasn't the time, the space or the enthusiasm for it".

McCarthy goes further:

During my time, I had quite a fight to get even rehearsed readings up and running, because actors, who were on permanent contracts and getting paid every week -- a lot doing absolutely nothing -- were not willing to come and do a play reading. Certainly therefore, they were not willing to come and do two weeks workshopping a play. They could not see the point. They did not care.¹¹¹

McCarthy came up against traditional complacency:

There always was an automatic conflict, right from the beginning. The only way to have started afresh would have been literally to have started again: sack all the actors. But that's not going to happen. The Abbey has been going too long for that: it's impossible to do.¹¹²

¹¹¹ McCarthy, 3 April 1992.

¹¹² Ibid.

With this "automatic conflict" McCarthy must have realised that, as with the Royal Court and the inception of Joint Stock, the only way to instigate a true playwright's theatre at the Abbey would be to remove the specific work from the mainstream of the Institution. How this could be made to work, however, was not discussed at the time.

In spite of a gradual development towards a total playwright's theatre and a clear understanding of the inevitable conflict that would occur at the Abbey, McCarthy, during the last 18 months of his time, was beginning to become frustrated. Happy to be given assistance and support during the early years of their careers, the playwrights were less prepared to explore fresh possibilities in creative development. McCarthy wanted to go further than the Abbey was prepared for:

I felt that we should have been getting to the stage when we should have been expanding much more. What everyone else wanted to do, including Joe and the Board, was to consolidate and keep things ticking over: in other words, the period of experimentation was over.¹¹³

From this, one can deduce that McCarthy was beginning to come into conflict with Dowling over the extent of the commitment to new writing. As Dowling has always made clear, however, he was there for the organisation as a whole and, accordingly, had wider preoccupations. In stressing this, Dowling is critical of McCarthy. "Sean was terrific, but he fought his corner in relation to new work so assiduously that he probably blinded himself to other areas."¹¹⁴ Such a criticism seems justified, because McCarthy failed to realise the wider pressures that burdened Dowling during this time.

In spite of the success that Dowling's programming brought to the Abbey there was always an underlying problem with finance. During 1982 Dowling was forced to programme conservatively. Such programming was only meant to be a temporary stopgap, but it came at a time when the Board was undergoing a rather

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Dowling, 15 November 1991.

unfortunate lurch to the Right. By the end of the year a change had been made to the make-up of the Board that was to result in increasing difficulty for all involved with attempting to move the Abbey forward in a positive manner.

In the first instance, Thomas Murphy's three year stint on the Board came to an end. Murphy had provided committed support to all the ideas put forward by both Dowling and McCarthy. When Murphy left, the Executive had lost a valuable and respected ally in the Boardroom. The seriousness of Murphy's exit was accentuated by the co-option of Ulick O'Connor to the Board: considered by many to be the most conservative and interfering member of an Abbey Board since Ernest Blythe. O'Connor had little time for Dowling and resented the autonomy given to the Artistic Director. Through a slight change in the balance of power within the Boardroom, the agreement that had been made in 1981, ensuring the singular control of the Artistic Director seemed decidedly less binding than it had originally. The tension generated by this provided the catalyst for Dowling's resignation in 1985 and the ensuing return to Boardroom interference.¹¹⁵

While the situation in 1982 did not seem as desperate as it did when Dowling resigned, it still indicated a clear movement away from progressive planning. McCarthy's position started to be challenged when conservative programming began to creep out of the main house, towards the studio. McCarthy sums up the changing climate.

My job was becoming much more of a bureaucratic function. I wasn't getting the chance to take the risks I felt we should have been at that stage in the proceedings. What was worse was that I felt that some of the new plays were being accepted against my better judgement. Two of them in particular during my last year there. One was Desmond Forristal's *Kolbe*, the other was *Mary Makebelieve*. Neither of them, particularly *Kolbe*, should have got on the stage. Joe was not in favour of them either, but there was this enormous pressure from the Board and the powers that be, that this fucking priest should have his moral little play on. He did and it was appalling.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ See Chapter Six.

¹¹⁶ McCarthy, 3 April 1992.

McCarthy's deep suspicion of *Kolbe* is shared by almost everyone who was connected with the project. Forristal's play told the story of a Polish priest during the Second World War, whose undying commitment to Mother Church never faltered, even on the way to the gas chambers. *Kolbe*, with its obvious Catholic preoccupations, brought the Establishment back to the Abbey. The first night was packed out with dignitaries from both Church and State, including President Hillary and Bishop Joseph Carroll.¹¹⁷

This would have appealed to certain members of the Abbey Board, Ulick O'Connor in particular, who still believed that the Abbey should represent the Establishment line and there is little doubt, from what McCarthy suggests, that the Board were responsible for the selection of this play, in direct conflict with the principle of singular artistic direction. For the sake of the artistic reputation of the Abbey, it was a pity that the decision was taken away from the artist, because, as McCarthy affirms, the play was appalling. Michael Sheridan, in *The Irish Press*, commented that "the opportunity to depict the incredible suffering of the inmates crushed by the evil intent of the SS is lost to the exigencies of philosophy".¹¹⁸ David Nowlan, in *The Irish Times*, suggested that "the work becomes a tract in which the characters are as much cyphers on the stage as were the fathers, mothers and children who were delivered to their deaths in places like Auschwitz".¹¹⁹

Such deliberate attempts to return the Abbey back to the old order were enough to prompt a realisation in many of the younger employees at the Abbey that experimental and developmental work would not be central to National Theatre policy for much longer. This resulted in Dowling's team disintegrating around him. In late 1982 or early 1983, Deirdre McQuillen, Douglas Kennedy,

¹¹⁷ *The Irish Times*, 1 October 1982.

¹¹⁸ *The Irish Press*, 1 October 1982.

¹¹⁹ *The Irish Times*, 1 October 1982.

Patrick Mason and Sean McCarthy all left. As McCarthy suggests: "It was becoming impossible".¹²⁰

McCarthy believes, consequently, that he failed as Script Editor. "We did some good work, but it never went far enough. I think in many ways the best plays were never written. I tried to integrate the writer into the Theatre, but I didn't succeed because it still hasn't happened."¹²¹

McCarthy is, like Thomas Kilroy before him, being too self-critical and too critical of the Institution. The fact that nothing developed after his time at the Abbey has little to do with him and does not reduce the importance of what was achieved between 1978 and 1982. Indeed, an examination of what happened to Farrell, Reid and Donnelly since McCarthy left the Abbey, strengthens rather than weakens the suggestion that the Abbey was an integral part of these playwright's existence. In spite of stressing their independence as writers, neither Farrell, Donnelly or Reid have developed in a way that they might have expected in 1982.

Of all the playwrights Graham Reid is the most definite in his belief that the collaboration and assistance given to him at the Abbey was a mere education: a training for a writer, rather than a method for a playwright. By the time *Callers* was presented at the Abbey in 1985, Reid believed that he had outgrown the use of the script editor.

I think that once you know what you are doing, script editors tend to get in the way. They are not needed if the writer's experienced and he has defined a working relationship with the director. During *Callers*, I dare say that Chris [Fitz-Simon, the new script editor] was around, but he didn't get involved. What could he have done?¹²²

As a writer for the theatre, however, Reid has not developed since he moved away from the Abbey. Since the mid 1980s Reid has been based in London and has searched for an opportunity to have his plays presented to the wider audience in Britain. By the beginning of 1992, however, only one play by Graham Reid has

¹²⁰ McCarthy, 3 April 1992.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Reid, 28 March 1992.

been produced on mainland Britain: *The Death of Humpty Dumpty* in Newcastle. Reid has received one commission for a play in London. That play is finished, but he has been frustrated by delays and financial problems in his attempts to get it produced: something that he would not have been subjected to while at the Abbey. Reid puts this lack of interest down to the fact that he has been pigeon-holed as an Irish writer: "I need to break the Irish label. I think that it is terribly unfair, because none of my plays are exclusively Irish."¹²³

Any dismissive label of being an Irish writer has not, however, affected his work for Television that has developed through the 1980s, notably with the completion of *The Billy Plays*.¹²⁴ Even though Reid would like to see further success in the theatre, his development away from the Abbey has been such that, to many, he can no longer be seen as a playwright. Sean McCarthy comments: "It was obvious right from the start that Graham would make a great television writer and that's exactly what he has turned out to be."¹²⁵ Neil Donnelly goes even further:

In fairness to Graham, I don't think that he is a playwright. He is a television writer. He is a very powerful writer in that medium, because he has a tremendous ability to write strong enclosed scenes.¹²⁶

What can be implied, therefore, is that Reid's association with the theatre during the four years focused in this chapter was an isolated experience, specific to the needs of the Institution at the time. Reid's work was identified by the Abbey as an opportunity to present the growing problems of the Northern Conflict, to the audience in Dublin: a valid aim for the Irish National Theatre. Reid's style of writing, so suitable for the screen, was also ideal for the presentation of an issue that was uncomfortable to a Dublin audience: so close, yet, in many ways, ideologically distant from the Island's second city. Reid wrote in a clear and often

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ *Too Late to Talk to Billy*, transmitted on BBC Television, 16 February 1982. *A Matter of Choice for Billy*, 10 May 1983. *A Coming to Terms for Billy*, 15 March 1984.

¹²⁵ McCarthy, 3 April 1992.

¹²⁶ Donnelly, 6 April 1992.

confrontational way and, in doing so, he managed in the words of Joe Dowling, "to open up the Protestant voice to the South in a way that could not have been thought of just ten years before".¹²⁷

For Reid, therefore, there was a specific reason for being at the Abbey during the early 1980s and once he moved away from this institution, he ceased to be a writer for theatre. The fact that he refuses to acknowledge a collaborative theatrical process tends to explain his movement away from the kind of theatre that McCarthy was interested in, but the kind of support that he received while at the Abbey meant that, for a time, he was a playwright actively contributing to the needs of one institution.

As Reid, Bernard Farrell was providing the Abbey with a style of theatre that was suitable to the time. While Reid was struggling with the uncomfortable issues of the North, Farrell brought a light and easily enjoyable style of drama to an institution that needed commercial as well as critical success. The transferral of Farrell's plays from the Peacock to the main stage raised the confidence of the company. While accepting that the Peacock was an equal auditorium to the main Abbey, Farrell's success in the main house did stress the success of the development of new writing. Farrell has been described as the greatest comedy writer in Ireland since Hugh Leonard. Such a claim is justified, but with the reputation comes a degree of pressure that Farrell has not been trained for. With the security of the support of the Abbey, support he is happy to acknowledge, Farrell managed to write a play every year. Since the breakup of the team, Farrell's output has slowed down. He has had critical failures and, in 1990, a rejection by the Abbey that is still shrouded in mystery.¹²⁸ Like Reid, Farrell found himself writing for television rather than for another theatre.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Dowling, 15 November 1991.

¹²⁸ For the 1990 Dublin Theatre Festival, the Abbey was due to present a new Farrell play. Only a few months before, the theatre withdrew the play and replaced it with *Misogynist*, by Michael Harding, a play that was, at the time, ill-conceived and unready for the stage. The production was a failure. See Chapter Six.

¹²⁹ Farrell was responsible for the mid-eighties BBC situation comedy: *Foreign Bodies*.

Independence has not suited him that well and he admits that he would have probably written more plays if he had stayed at the Abbey.¹³⁰

Donnelly, with his generous acknowledgement that he needed the kind of support the Abbey was able to give during the time that McCarthy was resident, has fared the worse. His one successful play, produced since 1982, *Chalk Farm Blues*, was produced for the Abbey in 1984, but it was written before *Upstarts*, during the 1970s, when he was still living in London. The play had already been accepted before McCarthy left the Abbey and the two of them had discussed the work. The fact that it took over a year before it was produced is clear evidence of a slowing up of the exciting developments that were occurring before McCarthy left.

Donnelly attributes his failure to make an impact as a playwright in recent years to the passing of this era: he highlights the drawn out negotiations over his play, *The Reel McCoy*, and, in doing so, draws attention to the reality of the situation, not only for him, but for all the playwrights who were forced to be independent after being used to the security and respect of team work.

Since Joe Dowling left the Abbey it's been an absolute disaster for me concerning my playwriting. My last meeting with Joe as Artistic Director of the Abbey was in March 1985: he gave me a commitment on my two plays. [*Good-bye Carraroe* and *The Reel McCoy*] Unfortunately for him, but also for me, Dowling left the day after that meeting due to all this trouble with the Board. Without him there it took from 1985 to 1989 to produce *The Reel McCoy*, the larger of the two plays: *four years*, that play was stuck in the Theatre. One went from the situation whereby every facility was there to help you achieve the play, to a situation whereby you had a new artistic director, virtually every year. Each time, you had to go through the begging-bowl situation: pleading with them to actually put the play on.¹³¹

The fact that these playwrights have had a difficult development away from the Abbey tends to stress the special relationship between playwright and Institution during the years 1978 to 1982. The fact that each of them considers himself an isolated writer, rather than a craftsman contributing to the development of a

¹³⁰ Farrell, 29 August 1991.

¹³¹ Donnelly, 6 April 1992.

theatre, does not weaken the importance of the special relationship. Since 1982 these writers have, indeed, become isolated writers: no theatre since has been able to match the level of support given to them by the Abbey during McCarthy's time.

While the idea of complete collaboration was never instigated at the Abbey in McCarthy's time, meaning that a playwright's theatre was not instigated, all the criteria to define a writer's theatre, similar to the Royal Court, can be identified as becoming established during this period. Playwrights were returning, time and again, with their work to a designated "living writer's" theatre; they were associated with that theatre and their plays were nurtured and drafted under the watchful eye of the Theatre. While these playwrights were never to determine the actual policy of the Abbey, they were at least part of the company and it is through not only the patient work of Sean McCarthy, but the considered changes in general policy brought about by Joe Dowling, that these relationships were achieved.

With hindsight it is clear that McCarthy's attempts to establish a playwright's theatre within such an established theatre as the Abbey were doomed from the start. As I attempt to clarify in Chapter Six, Ulick O'Connor's appointment to the Board represented an external, institutional influence that would always be in existence. Even Dowling, with his radical and yet pragmatic approach to running the Abbey, respected the tradition of the institution: a respect that, no doubt, gave him a certain amount of credit in his dealings with the Board. The balance between Dowling's pragmatism and McCarthy's vision, however, meant that the Abbey finally realised its practical responsibility to serving new drama, at least as far as any established theatre could do. McCarthy and Dowling as executives of the Abbey, responsible to a wide variety of playwrights, actors, directors and Board members, could do no more. But others, without the overall responsibility for programming, could at least attempt to isolate themselves from the institutional needs of the Abbey and reach the ultimate collaboration between playwright and theatre company. In 1983 Patrick Mason directed Tom Hickey in

Tom MacIntyre's play *The Great Hunger*. Ironically, in the months after McCarthy left and with a kind of theatre he was to find pretentious, Mason, Hickey and MacIntyre created an isolated series of plays that can be described as playwright's theatre.

Chapter Five: Tom MacIntyre. The Playwright within a Playwright's Theatre

This chapter moves away from the general examination of the Abbey Theatre's association with playwrights, towards the more specific consideration of one particular playwright whose work was produced by the Abbey Theatre during the 1980s: Tom MacIntyre. Through examining MacIntyre's work, it is my intention to show how a small group of theatre practitioners, removed from the mainstream of the Abbey, was able to rise above the political restrictions made on the Irish National Theatre and achieve a system for the creation of theatre, that can be considered true playwright's theatre.¹

Between 1983 and 1988, MacIntyre was to write five plays for the Abbey: *The Great Hunger* (1983); *The Bearded Lady* (1984); *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney* (1985); *Dance for your Daddy* (1987) and *Snow White* (1988). This collection of plays came to be known as "the Theatre of the Image":² a radical departure from the naturalism closely associated with the Abbey in previous years. The work was also noted for the ongoing collaboration of the director, Patrick Mason, and a small core group of actors, led by Tom Hickey.

Because of the collaboration involved, many believed that MacIntyre's work constituted a movement away from a situation whereby the writer was central to the creation of theatre.³ What I argue, however, is that the

¹ For details on the necessity for broad policy and the political restrictions on programming, see Chapter Three, Chapter Four and Chapter Six.

² A term first adopted by Fintan O'Toole, in referring to MacIntyre's work, in a review of *The Bearded Lady*, for *The Sunday Tribune*, 16 September 1984. Earlier, in an article for *Theatre Ireland* 6, April-June 1984, Kathryn Holmquist had discussed the relationship between MacIntyre's work and other 'image' drama.

³ In his review of *The Bearded Lady*, John Finegan commented that "it is a director's play, and I think it will be remembered as such rather than a poet's play". In his book, *Contemporary Irish Dramatists*, (London: Macmillan, 1989), Michael Etherton gives a more general overview of the work, citing Patrick Mason as the central figure in the development of the work, mentioning MacIntyre, only in the context of the collaboration. The subtitle for his examination of this work, "Patrick Mason at the Abbey: Theatre of the Image", tends to stress his view that the director is more important than the writer.

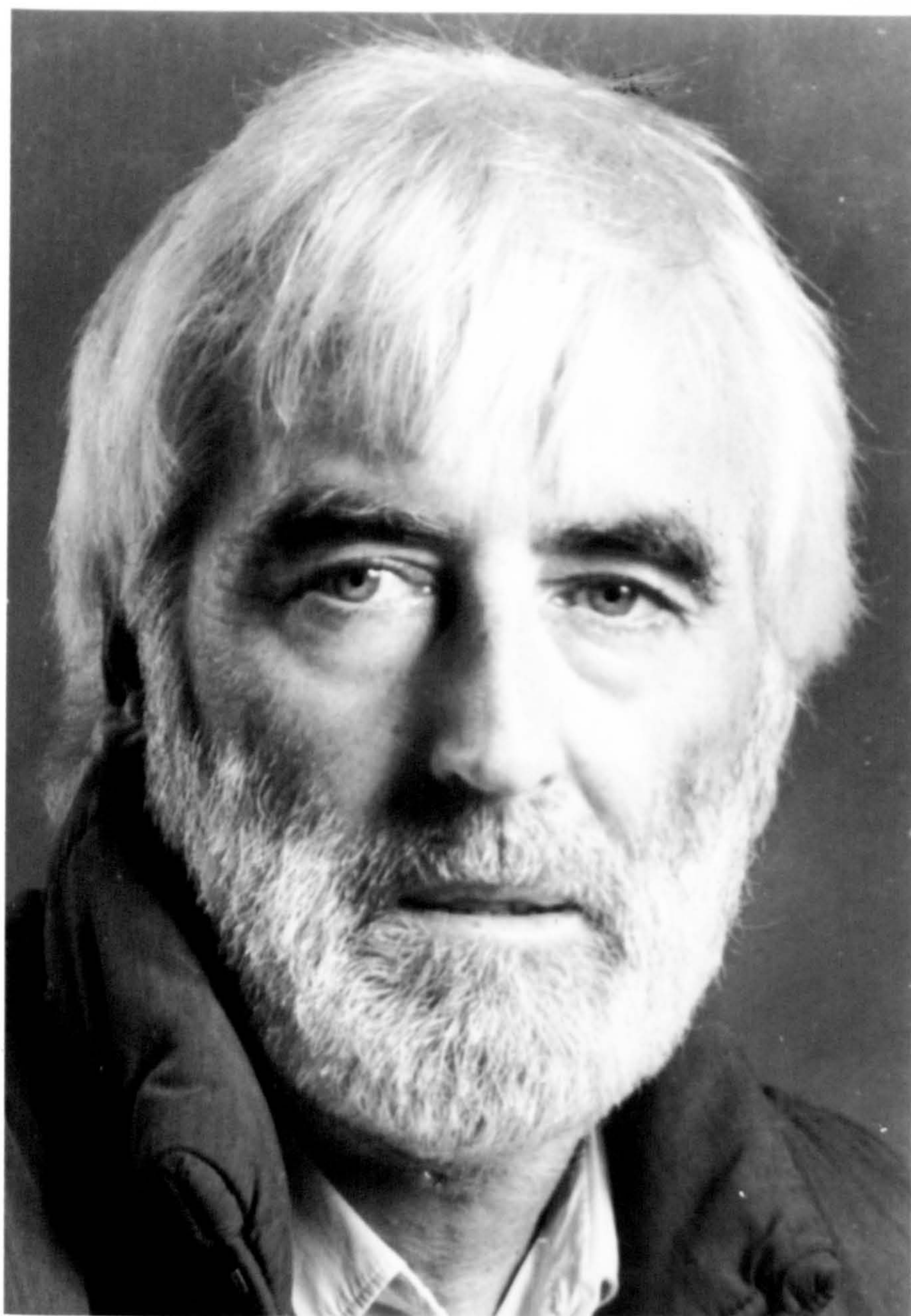
collaboration involved, represented a situation whereby a specific group of theatre practitioners could evolve with the united purpose of developing a playwright's craft.

Through a study of the background to the work, followed by a detailed examination of the rehearsal process for the first collaboration, *The Great Hunger*, and concluding with how the work developed from project to project, I will try to demonstrate how MacIntyre, with Patrick Mason and the team of actors, adopted three principles that can be identified as being essential requisites for a playwright's theatre.

The first of these principles has already been indicated in the first paragraph. The relationship between writer, director and actors extended beyond a specific project. Within the Abbey, a team evolved that had a unified sense of purpose, specific to the theatrical ideas of MacIntyre, enabling ongoing development from project to project. The second principle -- similar to the central aim of Joint Stock's work -- was the idea that the writer was an essential contributor to the rehearsal process. MacIntyre was present in rehearsals not only to clarify his specific vision, but to assist in the discovery of a complex and total theatrical communication that would have been impossible if limited to the written page. Finally, the integrity of the writer was never compromised. MacIntyre, Mason and the group of actors found a balance between improvisation and written script, realising the depth and specific strength, generating from the single vision. This was still scripted drama.

Having examined MacIntyre's work, in isolation, I will conclude this chapter with a consideration of the relationship between this work and the Abbey Theatre. Two major questions need to be answered. How far was the Abbey responsible for the development of this work? Can the Theatre's association with this work constitute the existence of playwright's theatre within the institution as a whole?

Figure Twelve. Tom MacIntyre.



In the first stage of this chapter, it is important to outline MacIntyre's background as a writer and to examine his tentative, early experiments with theatrical form. This will show how the writer came to understand the relevance of at least the first of these specific principles, adopted in working towards *The Great Hunger* and the other four plays.

Tom MacIntyre was born in 1931 in County Cavan: a geographical fact that has been used to identify the unique and isolated position he holds in Irish drama and literature. Vincent Hurley, in an article on the work of MacIntyre, calls Cavanmen "a breed unto themselves". Hurley continues:

The wily Cavanman is a mythic figure in Irish folklore, on a par with the cute Kerryman and the subject of almost as many jokes and stories.⁴

This infamous notoriety is derived, according to Hurley, from the fact that Cavan has for centuries become associated with boundaries. In the first instance, Cavan marks the southernmost extent of glacial activity in Ireland, providing a natural isolation from the rest of the country. In the most recent instance, the county has become part of 'border country' with implied "tension, uncertainty and division".⁵ What Hurley implies is that the Cavanman would never hold with the dogma and clearly defined identity, rooted in the easy traditions found to the West, North and East. MacIntyre is seen as being part of this tradition:

This land is in MacIntyre's blood. He's enough of a Cavanman to be adept at the side-step. He's not likely to be caught by such questions as 'What does it mean?'⁶

Lynda Henderson, in *Theatre Ireland*, tends to concur with this geographical identification:

Cavan is its own place. Its geology, the famous drumlins and lakes, renders it unique; and its geography -- on the way to nowhere -- preserves its individuality in isolation. It is a strange claustrophobic, anarchic place with an instinctive paganism close to the surface and often irrepressible.

⁴ Vincent Hurley, "The Great Hunger: a reading". Patrick Kavanagh and Tom MacIntyre. *The Great Hunger, Poem into Play*. (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1988). p71

⁵ *The Great Hunger*. p71.

⁶ *The Great Hunger*. p71.

The awareness of the nature of his birthplace is very strong in Tom MacIntyre.⁷

The strength of this deep-felt isolation and independence is seen in MacIntyre's initial writings. His most ebullient and accomplished works, before producing *The Great Hunger*, are defined as short stories: a description that Sean Dunne found "too much and too little".⁸ In *Dance the Dance* (1970) and *The Harper's Turn* (1982), MacIntyre uses a combination of prose and poetry in 'stories' that last a few pages. The economy and eclectic selection of vocabulary tends to relieve the reader of the enthusiastic rush of words popular with other Irish writers, drawing one into a world of personal and stark understanding of a blend between myth and fact. Seamus Heaney, in considering the prose work of MacIntyre, identifies a modern, less deliberate and less superficial interpretation of Irish identity, than is usual.

When Irish mythology began to become a literary currency at the end of the nineteenth century, it was used to vindicate a claim to national identity, historic culture, spiritual resource. A hundred years later the writer approaches it with less propagandist intent, with a primary hunger for form, in order to find structure for unstructured potential within himself.⁹

The need "to find structure for unstructured potential" is a prophetic remark, with personal importance to MacIntyre, upon his discovery of the dramatic form.

Hurley comments:

Theatre has been a liberation for him. Here he found a medium which could encompass the range of his talents and interests, accommodating both the verbal and the visual, admitting the exhilarating possibilities of experiment while remaining rooted in concrete reality.¹⁰

Through theatre, therefore, MacIntyre found a method of communication that needed less explanation, suiting an antipathy for over-statement. To be more exact, he found a particular kind of dramatic form, alien to the defined preoccupations of the self-conscious traditions of Irish drama. To determine

⁷ Lynda Henderson, "Irish Alternatives", *Theatre Ireland* 3 . June - September 1983. p129.

⁸ *The Cork Examiner*, n.d. Printed in Tom MacIntyre. *The Harper's Turn*. (Dublin: Gallery Books, 1982).

⁹ Seamus Heaney, "Introduction", *The Harper's Turn*.

¹⁰ *The Great Hunger*. p71.

structure, MacIntyre looked away from Ireland, the focus of so much of his content, towards the "image" traditions of European theatre and the experimentation of Meyerhold, Artaud and Brook. During the 1970s he studied and wrote on the work of Pina Bausch,¹¹ who had explored the fusion of dance, gesture and non-verbal interaction, in order to attack the senses rather than the mind. MacIntyre, himself, expands on his natural enthusiasm for the theatre of image:

The immediacy of the pictorial, of the imagistic, by contrast with the verbal, relates essentially to what we call sensory impact: you look, you *see*. In the verbal theatre, the energy hasn't got the directness, it has to come through the cerebellum, if you like, and then down to the solar plexus.¹²

Such an understanding of the totality of theatre culminated in the Abbey production of *The Great Hunger* in 1983, with a form and style of theatre that was to characterise his work for the next six years. Verbal language was seen to be no greater a method of communication than physical and visual language. MacIntyre developed a poetic expression through the collection of words, mime and physical images. Representational staging, to this extent, had never been seen before in Ireland.

It had taken over ten years, however, to develop this understanding. MacIntyre's first attempts at writing for the Theatre had seen little of this extreme use of the image. In his first major play, *Eye Winker, Tom Tinker* (1972), MacIntyre writes of the frustrations and aggression of a revolutionary group and its passionate leader, Snooks. The entanglement of political argument, the empty rhetoric, the improbability of commitment and the confused psychology of the central character, tend to identify the aggressive seclusion of the writer's background, but as D.E.S. Maxwell points out, the play "kept language at [its] centre".¹³ This initial contact with the Abbey -- the play was directed by Leila

¹¹ Mentioned by Lynda Henderson, *Theatre Ireland* 3. The relationship between the work of Pina Bausch and that of MacIntyre, referred to by Kathryn Holmquist, *Theatre Ireland*, 6.

¹² *Theatre Ireland* 6. p151.

¹³ Maxwell. p181-2

Doolan in the Peacock -- gave MacIntyre experience of basic dramaturgical development, from page to stage, but allowed little education in the understanding of a distinct theatrical communication beyond the words of the written page.

Four years and considerable thought later, MacIntyre had a second play presented at the Abbey Theatre. The transformation from *Eye Winker, Tom Tinker* to *Jack Be Nimble* (1976) was total. Gone was the verbal rhetoric, to be replaced by an all embracing use of mime. The play demonstrated a growing understanding and enthusiasm for image-based work, fuelled no doubt, by his growing interest in Pina Bausch, but also in the arrival on the scene of a director whose training, preoccupations and sheer talent could liberate and stimulate MacIntyre's imagination: Patrick Mason.

Jack Be Nimble was Mason's first professional production: a fitting beginning for a man whose reputation has been enhanced greatly by his association with the work of MacIntyre. Born and educated in London, of Irish descent, Mason trained as a voice tutor at the Central School of Speech and Drama before joining the Abbey as a voice and movement coach in 1972. Despite his Irish background, his appointment to the Abbey gave him his first opportunity to visit Dublin, but as he states, "there was always an attraction to Dublin and once I started to live here, it became a very personal thing to be here".¹⁴ Apart from a period in Manchester as a Lecturer in Performance Studies at the University, Mason has remained a resident of Dublin and is irritated by any assumption that he may be British. While embracing a personal sense of identity in Ireland, Mason realises and accepts that his English past is going to lead to an ambiguous interpretation of his background, and in an interview with *Theatre Ireland*, he states "here [in Ireland] I'm regarded as an English director; there I'm regarded as an Irish director. So I'm somewhere in the middle of the Irish Sea".¹⁵

¹⁴ Patrick Mason. Interviewed in Dublin, 30 July 1992.

¹⁵ "Mastermason". Interview with Claudia Harris. *Theatre Ireland* 22. Spring 1990. p52.

It is this factor of being "an outsider in both places",¹⁶ that made Mason such an ideal psychological stable-mate for MacIntyre. Mason, like MacIntyre, belongs, yet does not belong, to the defined Irish psyche. He is removed from the mythical tradition found in Dublin and West Coast art, has a wider and diluted vision, and so is "capable of a certain objectivity about Irish affairs".¹⁷ Any identity he feels with Ireland is defined by his own personal sense of Irishness. Mason is no less Irish than his Dublin neighbours, but his Irishness is less clearly defined and, so, demonstrates the same ambiguous instincts of his Cavan partner.

On a more practical level, Mason had the qualifications to assist in the development of an image and movement based theatre project. Further to his early work in movement, both at the Abbey and Manchester University, Mason trained in the Graham technique with Irene Dilkes of London Contemporary Dance Theatre. He followed this, in 1975, by becoming a visiting observer to Peter Brook's International Centre of Theatre Research in Paris.¹⁸ Mason's interests in theatre reflected those of MacIntyre.

As one would expect with a play by a playwright making tentative experiments with theatrical form, under the supervision of an inexperienced director, the Peacock production of *Jack Be Nimble* was on a small scale. Described as a Peacock Workshop Production, the technical team was small by comparison to any other Peacock production.¹⁹ The cast included four actors, all taken from the general pool of Abbey actors.²⁰ This first tentative collaboration was very much seen as an experiment, but its very existence goes to prove that the Abbey was, in isolated incidences, prepared to explore theatre beyond traditional style: as long as it did not interfere with the traditional repertoire.

¹⁶ *Theatre Ireland* 22.

¹⁷ *Theatre Ireland* 22.

¹⁸ Programme note for *Jack Be Nimble*, Abbey Theatre, 10 August 1976.

¹⁹ There were six members of the production team for *Jack Be Nimble*. In *Find The Lady*, there were twelve.

²⁰ The cast was: Stephen Brennan; Martina Stanley; Ingrid Craigie and Ronan Patterson. Stephen Brennan and Ingrid Craigie, in particular, went on to become very successful members of the Abbey Company.

The Abbey's contribution to allowing the development of this work is underlined by the fact that within a year, another project by the same author, using a similar approach, was presented in the Peacock. *Find the Lady*, opening on 9 May 1977, was a far more ambitious production, with an increased number of production staff and a cast that had more than doubled. This production marked the first tentative critical acknowledgement of MacIntyre's contribution to new drama in Ireland. David Nowlan, in the *Irish Times*, was to write:

In [MacIntyre's] latest play, *Find the Lady*,.... all forms [of dramatic presentation] are used: song, dance, mime, dialogue, wisecrack and even physical exposure, all in the cause of giving us the author's interpolation of the Salomé story. It makes clear that Mr. MacIntyre now has few equals in knowing how to say something in the theatre and that he can be very funny and entertaining in the process.²¹

This analysis of the process involved in *Find the Lady* draws attention to three important factors in the work. In the first instance, it becomes apparent that the company has less isolated interest in mime. The company was broadening its understanding of the possibilities of mime in a context with other dramatic communication, including dialogue. Secondly, Nowlan draws attention to the fact that the work was an interpretation of an established story: the Salomé story. In much of the work that was to follow, MacIntyre used familiar fable and myth as the root of the work, not only to develop a political subversion of perceptions, but also to give structured foundation to very eclectic experimentation. In the final instance, Nowlan makes little mention of collaboration: this work is still that of the playwright. While such a perception could be identified as being an ignorance of the methodology, it tends to stress the central importance of MacIntyre as the starting point for this work. In *Find the Lady*, the concept of the playwright is still in existence, and was to remain so, during all the projects.

In many ways, therefore, *Find the Lady*, rather than *Jack Be Nimble*, was the true prototype for the work seen during the 1980s. The project adopted a variety of theatre form to explore a story that was deeply rooted in the minds of

²¹ *Irish Times*, 10 May 1977.

the audience: attempting to find a totality of poetic expression. While it is quite clear, however, that the work was developing, with an exciting realisation that such development could go a long way, it is important to stress the problems encountered.

In examining *Find the Lady* in script form, one is given a clear impression of how MacIntyre had yet to come fully to grips with his form. As David Nowlan makes clear, the play uses many dramatic forms and yet these forms are seen, rather self-consciously, in isolation, detached from a fused totality. There are individual scenes in which gesture and mime are used, a clear example being Scene Three, where a camera is used as focus for a rather obvious non-verbal interaction between, Herod, Herodias and Salomé. The intention is to show the tensions that underlie the image of happy families. The games that are presented seem similar to the most basic 'high/low status' games, explored by both Keith Johnstone and Clive Barker during the 1970s,²² and the discoveries made about the relationships within the scene could have been made through improvisation and in isolation from the material at hand. What weakens the effectiveness of these non-verbal scenes is the fact that each section is punctuated with scenes in which traditional dialogue and interaction is the major method of communication. The verbal language in these scenes tries to be complex -- there is a lot left unsaid -- but because a traditional form of communication has been defined, the language seems hollow and rather self-conscious. Because of the fragmentation of the differing methods of communication used in *Find the Lady*, it becomes clear that, at this stage, MacIntyre is less concerned with the message and more concerned with the medium. It also tends to demonstrate how no one involved with the creation of the play could let go of the consciousness of verbal theatre. Non-verbal image scenes are adopted, but isolated as if to underline the separate nature

²² Keith Johnstone. *Impro.* (London: Methuen, 1979). Clive Barker. *Theatre Games.* (London: Methuen, 1977).

of the communication. The result, while interesting, is disjointed with only the most simple of underlying relationship communicated.

The deficiencies of the method in this project seem to illustrate the wider reaction of the institution to the work. At this point the people involved were normal members of the Abbey company, who were more concerned with the repertoire as a whole. The Theatre saw this work as an isolated experiment: valuable but irrelevant to the development of Irish drama. Mason comments:

We were working in a theatre that was geared to fairly traditional scripts and you were trying to find, within the company, the odd one or two who might have been interested in this kind of work. We were reduced to scraping around: "So-and-so's good at moving; such-and-such seems interested", that sort of thing.²³

The most valuable lesson learnt from *Find The Lady*, therefore, was that if such drama was to work and a totality of communion be attempted, then the process would have to remove itself from a conventional programme-then-cast method of staging drama. Mason continues:

After *Find The Lady*, it became clear that if the work was to continue, we would need a different kind of actor: someone who actually had a strong movement background; was interested in this kind of work and was prepared to do it.²⁴

What was needed was a company that was defined by a unified sense of purpose. By finding a group of actors, committed to the work of a playwright, the first principle of a playwright's theatre was beginning to be acknowledged.

By the time Tom MacIntyre and Patrick Mason got together again, the available pool of actors had changed. What Mason suggests is that around the turn of the 1980s, there were, on the scene, several actors who had returned to Dublin after studying mime and dance in Paris and London, who were "quite physical and quite visually aware". Others who had remained in Dublin were becoming "increasingly aware of the wider possibilities of drama".²⁵

²³ Mason. 30 July 1992.

²⁴ 30 July 1992.

²⁵ 30 July 1992.

The group of actors who came to the attention of MacIntyre and Mason and were to become involved closely with all, or nearly all, of the MacIntyre productions during the 1980s, included Vincent O'Neill, Conal Kearney, Bríd Ní Neachtain, Dermot Moore and Michele Forbes, all of whom were young and enthusiastic actors at the beginning of their careers. The most important actor, however, was older and had a recognised record in traditional theatre and television: Tom Hickey

Tom Hickey was born in Kildare and came to Dublin in 1964 to train with Deirdre O'Connell at her newly formed Stanislavky Studio. He graduated to become a founder member of O'Connell's Focus Theatre and has been closely associated with it ever since. In the early years of his career, Hickey concentrated on a 'method' style of acting, determined by his association with the Focus and played in such works as *Miss Julie* and *Uncle Vanya*. He became well-known to the general Irish public through the 1970s for his role as Benjy, in the popular soap opera *The Riordans*. Hickey's first appearance for the Abbey came in 1975, when he played in Ionesco's *What a Bloody Circus* in the Peacock, but he was not a regular performer for the National Theatre until 1981, when Joe Dowling asked him to play the name part in Brecht's *Galileo*.

Hickey had had a long and varied career outside the Abbey, therefore, and had demonstrated a willingness to explore many different theatrical avenues. He had little time for the traditions of the National Theatre. As is made clear in the previous chapter, he represented the growing number of actors who felt happier without the false security of a permanent Abbey contract, demonstrating an understanding of developing new horizons. It was natural, therefore, that when Hickey started to work at the Abbey, he would express an enthusiasm for new drama -- he estimates that over 90 percent of his work for the Abbey has been in new plays -- and a willingness to contribute to the ongoing dramaturgical

development of a new play, that was essential policy during Dowling's early years at the Abbey.²⁶

While never being the most disciplined of actors, Hickey showed a confidence in exploring drama and demonstrated, what Michael Harding has called, "tremendous colour and depth, both linguistically and physically".²⁷ Patrick Mason, who spent the period between 1977 and 1983 as a resident director at the Abbey, began to recognise Hickey's interests and specific talents for experimental work and, so, introduced him to MacIntyre. The three started to discuss the possibility of a collaboration of their talents: Mason and MacIntyre had found what Mason describes as "a remarkable actor, who became the absolute focus for our work".²⁸

MacIntyre's and Mason's desire to find practitioners suitable for a visual and physical realisation of drama was further complemented by the acquisition of a designer, Bronwen Casson.

Casson had joined the Abbey in 1970, after studying at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, as well as in London and Paris. With Wendy Shea, she had dominated the design department during the 1970s: an era when the presence of the new stage demanded an increased commitment to imaginative design. Casson had come to represent the growing desire to make the divisions of artistic role within theatre more flexible. She herself was the director of four plays for the Peacock, including *Strike*, a play that demanded a great degree of collaboration. Casson was, therefore, an ideal contributor to the MacIntyre projects, not only for her depth of imagination, but for her understanding of how her work could extend beyond a traditional role. The addition of Casson's skills to the team, completed an exciting line-up of individuals, who shared a sense of purpose and understanding of dramatic form.

²⁶ Tom Hickey. Interviewed in Dublin, 5 April 1991.

²⁷ Michael Harding. Interviewed in Dublin, 30 July 1992.

²⁸ Mason. 30 July 1992.

Figure Thirteen. Tom Hickey; Dermot Moore, Vincent O'Neill and Conal Kearney in
The Great Hunger, by Tom MacIntyre. Almeida Theatre, London, 1986.



The practical developments made, between *Find the Lady* and *The Great Hunger*, in defining the actual set-up that was suitable for this work, go some way to showing how a playwright's theatre was evolving. Having a group of actors dedicated to the specific aims of the work meant that the principle of collective, continuous association between the various contributors was already established before *The Great Hunger* went into rehearsal. This principle being established meant, however, that there was a possible compromise of the other two principles that demanded the central involvement of the playwright. With more people making a personal commitment to this work, could this have diluted the role of the playwright? Was the dramatic form discovered through devised improvisation, rather than a collaboration between playwright and practitioner?

To demonstrate how the team avoided a compromise of these principles, it is important to go into detail about the rehearsal methods used during the work and how the lessons learnt from project to project were rooted in a desire to realise MacIntyre's specific vision, made initially in isolation.

I use *The Great Hunger* as the focus for this examination, because of its reputation as the first and most engaging play in the series. When it opened, it caused an immediate stir in the press and public alike. The press reaction, if not totally enthusiastic, was certainly high-profile, motivated by the strangeness of the form and the play's association with Kavanagh's poem. Playing to packed houses throughout its initial four week run, *The Great Hunger* was to become the central play in the public's identification of MacIntyre's work. Revived in 1986, the play was to tour, over a two-year period, to Belfast, Edinburgh, London, Paris, Leningrad, Moscow, Philadelphia and New York. This was the play the company chose to show to the world and it is, therefore, the play that this particular Abbey company most identify with.²⁹ There is also the added advantage that *The Great Hunger* has been published. Although, as an image play, the expected method of

²⁹ Confirmed by both Mason, 30 July 1992 and Hickey, 5 April 1991.

evaluation should be through physical experience, it should be stressed that as this examination is focused on the extent of the playwright's contribution, a comparison between this published script and a script produced at the beginning of rehearsals provides an indication of the process of development during rehearsals.

The Great Hunger by Tom MacIntyre, adapted from the poem by Patrick Kavanagh, opened in the Peacock Theatre on 9 May 1983. The play, like the poem, probes the frustrating life of Patrick Maguire, the small-time farmer, in the rural heartland of Ireland. Through observing Maguire's reaction to the church, the land, his mother, the men and women who surround him and his own sexuality, MacIntyre examines, in the words of Lynda Henderson, "the social, spiritual and sexual condition of his contemporary rural Ireland".³⁰

The Great Hunger went into rehearsal in March 1983. In addition to Mason, Casson and Hickey, the team included Vincent O'Neill, Conal Kearney and Bríd Ní Neachtain, who were to contribute to almost all MacIntyre projects during the 1980s. The cast was completed by Martina Stanley, who had played Salomé in *Find the Lady* and Fiona MacAnna. Even before rehearsals began, however, MacIntyre had done considerable work on his own. The actual choice of Patrick Kavanagh's poem as starting point for the work demonstrates the extent of MacIntyre's personal vision for the foundations of the work.

Kavanagh's extended poem *The Great Hunger* first published in 1942, had long been considered an important work for its poetic revelation of painful rural stagnation within inner Ireland. Through the frustration of hope and fulfilment for the central character Patrick Maguire, Kavanagh brought a sense of realism to the idea of dreadful isolation. Seamus Heaney identifies *The Great Hunger* as being alien from the "inauthentic, sentimental" kind of poem, that has been written "by those for whom toil on the land is some kind of therapeutic luxury, not the grim,

³⁰ *Theatre Ireland* 3.

soul destroying necessity of daily existence".³¹ Michael O'Loughlin has argued that in being "... true to experience rather than true to tradition [it made] a profound break with what had been the dominant tone in Irish literature".³²

Such a poem, from a similar landscape to that of Cavan, with its wealth of hard, bleak and challenging imagery, was natural territory for MacIntyre. Realising the strong, yet instinctive picture drawn in the poem of Irish life, in conflict with the established view, MacIntyre saw the possibility of subconscious communication, fusing his own imagination with that of Kavanagh, to draw an audience into trusting their own responses. The nature of the material in this project, together with the natural interest it would have to an Irish audience, was always going to raise the play away from the dismissive description of tentative experimentation, towards that of high profiled "high art".³³

In the first instance, these observations were very much the personal property of MacIntyre, being rooted in the ongoing preoccupations of the writer. As with his previous work -- prose, poetry or drama -- MacIntyre wrote these observations down. From these observations, MacIntyre allowed messages to evolve in his own mind and, from this, a loose scenario developed, linked by the most general of images. This rough draft was passed between Mason and Hickey. Discussions took place, images traded and suggestions made until MacIntyre felt confident in developing his scenario into a full-scale rehearsal script.³⁴ Up to this point, therefore, the process adopted by MacIntyre was no more a compromise of the writer's integrity than the process adopted by Donnelly, Farrell and Reid in their dramaturgical discussions with Sean McCarthy or Joe Dowling.³⁵

³¹ Seamus Heaney. "From Monaghan to the Grand Canal: The Poetry of Patrick Kavanagh", in *Preoccupations*. (London: Faber, 1980).

³² See *The Great Hunger*. p71.

³³ Term used by Etherton. p45.

³⁴ Referred to in Patrick Mason. "Director's Note", *The Great Hunger*. p69. Rehearsal Script provided by the Abbey Theatre, with the permission of Tom MacIntyre.

³⁵ See Chapter Four.

The focus of the actor's attention on the first day of rehearsal was far more than a collection of ideas and possible source material. What MacIntyre came in with was a script of eighty-eight pages, comprising of fifteen scenes, divided into two acts. Even the most brief of examinations of this script demonstrates the extent of MacIntyre's control at this point. The script is typed and clearly laid out. Each act develops towards a climax, demonstrating initial consideration of dramatic structure. Most importantly, within each scene, each image is clearly expressed, with an attention to detail not realised in the average literary script. The following example of MacIntyre's detail comes from page thirty-five of the rehearsal script: the final moments of Act One, in which Maguire confronts the Mother, who is represented by a wooden effigy.

MAGUIRE turns and fires the hand-bellows into the drawer -- or at the drawer, turns away, finds THE SISTER'S shoe looking up at him. Scissors gleaming: he puts out a foot, turns over the shoe, stares, turns away, makes for THE MOTHER.

He would speak to her but--

He goes to her right ear, blows into it, makes to speak to her.

He can't do it.

As diversion: rag from the pocket, compulsive touch-up for the face of THE MOTHER: he moves back to look at that: okay.

He approaches the right ear again.

He stutters before it.

Gives up on that.

Moves in, clutches THE MOTHER, leans his head on her shoulder: with his fist he beats her breast.

Slowly, mechanically, the fist beats at the breast of THE MOTHER.

Fade Out. ³⁶

This example of how MacIntyre wrote this play tends to show how every possible movement and gesture were realised before coming to rehearsal. It goes a long way to prove Michael Harding's insistence that "MacIntyre's scripts were fully

³⁶ Rehearsal Script. p35.



Figure Fourteen. Bríd Ní Neachtain, Joan Sheeny and Michele Forbes in *The Great Hunger*, 1986.

realised". What is also shown in the extract is how MacIntyre's talents as a prose writer are adapted to the process. "Because the plays were so non-verbal", comments Harding, "people imagined they were lacking scripts."³⁷ In viewing the work as a member of the audience, such assumptions would be justified: in such an image based play the idea that any writing more poetic than simple technical directions would be hard to believe. Fintan O'Toole states a long held belief on the writing behind *The Great Hunger* and the other plays: "MacIntyre's scripts don't make any sense. You don't run out and buy them to read: they are not a readable piece of work, like the plays of Friel."³⁸ What is seen in the quoted extract, however, is that MacIntyre's scripts make for compulsive reading. The choice of words and the selection of different lines to emphasise a building of tension demonstrate a clever use of language. As Harding states: "They were very beautiful scripts. They comprised mostly of stage directions, but these long descriptions, in relation to gesture and movement, read like poems".³⁹ Such expert control of language, making for a compulsive read, is demonstrated with even more emphasis, in Scene Two, where Maguire first unveils The Mother.

MAGUIRE'S approach is circuitous. He delays to see if there's water in the Big Black Kettle. He takes the bucket and spills water into it... but he's pulled towards THE MOTHER.... he circles THE MOTHER. THE SISTER has entered, down stage right: she is unknown to MAGUIRE and is observing. Her position is that of sardonic observer/accomplice. MAGUIRE becomes aware of her, now. A current from her spurs him on... what is he to do? At once panicky and decisive, he advances on THE MOTHER. He tugs the cord several times, but the veil won't come clear. THE SISTER advances, boldly and swoops with her scissors. *Snip*. The veil becomes clear.⁴⁰

The short sentences building on one another, slowly revealing a picture of tension. The arrival of the Sister, distracting the focus. The power derived from the two of them. The economy of words -- "snip" -- to reveal the simple victory. Clearly a

³⁷ Harding. 30 July 1992.

³⁸ Fintan O'Toole. Interviewed in Dublin, 28 August 1991.

³⁹ Harding. 30 July 1992.

⁴⁰ Rehearsal Script p8.

poet is at work, committed as much to the first individual area of what John Arden calls the "dual structure" of playwriting, as to a second communal area.⁴¹

On the evidence of these extracts from the script presented to the actors on the first day of rehearsal, the job of the production team was one of mere dramaturgical development, rather than all out collaboration. Many changes were made to this script before the play met an audience, but in the main, these changes were instigated to realise better the already defined script. In allowing the majority of these changes to take place, therefore, MacIntyre was no more guilty of losing control than any writer used to natural developments of the rehearsal room.

By comparing the 1983 rehearsal script with a version published in 1988, one discovers that the bulk of the original remains intact. The majority of the characters are still employed for the same intentions and although the prologue in the rehearsal version is cut, the published version still retains the same scenes. The majority of changes made in the newer version tend to show that simple tightening has taken place. This process is demonstrated by referring to sections in the published version, that correspond to the extracts in the rehearsal script that have already been sited. The climax to Act One, where Maguire beats the breast of the Mother, is seen at the end of Scene Eight in the published version. While the rest of the scene that precedes this action is slimmed down, the slow acknowledgement of the Mother remains. When Maguire is left on his own, the remainder of the scene is described thus:

MAGUIRE rouses himself. He clutches THE MOTHER, leans his head on her shoulder. With his fist he beats her breast, slowly, mechanically, the fist beats on the breast of THE MOTHER.⁴²

These actions are all that is needed to convey the sense of frustration Maguire feels for the Mother. An economic control has been brought to bare, but the intention remains.

⁴¹ See Introduction, footnote 18.

⁴² *The Great Hunger*. p52.

In the scene in which the Mother is revealed, the same sense of economy prevails:

MARY ANNE [the name used for the Sister] arrives down stage left carrying a large black kettle and an enamel bucket containing water. She stares at MAGUIRE who's still down stage right. MAGUIRE responds by crossing to the MOTHER and making an irritated attempt to loosen the cord which binds the cover about her. MARY ANNE turns her back on him, faces upstage. The two share another look. MAGUIRE approaches the MOTHER. A second time claws at the cord. Fails to loosen it. MARY ANNE intervenes, sweeps towards him with scissors aloft, snips. Returns to her position, again gives her back to the proceedings.⁴³

Even the more obvious changes in the new version tend to demonstrate a dramaturgical approach, rather than an intent to devise and explore new ideas. The published version shows that at some point in the process, several characters have been cut. The Fairies and The Tourist, seen at regular intervals throughout the rehearsal version, tend to have their contributions given to the more established characters. In the case of the Fairies, the lines and intentions are given to the female characters, particularly The School Girl. The women in the play tend to torment Maguire, much in the same way as the Fairies. By cutting the Fairies, the focus and meaning behind the torment is clarified. The intentions do not change, but the theatrical method of demonstrating them has been sharpened. The fact that, in the main, the process adopted during rehearsals was aimed at serving the intentions of the playwright, was very obvious to the team involved. As Tom Hickey states:

If you were to look at the final result, after all that had gone on, the sequence might not be the same, the details might not be the same, but it was remarkable how the centre of it was the same.⁴⁴

What Hickey has stressed continually is that to a modern actor or director, the process used to explore MacIntyre's scripts was not particularly unique. What the actor was doing in MacIntyre's work was very similar to his or her approach in other playwright's work. In an interview with *The Irish Times*, Hickey makes this point about MacIntyre's work, in relation to Friel.

⁴³ *The Great Hunger*. p37.

⁴⁴ Hickey. 5 April 1991.

It all comes down to the same thing in the end. On opening night I'm still performing a text, whatever Tom may have added to it during rehearsal. Likewise with Friel, the character may be there on the page but I have to lift [it] off that page and present him to an audience. Nothing is taken for granted in any script.⁴⁵

Changes were made in the rehearsal process, however, that prove that MacIntyre's original intentions were not always to remain sacred. Tom Hickey was to play both the Poet and Maguire, representing both the external and internal preoccupations within Kavanagh's vision. By cutting the poet, a considerable change has been made. As the process went on, it is obvious that the focus of the work was removed from a consciousness of the original source. Tom Hickey comments on this change:

The initial idea was to represent both the story of *The Great Hunger* and Kavanagh himself. The Poet was an original character, but we all felt that such a split focus reduced the strength of the personality of Maguire. This decision was taken after a degree of workshopping: the poet never seemed to work on-stage.⁴⁶

This constitutes a contribution made by the company as a whole. Rather than undermining the work of the playwright, however, this change strengthens the commitment made by the company to MacIntyre's specific concerns. If the Poet had remained, then the company would have been determined to root its structure within the vision of the man who had written the poem, rather than in the vision of the man who had determined the theatricality of the piece. Understanding the nature of this change not only underlines the continual importance of MacIntyre's writing, but also demonstrates how he was prepared to go further: to trust, almost totally, the theatrical process and to commit himself to a total playwright's relationship with the theatre.

What is becoming clear is that if MacIntyre was to allow himself the luxury of creating images which corresponded to his intuitive understanding of Kavanagh's poem, he must have been equally prepared to allow the actors and

⁴⁵*Irish Times*, 15 January 1991.

⁴⁶ Hickey. 5 April 1991.

director the same luxury. The initial vision was only the way in to the work: the rehearsal process enabled it to develop fully.

This explanation is not meant to contradict the idea that MacIntyre's writing was central to the work. It is merely meant to show how, in a theatre where the image is of equal importance to the word, a greater development of meaning is required. While the overall principle of actor realising the truth behind the script is identical in both the work of MacIntyre and of Friel, it is obvious that where communication is sought from a dimension that, by definition, cannot be communicated on paper, the actor -- and the actor's approach -- will take on greater importance.

Through the working process, adopting the working vocabulary of "verbal score" and "physical score",⁴⁷ the company made an important discovery. When trying to animate MacIntyre's scripts, the traditional relationship between actor and playwright was turned on its head. Normally the playwright provides the motive and the meaning, and then the actor finds an image to communicate the intention. In this work the Playwright was providing the image, created in his own mind, from his own interpretation of the poem and the actor was encouraged to find his or her own meaning, having been given the image. This process meant that the communication would remain instinctive: the playwright providing a through-line of image rather than a through-line of meaning. It was the actors' responsibility to draw on the meaning determined by their individual characters.

Tom Hickey states:

It was impossible to obey formally the stage directions, simply as directives. They had to be tied into the way the character was interacting. We had to define the emotional direction within the figures we were portraying: to find an emotional and imaginative logic for ourselves.⁴⁸

The development from initial images towards an understanding and meaning derived from experimentation with the images can again be identified by

⁴⁷ Terms adopted during the rehearsal process. Commented upon by Mason, 30 July 1992.

⁴⁸ Hickey, 5 April 1991.

comparing scenes in the rehearsal script with those in the published script. Much of the economy used in the stage directions of the published version could be put down to the fact that they are describing meaning, brought to light during the rehearsal process, rather than the careful ambiguity of initial images as they appear in the rehearsal script. A clear example of this is found at the beginning of Scene Four: the first of several scenes depicting a religious service. The scene opens with a procession of all the major characters. In both versions the procession is preceded by "a spring moment of release", with brilliant lighting and "flitters of bird song",⁴⁹ but when it comes to describing the actions of those in the procession, the two versions vary. The rehearsal script goes into tremendous detail regarding the specific actions, but fails to suggest what the actions are suppose to represent.

The players - in possession of branches - move about. The green branch is magic. Each of the players, an individual way of dealing with it. e.g.: THE SCHOOL GIRL squeezes it again and again, raises the hand again and again to drink the incense. THE SISTER keeps returning to the pile and selecting another branch. AGNES strokes the branch softly against her face, her breasts, her thighs. MAGUIRE stands still with the branch extended in his hand.⁵⁰

In the published version, the scene and the actions are exactly the same, but less detailed description is employed. In its place is characterization.

All the players enter and take possession of branches. The green branch is magic. For each, an individual way of dealing with it. MAGUIRE is ecstatic, MARY ANNE severe. THE SCHOOL GIRL is rapt, squeezing the leaves, raising her hand to drink the odours; AGNES lies down laughing, strokes the branches against thighs, breasts, face...⁵¹

What is demonstrated is that during the rehearsal process employed in-between these versions, the actors have explored the images suggested by MacIntyre and have found meaning for the images in the context of their characters. In writing the published version, MacIntyre accepts the extra level of creation and without

⁴⁹ Rehearsal Script, p16. *The Great Hunger*, p42.

⁵⁰ Rehearsal script. p16.

⁵¹ *The Great Hunger*. p42.

distorting his original intentions, makes the description of the scene more clear and economic.

There are times when the theatrical imagery and, therefore, MacIntyre's acceptance of collaborative communication goes far deeper. The more total the theatrical image, in isolation to character interaction, the less inclined MacIntyre is to determine meaning: even in the published version. There is no tightening of the wording, to describe images such as the "simulated" masturbation⁵² or the inverted crucifix on the gate.⁵³ Such images are considered above explanation: so powerful, they demand that each individual member of the audience responds and experiences in their own way. Such moments tend further to underline MacIntyre's almost complete immersion into total theatrical exploration.

In summation, therefore, MacIntyre was prepared to commit himself to a theatrical form beyond the usual literary-based preoccupations of a normal theatre writer, because of his understanding of the needs of image-based theatre. What has been demonstrated is that the company involved in this work defined new roles for themselves. Up to a point, therefore, the process allowed for the informality of free-for-all collaboration. As Hickey points out: "In this process, Patrick sometimes became the writer, Tom the director and so, we all got mixed in together."⁵⁴ In itself, this process demonstrated MacIntyre's commitment as writer to a total involvement in theatre, but his integrity as a playwright is underlined by the fact that the complexity of the exploration demanded an understanding of the redefinition of roles beyond mere collaboration. In this redefinition, MacIntyre's contribution as writer was vital.

In effect, MacIntyre's role was to present to the company his personal and instinctive vision of the starting material, written in precise, yet ambiguous detail. From these ideas taken out of context of the starting material, the company

⁵² *The Great Hunger*. p39.

⁵³ *The Great Hunger*. p57.

⁵⁴ Hickey. 5 April 1991.

responded in turn, with instinctive exploration, providing at certain times a universality of meaning that could be acknowledged as such when writing the published version of the play. At other times, however, the process of ambiguous meaning was continued with undefined imagery being presented to the audience for their own personal understanding.

The Great Hunger was no longer the possession of Kavanagh, but it was also no longer MacIntyre's possession either. The writer accepted that because it was communicated through theatrical form, the play was the possession of the actor: a principle common to all theatre but rarely accepted by the playwright.

In the examination of the process used to create *The Great Hunger*, what one discovers is that the two main principles of playwright's theatre have been achieved. MacIntyre's script was essential to the process, but its use was tied in with a complete theatrical exploration, that went beyond the usual structuralist intentions, demanded by the traditional theatre writer. This process was given the chance to evolve because the second principle of a playwright's theatre had been accepted: the play was created by a team that had been determined by a united sense of purpose, focused on the playwright's ideas. But for a true playwright's theatre to evolve, this united team would have to be in existence beyond the period of one project.

If the theatre is to develop the ideas of individual playwrights then those involved with the theatre have to make a commitment beyond one project. If the playwright's team changes from project to project, the work has to start from scratch each time, meaning that the total theatrical experiment is limited. In the case of MacIntyre's work, there was an active need for such continuation. The realisation of his theatrical ideas were as yet unclear. After the presentation of *The Great Hunger*, the process may have been discovered, but it was not defined or fully acknowledged.

It was natural because of the lack of familiarity with this principle that much of the press reaction would find the play's ambiguity somewhat confusing.

The majority of the critical comment concerned itself with the task of associating the version of *The Great Hunger* on stage at the Peacock, with the version already familiar: Kavanagh's poem. Gerry Colgan, for the *Irish Times*, reread the poem to familiarise himself with the work, but "even with that head start, there were scenes that left me bemused and points of departure from the poem that were difficult to follow".⁵⁵ Colgan's point of reference is clear: he felt comfortable with the work, only when it resembled a rational representation of the poem. A similar attitude is expressed by Desmond Rushe in the *Irish Independent*. "What would the honest Mr. Kavanagh think?", asks Rushe and suggests, "That Mr. MacIntyre's *Great Hunger* is parasitical is indisputable. That it smacks of a pretension more close to the adapter's self-indulgence than to the originator's genius is a moot point."⁵⁶ In the *Sunday Independent* (reviewer not named), Rushe's question is repeated and a series of rhetorical questions are used to determine the extent of disapproval. "Would he [Kavanagh] be bewildered by the pretentious symbolism? Or by the long, pregnant silences? The mime and giggling girls? The lack of poetry?"⁵⁷

Up to a point, what one discovers in the press reaction to *The Great Hunger* is a lack of familiarity with the form, but not all of the comments can be put down to ignorance. The critics' reference to the poem highlights a confusion in the external presentation of *The Great Hunger*. Throughout the period of preparation, MacIntyre insisted that "all the words spoken on stage in *The Great Hunger* are taken from Kavanagh's poem".⁵⁸ Kavanagh is acknowledged in publicity and programme, his name being as prominent as MacIntyre's. The link between the two writers is stressed, with Dermot Healy, in his programme note, again drawing attention to the Monaghan/Cavan link. Healy goes further, over-stressing the link between the intentions of the dramatic version and the poem.

⁵⁵ *Irish Times*, 11 May 1983.

⁵⁶ *Irish Independent*, 11 May 1983.

⁵⁷ *Sunday Independent*, 15 May 1983.

⁵⁸ *Sunday Independent*, 15 May 1983.

"Patrick Kavanagh knew that a few words of his people could command attention beyond their borders -- in what's left unsaid, avoided for the sake of decency, or rudely exaggerated."⁵⁹ Kavanagh may well have realised the silence of his people, but he chose to examine this lack of communication through traditional poetic language. While such close association between the traditional poem and the material presented on stage is stressed, then the doubts of the critics seem justified.

What has been made clear by the examination of the process used to create the play is that by the time *The Great Hunger* was put in front of an audience, the focus for the actors' interaction had moved a long way from the original poem. The fact that the publicity for the play stresses the link with Kavanagh tends to suggest, therefore, that the process used to create the play was not fully realised at the beginning of rehearsals. Such ongoing development is of course justified, but without a complete redefinition and clarification of intent, the critics' confusion seems understandable.

As in *Find The Lady*, MacIntyre had used an external source for *The Great Hunger*. The advantage in such association is that there is always a reference point to return to, but in the former play, that focus had been mythical: no clearly defined narrative was in existence to confuse the audience about the extent of adaptation. With a rigidly conceived fiction, published in an exact form, as starting point for a play, there will always be the preoccupation with the extent and integrity of adaptation. To limit further the chances of clear understanding, MacIntyre did not focus in on one particular theme or detail within Kavanagh's poem. The intention was to explore all the themes of the poem and to try and realise, in image form, the major scenes within the poem. In spite of the success in creating exciting and engaging theatre, based clearly on the poem, therefore,

⁵⁹ Programme Note, *The Great Hunger*, 9 May 1983.

MacIntyre and the team at the Abbey had still to clarify the relationship between aim and execution.

Considering that *The Great Hunger* was the first project for this particular team, working in a form that is, by definition, complex, then such problems are expected. What I shall try to demonstrate in the next section of this chapter is how the clarity and depth of the work developed from project to project. What is revealed is the extent to which the company was able to develop the skills and ideas of a playwright beyond the aims of a specific play.

The Bearded Lady and *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney*, the next two plays in the series, represent a clear development of the intentions of the playwright: the first tends to clarify the form; the second explores the deeper relationship between form and theme.

On 10 September 1984, *The Bearded Lady*, by Tom MacIntyre, opened in the Peacock Theatre. A play about Dean Swift and the conflict between intellect and emotion, it intended to confront the whole issue of rational meaning as its central theme. It was clear from the start that this play was intended to be associated with *The Great Hunger*. Every cast member of *The Great Hunger* also had a part in *The Bearded Lady*. Tom Hickey, who had played the leading part in the former play, was to play the part of Swift. Dermot Healy continued to examine this style of work as part of the publicity for the production.⁶⁰ This was meant to be an ongoing exploration. The prophetic critic, Fintan O'Toole, who had been quick to acknowledge the ongoing contribution to playwriting made by Dowling and McCarthy,⁶¹ was also decisive in identifying the clear association between these plays.

The Bearded Lady is best seen, not as an end in itself, but as part of a continuing process, the development in Ireland of what might be called 'the theatre of the image'.⁶²

⁶⁰ Programme Note, *The Bearded Lady*, 10 September 1984.

⁶¹ See Chapter Four.

⁶² *The Sunday Tribune*, 16 September 1984.



Figure Fifteen. Tom Hickey (and friend!) in *The Bearded Lady*, by Tom MacIntyre. Peacock Theatre, September 1984.

The message to the audience, therefore, was that they were to experience more of the same. And yet, there were developments, both simple and complex, that proved the intention to develop an understanding of the process. In the first instance, it was obvious that the confidence of the team had risen, because there were more people involved in the process. There were seventeen members of cast, as opposed to six in *The Great Hunger*, meaning that some actors were going to have to be introduced to the methodology. It also meant that a wider contribution, with fresh ideas, was going to be introduced to the work. Two people, Michele Forbes and Dermot Moore, joined the team, who were to continue as members of the core team, for the remainder of the series of plays.

Creating a larger cast tends to be the first development made by anyone experimenting with image-based or physical theatre. The obvious advantage is that there can be an increase in the actual extent of spectacle. With Vincent O'Neill promoted to movement director, the company were successful in energising the interaction on stage beyond the static gesturing of Patrick Maguire and his associates. In the attempt to represent the schizoid personality of Swift, the company transformed the stage with a battle between the indulgent 'Yahoos' and the rational 'Houyhnhnms', that exploded with an energy not seen in *The Great Hunger*. The increase in spectacle was certainly to contribute to a more favourable critical reaction, but the company was not pampering to the popularist whims of the press. All images were still rooted in the ideas and vision of Tom MacIntyre. Nor had these ideas remained static. Further to the more obvious development of spectacle was the determination to find a starting point that would not confuse the relationship between source and actual content.

This time, MacIntyre had chosen as a starting point a particular theme from the source material. The focus may be the life of Swift and his relationship with the real and fantastic influences that he encountered, but the reasons for this focus were rooted less in a general interest in Swift and more in a specific theme and belief held by him. The play concentrates on Swift's theme in *Gulliver's*

Travels, identified in *Theatre Ireland* by Joe McMinn, as being that "his life-long belief in reason was a waste of energy".⁶³ In concentrating on this theme, it seems that MacIntyre was determined to make clear the instinctive level on which to approach this work: an intention that was assisted by Dermot Healy, with a defined programme note.

This theatre seeks not meaning but recognition, not penetration but a glancing blow. The dictates of reason are a miserable crew, are merely the ploys of the conscience.⁶⁴

Healy's statement is a clear reference to both theme and form.

This particular theme identified the intent of the work, but by concentrating on an individual theme, as a point of principle, also gave MacIntyre the chance to develop content beyond the restrictions of an isolated source. The play still had a control -- the theme -- but the content could be anything that served that control. *The Bearded Lady*, therefore, was not an adaptation of, say, *Gulliver's Travels*, it was not an historical representation of the life and loves of Swift, but a collage of any aspect of Swift's existence that demonstrated the theme. This gave historians and literary critics, like Joe McMinn, a biographer of Swift, the opportunity to experience the force of the play, without insisting on rational accuracy. McMinn comments:

At the risk of sounding rational, what is the play about? It is, in my opinion, certainly not about Swift. At least not Swift in history. It is about a particular and popular myth which surrounds Swift that he was driven insane by self-control.⁶⁵

This development from *The Great Hunger* was made by MacIntyre in isolation. It proves that he was determined to clarify his approach to theatre and this intent was certainly due to his experience and identification of the difficulties in the former play. It also demonstrates how MacIntyre was still in control of the starting point of the project. What is more interesting, with reference to playwright's theatre, however, is the extent of development, both in theme and

⁶³ "The Bearded Lady". Joe McMinn. *Theatre Ireland* 7. Autumn 1984.

⁶⁴ Programme Note. *The Bearded Lady*. 10 September 1984.

⁶⁵ *Theatre Ireland* 7. Autumn 1984.

approach, brought about through the rehearsal process. What is seen by examining the script for *The Bearded Lady* is the extent to which MacIntyre has grown more confident about the collaborative approach.

As with *The Great Hunger*, MacIntyre presented a well structured rehearsal script to the cast. Unlike the original play, however, this script remained more or less intact as basis for the actual performance.⁶⁶ This is not to say that MacIntyre, through understanding better the form of theatre, was less prepared for experimentation. On the contrary, he was more confident with the experimentation, better able to see the possibilities of the ongoing realisation of image and, so, wrote the script with a flexibility that would allow for this.

The text in the script, therefore, is laid out with an authority that demonstrates a clearer understanding of the rules defined during the earlier work. In the opening scene of the play, we are introduced to Swift as a nervous, alert, yet dominant force in the play. As with *The Great Hunger* script, MacIntyre refuses to explain or decide the meaning behind the communication, but attempts merely to suggest a series of words and gestures, that might create an interesting image. What is different in this script, however, is the way the structure of the page clearly demonstrates the understanding of the method.

The first page, describing Swift's possible actions, is divided into two: the top half is for the verbal score, the bottom is for the gestural score. This subdivision of the directions, demonstrates that MacIntyre is using the particular vocabulary that was adopted during the rehearsals for *The Great Hunger*. At the start of the verbal score, MacIntyre writes: "Have him play with the following as action begins to develop."⁶⁷ This demonstrates his understanding of the importance of the actor's creative process. The script abounds with similar shorthand. In the same scene, he writes "orchestrate in rehearsal", when Swift starts to

⁶⁶ Rehearsal Script supplied by the Abbey Theatre, with permission from Tom MacIntyre. Cross referenced with video of production, supplied by the Abbey Theatre.

⁶⁷ Rehearsal Script. p 1.

interact with other characters.⁶⁸ There are continual commands to "have him play with his gestural score", while at the point of climax to Act One -- an example of the riotous spectacle within the play -- MacIntyre makes "suggestions" as to possible actions, but never imposes precise details.⁶⁹ MacIntyre is making way for dramaturgical development, rather than having the dramaturgy imposed, in order to clarify the communication.

There are further examples of the creative methodology being acknowledged in the script. Each scene has a subtitle. Scene One is 'Rats in the Bed'; Scene Two, 'The Weather Forecast'; Scene Three, 'The Yahoos Invade', and so on. MacIntyre used the occasional title, when writing his previous scripts, but never as consistently as he does here. The intention seems to be that by giving a name or phrase to the section, he enables the actors to identify an overall focus for the scene. Again the use of short-hand is instigated to allow greater freedom in experiment, while rooting it in a simple yet clear intention.

Perhaps the most interesting technique used in the writing of *The Bearded Lady*, demonstrating that MacIntyre is not only prepared to accept the creative contribution of the actor, but actively to encourage it, is seen at the beginning of Scene Two. A scene that involves all the central characters, MacIntyre divides it up, to make three centres of action. The description for each of these centres of action goes into tremendous detail, similar in style to the writing of *The Great Hunger*. MacIntyre imposes the images, with precision and yet saves himself from the danger of imposed meaning, by the nature of the structure for the scene. While control is imposed to the sections of the scene in isolation, by putting them together and exploring "possible relationships between the three",⁷⁰ MacIntyre is allowing the natural fusion between the three sections, to become the unified communication.

⁶⁸ Rehearsal Script. p4.

⁶⁹ Rehearsal Script. p60.

⁷⁰ Rehearsal Script. p9.

Through liberating the creative process from the burden of implied adaptation and by defining clearly the rules of collaboration, MacIntyre allowed a far more assured and confident piece of image drama to evolve. By getting a second chance to create a similar kind of drama, using the same cast and production team, MacIntyre developed the methodology of his particular style of theatre in a way not open to the majority of playwrights working in a more traditional, freelance structure for programming theatre.

The confidence and clarity in *The Bearded Lady* was reflected in the growing recognition and enthusiasm within the press. The enthusiastic response from all the critics demonstrated not only a clear understanding of the general theme, but also an ease in accepting the form. Peter Thompson, in *The Irish Press*, wrote:

On one level, this is theatre, a play about Dean Swift, and the conflict of flesh and mind within the great writer. But it is also a circus, a cartoon strip, a cinema in technicolour of ideas of haunted dreams and neurotic fantasy, brilliantly realised by the director, Patrick Mason.⁷¹

John Finegan wrote in the *Evening Herald*:

In MacIntyre's dramatisation the nightmare engulfs the man completely as in a series of powerful images, he is caught between his fearful creations, the brutish yahoos and the horses with human reason called the houyhnhnms in the fourth voyage of Gulliver.⁷²

David Nowlan, who had been one of the first to acknowledge the tentative experiments made by MacIntyre in *Find The Lady*, demonstrated the extent of his own education in this form, with an assured and commanding review in *The Irish Times*.

At the most basic of its several satisfying layers it can be taken as a biography of the inside of Jonathan Swift's head. But it is a great deal more than that. In a sweeping series of images and ideas, words, movements, moods and actions, each fleetingly intermingled with the other, it explores, in an explosion of the imagination, man's struggle with himself and the conflict between his ambitions and his desires. Now it flies upwards. Then it descends. The sublime and the venal are in direct and confused confrontation.⁷³

⁷¹ *Irish Press*, 12 September 1984.

⁷² *Evening Herald*, 11 September 1984.

⁷³ *Irish Times*, 11 September 1984.

The reputation of MacIntyre's Theatre-of-the-Image was firmly established. With it, came an assurance in the process that enabled the playwright to explore with confidence and security the true depths of his theatrical imagination.

In *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney*, which opened at the Peacock Theatre on 9 September 1985, the process used to explore the ideas, was the same as that established and consolidated during the rehearsals for *The Bearded Lady*. By this point, the fact that there was a specific group working on this particular style of work was being realised and acknowledged by all the critics.⁷⁴ The methodology used to create the drama was, by now, clearly understood and Dermot Healy, in the programme, gave a clear outline of the intent behind the work:

There are players saying what the playwright can't and won't say, for though gestures are plotted, such humour and hints of frailty the texts call for can only be found in rehearsal.⁷⁵

Seven of the eight cast members had been involved in the previous plays in the series: so the team that started work on *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney* was no longer experimenting with an unfamiliar form. This confidence with form was taken advantage of, leading to the most complex and disturbing play in the series.

Rise Up Lovely Sweeney is a difficult play. Based on O'Keefe's *Buile Shuibhne*, MacIntyre conceived Sweeney "as an avatar of eternal Irish troubles".⁷⁶ This most terrible of Irish mythical heroes swoops in, sometimes observing, sometimes instigating the destruction of Irish identity. Sweeney is distilled with the psychological burdens of Irish preoccupation. As MacIntyre states:

Sweeney is a warrior, he's on the run, he's afflicted by a sense of grievance, the clinging flavour of defeat, remorse for violent deeds, desire for vengeance, fear of vengeance upon himself, death wishes, domestic hankerings intrude. And his tie to the land, motherland, is symbiotic.⁷⁷

By forcing this horrific, encompassing character into "a twentieth-century nightmare context",⁷⁸ onto a stage that has become a waste land of battered and

⁷⁴ See reviews, cited above.

⁷⁵ Programme Note. *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney*. 9 September 1985.

⁷⁶ Note to the Rehearsal Script of *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney*.

⁷⁷ Note in Rehearsal Script.

⁷⁸ Note in Rehearsal Script.

distorted domesticity, the company was determined to exercise its style of theatre in a deeply painful and identifiable world: a cruelty that had not been experienced in the previous plays. Patrick Mason, looking back, feels that *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney* was the most powerful and "mind blowing" of the plays produced. He continues:

The Bearded Lady was a fun piece and great to do, but with *Sweeney* we returned to the incredible 'clay' of *The Great Hunger*. But now we were more confident. The whole world seemed to vibrate more. It was the blow up, it was the blood from the boarder lands, that actually cracked it: the intensity of it. The intensity of working on the images of violence and the hunter and the hunted and this extraordinary search for healing, the whole rituals of healing. It seemed so resonant.⁷⁹

The company set out in more aggressive fashion, retaining the spectacle of *The Bearded Lady*, but reacting against the joyous celebration in the previous work. The company built on its earlier findings, both in technique and in actual images. There were examples of the ongoing use of split focus, and separate centres of action,⁸⁰ while at times, MacIntyre chose to refer, within the script, to specific images used during *The Bearded Lady*.⁸¹ The team was using what they needed from their earlier work, but they were far more prepared to direct their focus, concentrating on clarifying the theme and communication.

Rise Up Lovely Sweeney controls the images in a way not seen before. There is continual juxtaposition, of the wildness of "the whipping aggression"⁸² determined through the panic of the unknown, of the cold interrogation and controlled searching⁸³ that builds up the tension, in a very deliberate way. The interaction of the actor with the props takes on a greater menace. A particularly harsh example is the use of a child's dress, referred to several times with a sense of tense suspicion⁸⁴ and finally dismantled with an aggression that suggests

⁷⁹ Mason. 30 July 1992.

⁸⁰ Scene Three.

⁸¹ Rehearsal Script. p74.

⁸² Note to Rehearsal Script, Scene One.

⁸³ Rehearsal Script. p 2.

⁸⁴ Scene 8.

mutilation.⁸⁵ If any doubt remains, the scene is called 'The Dismembered Child'.⁸⁶ The use of sound in this play develops further, beyond dialogue, the idea of fusion between the physical and verbal scores. The usual collage of words and phrases is controlled and multiplied, both through more active participation⁸⁷ and through the use of amplification.⁸⁸ Further to the increased use of sound is the introduction of video. This new dimension, giving life to beautiful and powerful images, such as the development of Sweeney from child to old man and back again,⁸⁹ contributes to the brutality of intent with a modern directness that allows for and deliberately encourages a look and feel, beyond that possible on the stage.

The greater totality and fusion of images and the wider methods used for presentation of images led to a more demanding and complete attack on the senses. There was a directness, a coldness, a determination to shock, that demonstrates a reaction against the prettiness of *The Bearded Lady*. MacIntyre had, once again, been given the chance to experiment further, leading to a production that was to represent the closest the company came to realising the full theatrical potential of image drama. Dermot Healy stressed: "The collaboration between actors, writer and director in this production is at its most lucid, humorous and intimate."⁹⁰ As well as finding it to be the most engaging production, Mason remembers it as the best.⁹¹ Michael Harding, who was to have his first play produced by the Abbey, two years later,⁹² was influenced greatly by *Sweeney* and, looking back, identifies the depth of the play's attempts to deal with Irish psyche.

The play moved me more than any other. I was living on the border at the time and *Sweeney* dealt with that whole area of the gunman and the strange insanity of the gunman: his ego, being carried aloft, up a tree, like

⁸⁵ Scene 14, Rehearsal Script. p78.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Scene 4.

⁸⁸ Scene 2.

⁸⁹ Scene 2.

⁹⁰ "Let the Hare Sit", Dermot Healy. *Theatre Ireland* 11. Autumn 1985.

⁹¹ Mason. 30 July 1992.

⁹² *Strawboys*. Directed by Tom Hickey, 29 July 1987.

Sweeney, but in the strange tree that holds the ego, because its of the gunman, with the resonance of sexuality, of power, of infamy. Here was a writer finding a style to voice the psyche; determined to root for the feelings of Irishness unattainable in naturalism.⁹³

With such a demanding and powerful production, it was inevitable that critical reaction would be mixed. David Nowlan felt that "... we do not lift off with Sweeney. The collective experience on stage does not spread, except momentarily, to take its audience with it".⁹⁴ Peter Thompson believed that "the result on this occasion has been chaos".⁹⁵ John Finegan, however was to appreciate the strength of theatricality, that determined the play's integrity.

Despite the obscurities of the text, the presentation holds one's interest in a grip that never relaxes, as in my cast I sought for two hours to get into shape in my mind the startling, scudding, fragmented images conjured up by director and dramatist. Nothing quite like this has previously been seen on the Dublin stage.⁹⁶

Nothing quite like this was to be seen again on the Dublin stage. *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney* was to represent the high point of this series of productions, at least in relation to the development of the playwright's experimentation. MacIntyre had been given the chance to develop the methodology used in *The Great Hunger*, which determined his credentials as a playwright with a complete theatrical intent, beyond the clarification process of *The Bearded Lady*, to the point where clarity of theme and form were at one. The fact that the next project by the group was a revival of *The Great Hunger*, to re-examine the play given the advances made, meant that the time had come for reflection, rather than onward exploration.

Through the 1986 production of *The Great Hunger*, followed by the exciting, but shallow *Dance for your Daddy*, the work by this company was consolidated, but not advanced. Through the final production, *Snow White*, the work was halted.

⁹³ Harding, 30 July 1992.

⁹⁴ *Irish Times*, 10 September 1985.

⁹⁵ *Irish Press*, 10 September 1985.

⁹⁶ *Evening Herald*, 10 September 1985.

Dance for your Daddy, opening on 2 March 1987, was an accessible presentation on the relationship between Father and Daughter. It responded to the observation made by Dermot Healy, on *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney*, that "they have exhausted the theme of the loneliness of the male".⁹⁷ In making such a response, MacIntyre was demonstrating his confidence in applying this form to identify and illuminate wider issues. Through the greater necessity for interaction demanded by a play that examines relationships, together with the more obvious images of sexual cross-over and the command the company had over the theatrical vocabulary, it meant that there was an ease in the process, not experienced in the previous plays. In one way, therefore, it was the most enjoyable to produce, as Mason states: "Like *The Bearded Lady*, it was great fun and it was very spectacular. There was cross-dressing, cabaret scenes, party scenes: the whole thing was a celebration."⁹⁸

Critical reaction was favourable for this accessible production. John Finegan commented that "... it is a nightmare of eye-catching brilliance, superbly directed by Patrick Mason and acted with almost unbelievable concentration and timing by the cast of eight".⁹⁹ David Nowlan believed that it was "absolutely not to be missed" and stressed that "this is one of those theatrical occasions when only the eyes and the ears should be open so that the sights and sounds can be allowed to impinge, sans censor, on the mind and the feelings".¹⁰⁰ But even in some of these favourable reviews there were rumblings of doubt regarding the lack of innovation. Desmond Rushe commented: "In terms of a theatrical experience, it is fascinating stuff despite the fact that the novelty of the approach has vanished."¹⁰¹ Tim Harding went further, believing that "it is both the most entertaining of the four [previous plays], but also the shallowest and least

⁹⁷ *Theatre Ireland* 11.

⁹⁸ Mason. 30 July 1992.

⁹⁹ *Evening Herald*, 3 March 1987.

¹⁰⁰ *Irish Times*, 3 March 1987.

¹⁰¹ *Irish Independent*, 3 March 1987.

structured".¹⁰² What Harding implies, in his review, is that the comedy ("for that is essentially what this show is"), was determined from a rather obvious imposition of the form. He continues:

To those involved in creating this set of plays, which certainly seem to arouse strong reactions for or against it may seem that they are mining a rich vein of experimental theatre which has yet to yield its richest treasures. To me the best nugget of the mine has already been produced.¹⁰³

In *Dance for your Daddy*, MacIntyre seemed to be moving away from the isolation of his own vision. This was a play imposed onto the form, proving that the style was a legitimate method of producing work with wide preoccupations, but in terms of the development of MacIntyre as a playwright, within a playwright's theatre, advancing little.

In the next production, *Snow White*, the question marks that hung over the work in *Dance for your Daddy* were magnified to a point at which the form was seen as being an end in itself. The reaction to the play's opening on 27 June 1988 perceived the production as being over indulgent and complacent. David Nowlan commented that "the techniques which this collective has made its own, while more assured than in earlier productions, are somehow less inventive than in the previous manifestations".¹⁰⁴

The reasons for the failure of this production were, in the first instance, due to a familiarity breeding contempt and a complacency breeding shallowness. Mason identifies what he calls "... a feeling in the air that enough was enough".¹⁰⁵ This attitude seems to be supported by aspects of the production that seem to demonstrate a detachment to the work. For the first time, a full-scale programme was produced. This had the air of a souvenir booklet, with a collage of photographs and programme designs from the previous shows, giving the impression of a self-satisfied acknowledgement of the importance of the work,

¹⁰² *Sunday Press*, 8 March 1987.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Irish Times*, 28 June 1988.

¹⁰⁵ Mason. 30 July 1992.

which had not been apparent in the intensity of rehearsals for the earlier manifestations. A quick glance at the programme gave the impression that a lot of the previous aspects of the work had already fallen by the wayside. Dermot Healy was no longer writing the programme notes. Monica Frawley had taken over the design of the production from Bronwen Casson. Only Tom Hickey from the original team remained, with Conal Kearney and Vincent O'Neill very noticeable in their absence.

The absences broke the focus that had been brought about by a continued association. This was no longer a group working as a playwright's theatre: instead MacIntyre and Mason had returned to the usual freelance selection of actors. This lack of focus was accentuated by a lack of intensity that had been determined within the earlier work by MacIntyre's insistence of a singular vision. The theme for *Snow White* was a continuation of the nature of close relationships that had been central to *Dance for your Daddy*. As with the former play, the movement away from the singular brought a fragmentation to the work: as Patrick Mason comments, "the more generalised the work became, the more we got into the area of gender conflict, the male and female conflict, the more false it felt. You got less resonance and you got less appeal".¹⁰⁶

What becomes clear is that the slow break-up of this work was due, in part, to the natural break-up of the company that had been central to the creation. As Mason stresses: "Any group, however successful, will only last up to a certain time: you may want to go beyond that, but you can't."¹⁰⁷ But this situation only goes to prove the importance of an ongoing association between playwright and actors and director in order to realise the full potential of such work. While the team remained intact, united by their sense of purpose; while the singular vision of the playwright was respected; while the theatricality of the work was determined through the rehearsal process, then MacIntyre's theatre-of-the-image

¹⁰⁶ Mason. 30 July 1992.

¹⁰⁷ Mason. 30 July 1992.

could continue. When these three principles were lost, so was the integrity of the work. MacIntyre's plays at the Abbey demanded a playwright's theatre.

By examining the work of MacIntyre, during the 1980s, out of the context of the political development within the Abbey, one is able to understand the possibilities of the isolated and specific development of a playwright. Such development demonstrates the dedication of certain individuals, but fails to clarify the actual contribution made by the Abbey as an institution. Does the work realised by this small team of individuals go any way to justify the Abbey as a playwright's theatre? The team of individuals, united by a specific sense of purpose, who defined this work as playwright's theatre, was by implication, removed from the repertoire that was common to the rest of the institution. With such a situation, can the Abbey take any credit for the dramaturgical realisation of this work?

In the first instance, it must be stressed that by accepting this work -- by first programming *The Great Hunger* and allowing the specific team chosen by Mason and MacIntyre to operate under its roof -- the Abbey was showing a degree of enthusiasm not seen during the earlier, less defined creations from this playwright. In the 1970s, with *Find the Lady*, the Abbey adopted an unenthusiastic or, at least, passive attitude to MacIntyre's work. As is shown in the previous chapter, however, the arrival of Dowling as Artistic Director prompted a revitalisation of enthusiasm and commitment to new drama. In spite of initial interest in the development of social realism, the rise in the profile of the Peacock Theatre, influenced by the work of Dowling and McCarthy, could only benefit MacIntyre's highly experimental company. Dowling's determination to avoid the get-out clause of the 1970s -- "its not really Abbey policy: they're doing

it down there"¹⁰⁸ -- and, therefore, destroying the barrier that prevented experimental work being seen as the mainstream meant that, by his acceptance of MacIntyre's play, he was rejecting the notion of fringe activity. Such actions underline Dowling's integrity as an Artistic Director.

In spite of a preference for naturalism in his own work, Dowling remained impartial when programming. In 1982, MacIntyre had submitted *The Great Hunger* to the Project, no doubt convinced that a venue with an experimental reputation would be more suitable for the work after the difficulties of *Find the Lady*. In spite of breaking with his old venue, MacIntyre wanted to retain his director who had been so helpful in the finding of suitable actors. Since 1977, however, Mason had been contracted to the Abbey as a resident director and the actor at the centre of the artistic plans, Tom Hickey, was also contracted to the Abbey. Mason talked to Dowling about the play and the method of work. Dowling remembers: "I didn't understand a word of it at first, it didn't make any sense to me, but I knew that we had to do it." Dowling bought the rights of the play off the Project because "I just thought that this was something that we had to be involved with".¹⁰⁹ Mason acknowledges Dowling's commitment and the importance of such commitment:

Joe was totally enthusiastic about the succession of works that came through and by his efforts to bring the Peacock into prominence, we had the National Theatre providing us, not only with material support, but with a level of credibility. I think that this was the first time this happened at the Abbey. I think that Joe got it absolutely right.¹¹⁰

Through Dowling's sense of adventure, Ireland's most established theatre became the home for the country's most experimental project.

Mason's comment on the level of credibility, brought by the association with the Abbey, is pertinent. There is little doubt that the average theatre-goer is going to acknowledge not only the work in isolation, but the relevance of the

¹⁰⁸ Joe Dowling. Interviewed in Dublin, 15 November 1991. See Chapter Five.

¹⁰⁹ Dowling. 15 November 1991.

¹¹⁰ Mason. 30 July 1992.

development from project to project by the security of an established theatre company. The team were members of "the Abbey Players",¹¹¹ rather than of an independent company using a vague name of convenience, and this entitled them to financial security, decent rehearsal facilities, more time to create the work and the best technical staff in Irish theatre.¹¹²

But the Abbey received a degree of credibility in return. The inclusion of such experimental work within the repertoire boosted their growing reputation for youthful commitment to new drama. The Abbey was to receive great praise for their association with MacIntyre's work. In his review for *The Great Hunger*, Gerald Stembridge commented that the production was "decidedly different and daringly well done. It is the sort of chance the Peacock can afford to take and should take more often".¹¹³ Lynda Henderson, in her detailed analysis of this work, under the umbrella title of 'Irish Alternatives',¹¹⁴ welcomed the Abbey as a rather "bizarre" yet valuable contributor to alternative theatre in Ireland. When the work was taken abroad, it was the company, rather than the specific individuals, that received the overall praise for the production of original work.¹¹⁵ Such acknowledgements were more than the repayment required for the institution's commitment, especially as once initial contact had been made, little more was expected of the Abbey: at least in terms of artistic contribution.

It is the low level of ongoing artistic commitment from the actual company for this work that raises question marks over defining the Abbey itself as a playwright's theatre. In accepting this work, Dowling was proving his determination to haul the Abbey Theatre into a modern era with a youthful enthusiasm for new work. In doing this, he proves that he has the impartial qualities essential for any good artistic director. It does not prove, however, that

¹¹¹ As advertised on programmes for all five productions.

¹¹² Included on the technical side of production were Tony Wakefield and Dave Nowlan, the best lighting and sound technicians in the country.

¹¹³ *Irish Press*, 11 May 1983.

¹¹⁴ *Theatre Ireland* 3.

¹¹⁵ *Glasgow Herald* 12 August 1986; *The Sunday Times*, 17 August 1986.

the Abbey was a playwright's theatre. What sets MacIntyre's work apart from the work of, say, Reid, Farrell and Donnelly, in terms of practical association with the National Theatre, is not the emphasis of Dowling's overall programming, but the level of dramaturgical responsibility the Theatre took on.

The main link between the Abbey and Reid, Farrell and Donnelly, was made through the office of the Script Editor. Sean McCarthy provided these playwrights with the necessary collaboration and support, that underlines the Abbey's attempts to become a writer's theatre. There was no association between MacIntyre and McCarthy or, later, Christopher Fitz-Simon.

It is somewhat ironic, if one accepts the identification of MacIntyre's work as playwright's theatre, that McCarthy, the man most committed to the idea of playwright's theatre within the Abbey, was not initially inclined to accept this work. It is no secret, to either MacIntyre or Mason, that the Script Editor in residence at the Abbey, at the time of *The Great Hunger's* submission, disliked the play.¹¹⁶ McCarthy has commented recently:

I didn't like MacIntyre's work at all. I felt it was pretentious and shallow. Through the development of the work, I felt that it was becoming an end in itself: it was not rooted sufficiently in its own material, but in its own pretentiousness and theatricality. I also think it was out of date.¹¹⁷

It was, perhaps, inevitable that McCarthy should have been suspicious of this work, considering his dedication to the development of a playwright's theatre through the social realisation of theatre companies within the community. MacIntyre's theatre was rooted in the imagination of the individual participants. But the acceptance of this tends to stress the limited level of contribution that could have been made to the dramaturgical development of this work.

In spite of the fact that McCarthy left the Abbey before the opening of *The Great Hunger*, the relationship between the script department and MacIntyre did not become any more active. Certainly, the incoming Script Editor, Christopher

¹¹⁶ According to McCarthy, both Mason and MacIntyre know of his opinions.

¹¹⁷ Sean McCarthy. Interviewed in Dublin 3 April 1992.

Fitz-Simon, showed greater enthusiasm. "Tom MacIntyre", he recalls, "was the most important writer at the Abbey, during the mid 80s."¹¹⁸ Tom Hickey also remembers the support given by Fitz-Simon. "Christopher was a very influential force within the Abbey, as regards to the MacIntyre work." Hickey, however, goes on to clarify that level of support: "He promoted it and supported us, but he didn't get involved with the actual process: that wasn't his role."¹¹⁹ In this instance, therefore, the Script Editor's contribution, normally the pivotal component in playwright's theatre, was no greater than that of the enthusiastic yet impartial Joe Dowling: indeed, it was no more important than the enthusiastic yet external support of Fintan O'Toole, David Nowlan and other critics.¹²⁰

Once Joe Dowling resigned in 1985,¹²¹ this enthusiasm became less obvious. Although both the immediate successors to Dowling, Tomás MacAnna and then Christopher Fitz-Simon, who took over as Artistic Director between 1986 and 1987, "didn't have any problem with the work",¹²² the rest of the institution was becoming less sympathetic. Under Dowling, the employees within the Abbey had been swept along with forceful enthusiasm, but after his resignation, and despite the personal commitment of the new Artistic Directors, the united sense of purpose started to fragment. In Tom Hickey's words: "the whole relationship between the Board and the Artistic Director was trembling and this was reflected in nervousness further down".¹²³

Both Hickey and Mason have commented on the growing suspicion and resentment within the theatre. Hickey remembers that, "to some members of the Board and to growing numbers of people within other departments, we were

¹¹⁸ Christopher Fitz-Simon. Interviewed in Dublin, 1 August 1990.

¹¹⁹ Hickey. 5 April 1991.

¹²⁰ See Chapter Six for an examination of the less intensive approach Fitz-Simon was to bring to the work of Script Editor.

¹²¹ See Chapter Six.

¹²² Hickey. 5 April 1991.

¹²³ Hickey. 5 April 1991.

regarded as the lunatics in the basement".¹²⁴ Mason tends to share this view of the internal reaction.

While there were times when reaction from individual members was very encouraging -- during the Russian Tour of *The Great Hunger*, there was a lot of support from the players in *The Field*, the play that went on tour with us -- but there were other times and other individuals who would come away with comments like "they're at it again in the basement", or "there go the lunatics from the basement". They were joking, but it was begrudging and it was patronizing.¹²⁵

Suspicion came to a head, in 1988, when *Snow White* was produced. The Abbey finally decided to withdraw support for MacIntyre's experimental work. Since then the Abbey has only produced one play by Tom MacIntyre, *Kitty O'Shea* (1990): a play with a far more traditional structure, directed on this occasion by Ben Barnes. It is worth reiterating that many of the reasons for the ending of these collaborations were due to the natural break-up of the company, leading to the failure of this show. And yet failure, in itself, should not mean automatic destruction. Tom Hickey, in contrast to Patrick Mason's view, did not see *Snow White* as the natural end of the work. "[The failure of the show] did not discourage us, it discouraged the theatre."¹²⁶ Mason tends to admit that after *Snow White*, there was an impatient pressure on MacIntyre's work: "I think that it was getting too troublesome.... there was a feeling that enough was enough."¹²⁷

The immediacy of the institution's rejection of this work, once they had an excuse of a failed production, tends to suggest that they had no understanding of the importance of this work in relation to the stated intention to produce new drama. The Artistic Director at the time was Vincent Dowling,¹²⁸ a man whose grasp of the present preoccupations of Irish theatre were somewhat lacking. Determined to show his commitment to the development of new drama, he approached Tom MacIntyre, after having seen *Snow White* and implored the

¹²⁴ Hickey. 5 April 1991.

¹²⁵ Mason. 30 July 1992.

¹²⁶ Hickey. 5 April 1991.

¹²⁷ Mason. 30 July 1992.

¹²⁸ See Chapter Six.

playwright to sit down and write a play about child abuse.¹²⁹ Whether Vincent Dowling's intention, in saying this, was to install MacIntyre with a sense of the importance of social realism or to further the themes of the former play is rather irrelevant: the result was the same. The Abbey lost its association with the most exciting theatrical work seen in Ireland during the 1980s and, with it, any further justification for being called a playwright's theatre.

This development, towards destruction, can be seen as being inevitable. While McCarthy's work in the early 1980s was diametrically opposed, in terms of style and political intent, to the work of MacIntyre during the mid 1980s, there is a valid comparison to make regarding the two distinct working practices and their external relationships with the institution that housed them. When McCarthy first started to work at the Abbey, there was a tremendous enthusiasm for what he was trying to achieve. The Board and Executive of the Theatre understood the reasoning behind his active dramaturgical policy. For a time, a specific policy was to take preference over the wider political issues that determined the Abbey's existence. In time, however, with changes of personnel and movements of Board members, the traditional Broad policy of the Theatre started to smother any attempts at specificity. With MacIntyre's work, initial enthusiasm was also encouraging, but views were to change and more central preoccupations re-asserted, leaving the experimental work isolated: down in the basement.

This isolation, however, was the very thing that determined MacIntyre's survival as a playwright within the Abbey. By getting beyond the political preoccupations of the National Theatre's policy, by being a part of the whole, only in name, the work was to survive in the Abbey for six years. It could be argued that if Sean McCarthy had taken a similar isolated position within the company, concentrating less on the transformation of a rigidly defined national theatre towards a total commitment to new drama, then his work would have continued.

¹²⁹ A story referred to by Patrick Mason and Tom Hickey, as well as Michael Harding.

As it was, the only kind of theatre that continued at the Abbey, after McCarthy's resignation, that can be defined as playwright's theatre, existed without its dramaturgical contribution. In returning, in the final chapter, to a general examination of the Abbey Theatre, from 1983 to 1990, one will see how isolated and exceptional the work of MacIntyre was in terms of National Theatre policy. MacIntyre became a playwright within a playwright's theatre, but the institution's contribution to this was limited.

Chapter Six: The Playwright and the Abbey, 1983 to the present day. Stagnation and Debate

Under its last Artistic Director, Joe Dowling, the Abbey made some attempts to broaden its perspective and to move into styles and directions more attuned to Ireland of the 1980s. It gave a platform for some of the best modern Irish writing ... and gave audiences access to new modes, in, for example, Patrick Mason's inventive production of Tom MacIntyre's *The Great Hunger* in 1983; it encouraged young directors ... to work on new texts in the experimental Peacock Theatre; finally, it encouraged new emergent playwrights through its production of new full-length and one-act plays. A former script editor, Sean McCarthy ... [has] brought into prominence the talents of Farrell, Donnelly, Reid, McGuinness and Madden.¹

Writing in 1986, Emelie FitzGibbon sums up the successes of Joe Dowling's period of artistic direction, highlighting both the work of Sean McCarthy in his association with new playwrights and the work of Tom MacIntyre and his relationship with Patrick Mason. By the mid 1980s, therefore, clear acceptance of what Fintan O'Toole had identified, in 1982, had become the norm. Joe Dowling was acknowledged as a successful artistic director, whose main contribution to the Irish theatre had been, with Sean McCarthy, to make the Abbey "the home of the living writer". There is little doubt, therefore, that when the history of the Abbey Theatre during the 1980s comes to be written Dowling and his period of office will receive prominent coverage. But the object of this concluding chapter is to examine whether the obvious success Dowling and Sean McCarthy achieved in finding a practical relationship between the Abbey and playwrights has had a positive effect on the Abbey and Irish theatre in general. What exactly has been the legacy of "the home of the living writer"?

In this chapter I argue that the effects can be seen on two levels: one immediate and somewhat negative; the other more indirect and generally positive.

¹ Emelie FitzGibbon. "All Change: Contemporary Fashions in the Irish Theatre", Masaru Sekine (ed.), *Irish Writers and the Theatre*. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1986). p34.

First, Dowling's and McCarthy's work with playwrights, within the immediate confines of the Abbey Theatre during the last ten years, has all but been forgotten. Through outlining the progress of the Abbey, from 1983 until the present day, I aim to show how the resumption of conservative control instigated a debate over the general principles of running the Theatre that pushed any consideration of specific artistic development off the agenda. Second, I examine how this debate has been conducted at the National Theatre during a period of radical change within the Irish theatre system in general. I argue that Dowling's energy and enthusiasm, as well as the specific artistic results of his approach, including the work of MacIntyre, has influenced Irish theatre at large, providing a wider theatrical environment for the development of new drama. In considering these two parallel developments in Ireland, during the last few years, I come to a conclusion on the legitimacy and value of calling the Abbey Theatre a writer's theatre.

It could be argued that the work carried out by MacIntyre, Mason and Hickey, between 1983 and 1988, within the boundaries of the National Theatre, can be seen, in itself, as a positive legacy to Dowling's "home of the living writer" work of the early eighties. As I explain in the concluding part of Chapter Five, it was Dowling that gave the specific team the freedom to explore the ideas in MacIntyre's work: an exploration that was allowed to continue in isolation after Dowling's resignation in 1985. But the increasing isolation between MacIntyre's company and the institution that housed it also tends to show how irrelevant specific experimental development was to the traditionally-minded Executive that assumed ultimate control in 1985. My final point in Chapter Five concerns the likelihood of McCarthy achieving greater success for his developmental work if he, like MacIntyre, had isolated himself from the mainstream of the Abbey. But in suggesting this, one is almost admitting the impossibility of the Abbey ever defining a clear developmental role for itself. Rather than providing hope for the future, therefore, MacIntyre's isolated and lonely stand tended to accentuate a

distinct lack of confidence and pessimism, underlined by FitzGibbon who followed up her enthusiastic reflections on Dowling's period of control with a sobering outline of the Abbey's position as it was in 1986:

At the time of writing, Joe Dowling has resigned as Artistic Director of the company, thus following a great tradition of imaginative artistic directors. The poor financial standing of the Abbey has forced the Board into a conservative position: there has been a cut-back on the number of new plays to be staged and an embargo put on the employment of 'outside' directors and designers. In essence, unacceptably stringent conditions have mitigated against artistic considerations and, ultimately, it will be the image and standards of our national theatre which will suffer².

These were prophetic remarks. From about the time FitzGibbon was writing until 1990, when the Abbey finally decided to appoint a new Artistic Director with an equal strength of character to Dowling, the National Theatre drifted from production to production with limited effect and non-existent long-term planning. Bernard Farrell, one of the writers who was to be effected, identifies this period as the "rudderless years",³ Fintan O'Toole defines the Abbey's condition from 1983 until 1990 as "the seven years of stagnation",⁴ while Tom Hickey recalls the "doubts and the frustrations and the heart-aches that destroyed the confidence and clarity of the place".⁵

On reflection, it is easy to assume that the turning point in the Abbey's fortunes was the resignation of Joe Dowling in March 1985. After 1985, through justified attempts to emphasise the importance of Joe Dowling's work at the Abbey, the Irish media tended to identify his seven year's in control as one, long period of success. FitzGibbon uses the fact that Dowling was no longer employed by the Theatre as starting point for her negative observations. But the obvious humiliation that Dowling received from the Board, the subject of so much media attention at the time, tends to override and limit consideration of the difficulties for both Dowling and Irish playwrights during the two years that preceded his resignation. As early as the beginning of 1983, there was a definite change in

2 Sekine. p34.

3 Bernard Farrell. Interviewed in Dublin, 29 August 1991.

4 Fintan O'Toole. Interviewed in Dublin, 28 August 1991.

5 Tom Hickey. Interviewed in Dublin, 5 April 1991.

emphasis that forced Dowling into considering the more fundamental principles of his artistic direction rather than the specifics of developmental policy. In time, such enforced considerations would lead to the slow transformation, from forward-thinking writer's theatre, into a backward-looking institutionalised national theatre.

As was made clear in Chapter Four, the end of 1982 saw an exodus from the Abbey. Douglas Kennedy, Deirdre McQuillen, Patrick Mason (at least as employed resident director) and Sean McCarthy all moved on to other employment. At the same time, Dowling's own contract was also up. In 1978, Dowling had said in an interview with Fergus Lenihan that after his five year appointment he would probably return to acting⁶, and yet he chose to accept the Board's invitation to extend his contract for three years. That decision he describes today as being "the biggest mistake for me and the Abbey".⁷ There is little doubt that the next two years were to prove frustrating for Dowling as he struggled to continue with the developmental work that had defined his first five years. Little progress was made, as Patrick Mason observes: "one of the great sadnesses for Joe must have been seeing many of the great achievements of his first tenure simply unravel in his second tenure: that must have been hard to go through."⁸

The main reason for the lack of development was due to the fact that Dowling was now isolated. Sean McCarthy expands: "When we all left, Joe was without his team."⁹ Central to his developmental policy for playwrights had been Dowling's determination to delegate young executives to contribute an atmosphere that would be encouraging to the potential playwright. When Deirdre McQuillen and Douglas Kennedy left, in 1982, Dowling lost the two main facilitators of energetic and accessible administration. With Mason now working

⁶ *The Irish Times*. 17 May 1978.

⁷ Joe Dowling. Interviewed in Dublin, 15 November 1991.

⁸ Patrick Mason. Interviewed in Dublin, 30 July 1992.

⁹ Sean McCarthy. Interviewed in Dublin, 3 April 1992.

as a freelance director, Dowling could no longer guarantee the services of a young director who had been committed to new drama since returning to the Abbey in 1976. But the most obvious hole in Dowling's 'living-writer's team was left by Sean McCarthy. As Script Editor, McCarthy had done more than simply follow policy directives. He had become involved with what Dowling calls "an intellectual and theatrical challenge" towards the stimulation of playwrights. McCarthy had exemplified the decisive approach the Abbey had adopted during the first five years of Dowling's control. The next appointment was to exemplify the administrative, vague and cautious approach to developmental work that was to dominate the Abbey for the next two years, and beyond.

Christopher Fitz-Simon, in 1983, was a well-liked theatre practitioner, who, as Artistic Director of the Irish Theatre Company between 1979 and 1982, had shown himself to be a well-organised theatre administrator. Joe Dowling admits that it was for his ability to deal with administration that Fitz-Simon was appointed as Script Editor:

For all his intellectual talent and ability to stimulate, Sean was an organisational disaster. When he left, his desk was piled high with unopened scripts and we realised that we had better get someone who could actually deal with all this: that was Christopher's function and he did it extraordinarily well.¹⁰

While such a decision was justified and demonstrates Dowling's pragmatism, it also provides evidence in support of McCarthy's claim that by the end of 1982, Dowling, as well as the Board, was content on consolidation rather than exploration.¹¹ It was inevitable that such an appointment would lead to a more administrative approach to new writing: merely processing and reading the scripts that came into the Theatre. Fitz-Simon was to become an approachable Script Editor, who supported the work of MacIntyre and gave a certain amount of assistance to new writers who had had their scripts accepted by the Abbey, but it was clear from the start of his contract that the days of reaching out and making

¹⁰ Dowling. 15 November 1991.

¹¹ See Chapter Four.

active contact with playwrights were over. Dowling concedes that Fitz-Simon was less penetrating: "Christopher, himself, would admit that he was not the kind of person who would automatically challenge and encourage younger writers with the same practical, hands-on emphasis that Sean used: it just wasn't Chris's style."¹² Neil Donnelly gives a playwright's point of view of the changes in approach between the two Script Editors:

After Sean McCarthy left, the door of the Script Editor's office didn't seem quite so open. Christopher Fitz-Simon was always around and was always friendly, but his approach could not have been more different: he's a completely different animal. Sean was prepared to wade through difficult work and get his teeth into actual problems: he liked the details. Christopher was more academic, even though he'd had practical experience. I suppose he came from a different tradition, where the boundaries were rigidly defined, but he certainly didn't carry the same weight as Sean.¹³

In effect, the appointment of Christopher Fitz-Simon symbolised a gradual drift away from the clarity of vision that was so much part of Dowling's first five years of control. Donnelly talks of boundaries in the tradition of theatre that Fitz-Simon had come from and it was clear that boundaries were again beginning to show themselves at the Abbey. It was inevitable that the playwright, the most freelance of theatre practitioners, would be the first to suffer from this. Bernard Farrell talks of a certain change in atmosphere:

It's hard to say what happened, but there was a definite feeling, from about the time Sean left, that the party was over. Everyone was just as welcoming, and I must say I liked Christopher Fitz-Simon, but there was never the same urgency after that. Really, the result is obvious: I didn't write as many plays. The gaps between the plays increased from one to two years. Okay, I was now established and managed to get work with the BBC -- that was important -- but the real pioneering spirit of those early years had been lost. I suppose that's inevitable, but it's sad all the same.¹⁴

Farrell identifies a lack of urgency in the need for playwrights, which is underlined by a more wayward programme in the Peacock. While the 1983 and 1984 repertoire saw the first two contributions from the MacIntyre's Theatre-of-the-Image team, there were few other new projects or new writers actually

¹² Dowling, 15 November 1991.

¹³ Neil Donnelly. In interviewed in Dublin, 6 April 1992.

¹⁴ Farrell, 29 August 1991.

initiated during these two years. In 1983 Aodhan Madden had *The Midnight Door*, the first of his three Abbey plays, presented in the Peacock, but all the other new plays at the venue were by already established dramatists or one-off writers.¹⁵

Perhaps an even more serious indication of a less committed approach to the idea of writer's theatre was to be seen in comments made in 1984 by Michael Judge, chairman of the Irish Playwright's Association. In an article by Gus Smith, entitled "Why dramatists want a new deal", Judge was quoted as saying:

The status of the playwright in Ireland today is that of the casual labourer. He has no security, no social welfare benefits, no pension. He is hired and fired at the whim of theatre managers and radio and television executives. He is never sure whether what he is doing has any value, and he has to hawk his wares around from door to door in the hope of making an occasional sale.¹⁶

While Judge is referring to Irish theatre in general and goes out of his way to mention the "good results" on new writing achieved by Joe Dowling, his statement exposes the fact that the fundamental idea of writer's theatre was without clear definition in Ireland. In 1984, Dowling's policy to create "the home of the living writer" had had little effect on changing the principle of the playwright as isolated literary writer. This suggestion is underlined by the involvement of playwrights Neil Donnelly, Graham Reid and Bernard Farrell in the formation of Kevin McHugh's Playwrights and Actors Company in 1984: a company that, according to Seamus Hosey, "aims to revitalise *freelance* theatre by bringing together writers and actors who will work together to present mainly new

15 In addition to plays by Madden, MacIntyre, Reid and Donnelly the 1983/1984 selection of new plays were by Eamon Kelly (*Your Humble Servant*); Antoine Ó Flatharta (*Imeachtaí Na Saoirse*); Robert Packer (*The Unexpected Death of Jimmy Blizzard*); Jim Doherty (*The Lugnaquilla Gorilla*); James Foulgas (*Pisces - The Cod*); Brian Merriman and Siobhain Nic Cionnaith (*Cuir an Mhean-Oiche*) and Richard J. Byrne (*Auld Decency*). With the exception of Eamon Kelly and Antoine Flatharta, none of these writers have written any more plays for the Abbey.

16 Gus Smith. "Why dramatists want a new deal", *Sunday Independent*, 1 July 1984.

plays"[emphasis added]. The irony that the first production was of the now old play, *Upstarts*, seemed to be lost on the company.¹⁷

It seems that, after 1982, a certain momentum had been lost and definitions of Abbey policy were stated with less decisiveness. But while Dowling remained in sole artistic control, there was always a possibility that he would be about to reassert a clear approach to developmental work. New talent abounded in the mid-eighties: Madden and Frank McGuinness had already established themselves as possible leaders of a second wave of Abbey playwrights. McGuinness's masterpiece, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, had yet to be produced by the Abbey and its 1985 production gave an indication of the National Theatre's continuing potential as a dynamic writer's theatre. But as I state later, the production was also to provide a clear and brutal contrast to the other work of the Abbey Theatre, receiving its accolades in glorious isolation, as Dowling was forced into a fight to preserve the general principle of his singular artistic direction -- that had allowed for developmental work -- rather than the developmental work itself.

Joe Dowling stresses that he never got bored with the job of Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre -- "I found it absorbing, fascinating, difficult and wonderful" -- but admits that, after five years in any high-pressure job, there are going to be personal problems: "You find that it takes more time to expand the same energy level."¹⁸ Linked with the fact that the people Dowling had trusted to realise his defined policy had left, his flagging energy may well have been responsible for two mistakes that turned a vague sense of waywardness into a clearly defined artistic crisis that led to his resignation in 1985.

The first mistake, Dowling freely admits. During 1984, he made what he terms "some disastrous decisions in terms of programming", symbolised by the

¹⁷ Seamus Hosey. "Review of *Upstarts*", *Theatre Ireland* 7. Autumn 1984. In 1991, the company again produced *Upstarts*: a production that went against the wishes of Neil Donnelly who believed that it was going against the intentions of the company.

¹⁸ Dowling, 15 November 1991.

first major production of 1985.¹⁹ For two years, Dowling had been planning a production of O'Neill's *Long Days Journey into Night*. He believed, with justification, that Siobhain MacKenna would be sensational in the part of Mary Tyrone and the two of them had discussed the possibility of a production. It was realised that MacKenna would be available to play the part in early 1985 and so a production was duly programmed. The first problem came with casting James Tyrone. Someone was needed to act as a spur to MacKenna and the Abbey settled on Godfrey Quigley: a fine actor, but one who never fitted into Dowling's vision which had been based solely on MacKenna. This rather casual approach to casting was then compounded by Dowling's decision not to direct it himself. Dowling flew off to New York to direct a (disastrous) production of *The Playboy of the Western World*,²⁰ leaving Pat Laffen in charge of a rehearsal process that should have been the climax to Dowling's two year personal project. Dowling admits the complacency with characteristic frankness:

It was a silly, silly mistake, based on a rather too relaxed assumption that the production was destined to work: it didn't. I abdicated responsibility in a way that I wouldn't have in previous years. Here was a project that could have said something enormous about MacKenna's talents as one of greatest Irish actresses of the twentieth century and I fucked it up. And that symbolises for me that the grit had gone in my approach to the job.²¹

If Dowling could show such a limited interest in such a major project, it was inevitable that the public would do the same. After its closure, Ray Comiskey was to call *Long Day's Journey into Night* "a commercial disaster", which he felt had echoed "the failures that marred the first half of 1984".²² Such a comparison was rather unfair. Few productions in 1984 had been either commercial or critical disasters, but there had been an almost inevitable slip from the all-time high seating occupancy of 80 percent, during 1981, to a rather more

¹⁹ Dowling, 15 November 1991.

²⁰ See Joe Dowling. "Anatomy of a Disaster", *Theatre Ireland* 9/10. Spring 1985. A fascinating article in which Dowling outlines the problems he faced in New York over this production. The article demonstrates how Dowling was prepared to be open and honest about his mistakes at a time when he was clearly under public scrutiny.

²¹ Dowling, 15 November 1991.

²² Ray Comiskey. "Is the Abbey in a no-win Situation?", *The Irish Times*, 14 March 1985.

modest 65 percent during the year in question.²³ Few would argue that this proved a lack of success at the Abbey, but Dowling was to come into conflict with an Arts Council funding policy determined by an assumption that 80 percent was the norm. Coupled with this, the 1984 programme, while comparatively successful, had been expensive. Productions of Behan's *The Quare Fellow*, *The Glass Menagerie*, by Tennessee Williams; *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Plough and the Stars*, and *The Merchant of Venice* all required high quality acting and direction, large casts, comparatively long rehearsal periods and expensive settings. By the end of 1984, the Abbey and its Artistic Director were faced with a deficit of £350,000. With such a dire financial situation, developmental work had to be put on hold. Dowling was forced to turn his attention away from the Peacock and towards the main house where expenditure was more of an issue.

It was Dowling's contribution to dealing with this deficit that led to his second mistake: not so much a failing or weakness, as an ill-timed commitment to honesty and integrity. In many ways, Dowling allowed himself to become too closely associated with the Abbey's debt and, therefore, gave certain enemies a stick to beat him with. In May 1985, after Dowling's resignation, Tom O'Dea was to justify criticism of him by quoting one person "inside the Abbey" as believing that: "Joe ran the place into debt, because he was over ambitious".²⁴ The unidentified source, in this case, could no doubt point to the large-scale productions of the previous year as evidence for his claim. Such an observation, however, was a gross simplification. As the outline, in Chapter Four, to his working methods demonstrates, Dowling had always shown a pragmatic concern for keeping production costs within the permitted budget. In 1982, Dowling had found the Abbey in a similar, if less acute, financial position. He had programmed *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* and *Da*, and had averted disaster.²⁵ He

²³ See David Nowlan. "An Eye on the Box Office", *The Irish Times*, 6 December 1984.

²⁴ Tom O'Dea. "MacAnna: riding the storm", *Sunday Independent*, 12 May 1985.

²⁵ Dowling, 15 November 1991.

had grown up with the Abbey and realised the recurring financial difficulties of the institution. Further to this was his realisation, stated after his resignation in a letter to *The Irish Times*, that it was "not within the competence of any artistic director to commit the theatre to vast expenditure without restraint".²⁶ Here, Dowling is referring to the existence of the Financial Sub-Committee, dominated by Board members, which approved all financial matters. Unfortunately, Dowling did not draw attention to this until it was too late to save his job.

When the problems with the deficit came to a head at the end of 1984, Dowling never even considered mentioning how the Abbey had been allowed to get into such a state: such comments would have been, to his mind, irrelevant and dishonourable. Showing no sign of jaded energy, Dowling launched himself into a crusade to draw attention to the woeful limitations of funding for the National Theatre, believing that, as Chief Executive, it was his job to lead a campaign of action. On 28 November 1984, Dowling called a high profile press conference, attended by himself, Tomás Hardiman, the new Marketing Manager and the Abbey's Manager, Martin Fahy. From the Board, only the company representative, Leslie Scott, was present. At this meeting, Dowling "expressed deep concern about the level of arts funding in the country and the future development of the National Theatre".²⁷ Dowling received a great deal of attention, with all national newspapers giving considerable space to the Abbey's plight. Sympathy was expressed for Dowling's decision to postpone certain productions. No blame was attached to single individuals or to the Abbey in general. And significantly, no one commented on the absence of the Board from the press conference.

Dowling's determination to be direct and honest left him severely vulnerable. Throughout the festive season Dowling continued his personal campaign, launching himself into rehearsals for *The Merchant of Venice* with

²⁶ *The Irish Times*, 1 May 1985.

²⁷ Michael Sheridan. "Arts cash crisis hits Abbey, say director", *Irish Press*, 29 November 1984.

renewed and pointed vigour. In an article ominously entitled "Joe Dowling and the Abbey's critics", he stressed to Ronit Lentin that he "still likes being in charge".²⁸ The assumption that Dowling was hoping to create was that his singular vision was still very much the driving force behind the Abbey. Financial problems were inevitable, as was the conservative programming needed to contain the problems. But for all that, he was determined to show that once the bank-balance was under control, a new period of developmental programming would ensue: indeed, the planned programme for 1985 was, according to Lentin, "showing signs of being the most exciting for years". But in drawing attention to the principles involved in running the National Theatre, Dowling had already removed himself, and the Theatre's future, from the artistic specificity of developmental programming: the agenda had changed. Unfortunately for Joe Dowling and for Irish theatre in general, there were members of the Board who, regardless of the success of isolated projects, were beginning to resent his "being in charge".

At the end of 1982, when Dowling's team of artistic executives were leaving, the Board was also undergoing upheaval. Individuals such as Tom Murphy and Margaret O'Dalaigh -- who had supported Dowling's moves towards modern artistic policy -- were being replaced by more conservative figures, who had both political and artistic reasons to resent Dowling's vision. Two people in particular, Ulick O'Connor and Augustine Martin, were co-opted at the time and formed the basis of what the media was to call "the Green Alliance", in direct opposition to the liberal programming that Dowling had adopted.²⁹ While the

²⁸ Ronit Lentin. "Joe Dowling and the Abbey's Critics", *The Irish Press*, 14 December 1984.

²⁹ Ulick O'Connor is an artistic jack-of-all-trades, who had become well known for his biography of Brendan Behan (Hamish Hamilton, 1970). Over the years, he had received certain acclaim for his verse plays in the Yeatsian Noh drama tradition and for his one-man shows on Behan and Oliver St. John Gogarty. In his biography of Behan, O'Connor expresses his difficulties with a any perception of Ireland other than the traditional catholic ideal. He outlines faithfully an occasion in which he protested against Socialist campaigns supported by Behan: actions which led to their long-term enmity. O'Connor also blinds himself to the obvious contribution that Joan Littlewood was to make to the development of Behan's work: such a collaboration was, in O'Connor's mind, a betrayal of Behan's Celticism. Augustine Martin is Professor of Anglo-Irish Literature at UCD. A pragmatic academic, who has transformed his department into a forward

media attacks on these two individuals, following Dowling's resignation, are inclined to deflect criticism away from the rest of the Board, who had, after all, come to a unanimous decision, the appointments of both O'Connor and Martin, in late 1982 and early 1983 respectively, tend to coincide with a resurgence of Boardroom interference and insistence on artistic involvement. Ulick O'Connor, in particular, had a personal reason to resent Dowling, as his play, *Execution*, had been rejected by the Executive: a conflict from which the press was to extract considerable mileage. The issue of the Artistic Director having full artistic control, therefore, was already causing a certain amount of debate within the privacy of Board meetings and Dowling's open association with the Theatre's deficit gave his detractors within the Boardroom a corrupted legitimacy to question the validity of singular control. As Dowling caught the flight to New York to start rehearsals for *The Playboy*, confident of the continued support of the Irish media, his Boardroom enemies saw their chance to remove him from his job.

As with all internal power struggles, the motivation behind the events that led to Dowling's resignation is difficult to clarify. Dowling -- again showing integrity -- has always refused to name specific individuals on the Board who may have perpetrated a move against him. He maintains to this day that "the conspiracy theory is rubbish" and that the central issue that determined his resignation was purely the financial position of the Theatre.³⁰ On the surface this seems to be correct, but, in their dealing with the financial situation, the Board chose to link the issue of finance closely to the principle of artistic control. While Dowling was out of the country, in January 1985, the Board made a unanimous and unilateral decision that they felt would help reduce financial pressures. From that point onwards, the Artistic Director would have to programme on a play-by-play basis, using no actors, directors or designers outside the organisation. While they stressed that this decision was forced upon them by financial strictures, the

thinking research community, Professor Martin has always shown a commitment to traditional definitions of Irish art. See "Pillars of Society: Gus Martin", *The Phoenix*, 15 August 1986.
³⁰ Dowling, 15 November 1991.

Board must have been only too aware of the effect this would have on their Artistic Director. There was immediate speculation that Dowling would resign, for reasons which Ray Comiskey clarified in *The Irish Times* : "Mr Dowling has always insisted on, and received, a free hand in choosing plays and programme planning, and the statement [made by Chairman Charles McCarthy on 4 March 1985] might have been seen as a curtailment of his powers by the Board."³¹

Dowling had returned from New York, in late February, however, with little intention of resigning. He was determined to enact a compromise that would commit himself to the reduction of the budget in ways similar to those used in 1981. Together with Martin Fahy, Dowling put forward a revised plan to a Board meeting on 13 March, in which he agreed not to use more than 36 players during 1985. This proposal was accepted, but when Dowling then went on to ask for the original January motion to be rescinded, on the grounds that it was a fundamental infringement of the principle of the artistic director, the Board refused. While the original suggestion to limit the powers of the artistic director could be seen as an honest, if short-sighted, attempt to rectify the Abbey's financial position, the decision not to meet Dowling in a compromise demonstrates an intransigence that suggests deeper and darker motives. Further to their obvious intransigence was the underhand way in which they selected a new Artistic Director. Dowling offered his resignation on 14 March. He did not hear anything from the Board for six days, in spite of the fact that he had clearly stated that his resignation was open to discussion. When he was called to the Board on 20 March, Dowling discovered that no questions could be asked, apart from those concerning clarification, and that a new Artistic Director had already been decided upon. From the very next day, Board member Tomás MacAnna was to replace Dowling.³²

³¹ Ray Comiskey. "Dowling not to resign over Abbey cutbacks", *The Irish Times*, 5 March 1985.

³² Dowling, 15 November 1991.

There is little doubt, therefore, that Dowling was pushed, and not simply over a point of financial principle. The distinct disquiet over Dowling's extensive control, expressed privately by O'Connor, Martin and others, had been exposed. The Irish media was to have a field day, with penetrating criticism of the Board for the way they had handled events, and, more importantly, for the reasons and motives for their decision. What became the central talking point at the Abbey was not the artistic quality of specific productions or the value of on-going developmental policy, but the general principle of artistic control. David Nowlan was to comment:

At this stage, the only possible interpretation of the events leading to Joe Dowling's quickly accepted resignation is that of a Board seeking to claw back power which previous Abbey Boards have used to damage the theatre.³³

Fergus Lenihan observed the irony of the title of Bernard Farrell's new play, *All the Way Back*, opening in the Abbey at the time: "All the way back is just where the Abbey seems to be heading, back to the dear drab days of the Queens."³⁴ In his letter to *The Irish Times* on 1 May, Dowling admitted that there had been side issues that had created the final tension between him and the Board.

For some months, successive meetings had discussed motions tabled by one member concerning the artistic director's "lack of respect" for the Board; another member articulated the frustrations of the Board's distance from artistic decisions, the legality of certain contracts entered into was questioned and finally at a meeting I was falsely accused of collusion with a journalist in the writing of an article critical of the Board.³⁵

Hugh Leonard, who had had his own difficulties with the Abbey Board during his time as Literary Editor, in the 1970s,³⁶ was less inclined to hide behind tentative and enigmatic statements. In his column in *The Sunday Independent*, he launched gleefully into gossip and intrigue that was typical of the messy end to Dowling's reign:

33 David Nowlan. "Scandal at the Abbey", *The Irish Times* 18 April 1985.

34 Fergus Lenihan. "All the Way Back?", *The Irish Times*, 23 March 1985.

35 *The Irish Times*, 1 May 1985. The article Dowling refers to was printed in *The Irish Press*, 5 March 1985. In an article, entitled "The knives were out to get him" (*Irish Press*, 15 May 1985), Michael Sheridan stresses that the article in question was prepared from information obtained when Dowling was out of the country.

36 See Chapter Three.

There are few secrets in Dublin. About a year ago, there were murmurs that the Abbey was becoming not so much a national theatre as a nationalist one of a particularly dirty green. And it is not a rumour, but fact, that, speaking of one of the best and most successful play directors working here at present, a member of the Abbey Board -- someone of whom nothing would surprise me -- said: "We don't want queer Brits in this theatre".³⁷

There is little doubt that the disquiet and the recriminations that followed Dowling's resignation, were indicative of a deeply unfortunate end to a period of harmony and artistic confidence at the Irish National Theatre. For all the mistakes and difficulties that accompanied his final two years, Joe Dowling was the greatest Artistic Director the new Abbey Theatre has had. While MacAnna, in earlier years, may have encouraged a more internationalist repertoire to the Abbey, Dowling had brought a belief in developmental policy. To him, the theatre was not simply a place of presentation, but of progression. Individuals were made to feel welcome, respected for their talent and encouraged to believe in their own potential. Through pragmatic and single-minded policy the Abbey was transformed into a place of experimentation, with playwrights using it as a resource for their own development, encouraged to understand the concept of writer's theatre and, in the case of Tom MacIntyre, the concept of playwright's theatre. Within a theatre that had, for the best part of the century, exemplified the ingrained idea of artistic fragmentation, such achievements were formidable. But in 1985, Dowling's efforts to transform the Abbey appeared to count for nothing. The Board had taken control again and duly led the National Theatre into a period of stagnation that seemed to be a mirror-image of the institutional propriety of the previous era. The apparent hopelessness of the situation was exemplified by the stark contrast between the last new play to be seen during Dowling's directorate and the first new play to be programmed by his successors.

Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme, the second play by Frank McGuinness, opened at the Peacock Theatre on 18 February 1985: one

³⁷ Hugh Leonard. "Power plays at the Abbey", *The Sunday Independent*, 25 March 1985.

month before Dowling resigned. A play that refused to compromise in its attempts to exploit theatricality for the sake of in-depth and sensitive observation of individuals, it was described by Michael Coveney as being one of the finest plays to come out of the "extraordinary playwriting renaissance in Ireland: It is informative and poetic, brave and thoroughly absorbing".³⁸

While Frank McGuinness was never a playwright within McCarthy's and Dowling's writer's theatre -- only coming to the attention of the Abbey in the last year of McCarthy's term and always refusing to give up his job as a university lecturer -- there was much in this new play that exemplified what Dowling had attempted to do within "the home of the living writer". *Observe the Sons of Ulster* was a direct progression from McGuinness's first play, *The Factory Girls*, (1982) which had been constructed within a straight forward naturalistic framework. It confronted an issue that went beyond the traditional boundaries of Irish theatre, complementing Graham Reid's attempts to open up the voice of the Protestant North to Southern Ireland, but with greater sensitivity, determined by the fact that McGuinness was in fact a Catholic. It had demanded tremendous skill in both direction and acting, provided by a directorate insistent on drawing on the best talents in Irish theatre regardless of their association with the Abbey.³⁹ This was a play that Joe Dowling could proudly point to as he left office: an example of the strength of development during his period in control, concerned solely with artistic priorities. Had Dowling continued, there would have been an almost certain commitment to assisting in McGuinness's development -- a determination to keep his work associated with the National Theatre -- and yet looking back today, it is impossible to identify McGuinness as an Abbey playwright.⁴⁰

³⁸ Michael Coveney. *Financial Times*, 25 July 1986.

³⁹ *Observe the Sons of Ulster* was directed by Patrick Mason -- officially, a freelance director -- and six of the nine actors came from outside the organisation. If the Board's decision to limit outside participation had come into effect, then this production would have been impossible.

⁴⁰ From 1985 onwards, McGuinness has chosen to spread his work around. While his plays *Baglady/Ladybag* (1985) and *Carthaginians* (1988) were presented by the Abbey, he has also had plays produced by the Gate -- *Innocence* (1986), a version of *Peer Gynt* (1988) and *The Breadman* (1990) -- and in London, with *Mary and Lizzie* (RSC, 1989) and *Someone to Watch Over Me* (Hampstead, 1992). McGuinness has become the epitome of the freelance writer and,

It seemed that the Board who took responsibility after Dowling's resignation, was less concerned with theatrical strength and more concerned with political "soundness". During *Observe the Sons of Ulster*, McGuinness had displayed the "Hand of Ulster" -- the traditional symbol of the Unionist majority -- on the back wall of the Peacock: not an image that would have comforted the Republican faction who now controlled the Theatre. It was time, in their minds, to reassert the "correct" political identity of the Abbey and, in doing so, they proved themselves to possess an artistic and political obliviousness that Ernest Blythe would have been proud of.

At a press conference, on 30 April 1985, the new executive announced a new season of plays. Unlike the press conference called by Dowling, in November of the previous year, every member of the Board was present, sitting with equal prominence to Artistic Director Tomás MacAnna. The programme announced caused few surprises, with one notable exception. The Board declared that in November, the Peacock would stage *Execution* by Ulick O'Connor: the play that had been rejected by Dowling in previous years. Not only was the decision to stage this play a crude admission that Dowling's resignation may not have been solely to do with a point of financial principle, it also demonstrated an end to choosing plays on artistic merit.

While O'Connor was, and is, a biographer and historian of some merit, he has never been a particularly able playwright. *Execution* demonstrates a moderate ability to research and collate material, as well as an appreciation of an outmoded and discredited dramatic form. The play follows the last few hours of four Republican prisoners who are to be executed in reprisal for the assassination of a member of the Dail, during the Civil War in 1922. Potentially, an emotive starting point for close, personal dramatic exploration and yet O'Connor chose a dry and unengaging documentary style, that had last seen the light of day during

fortunately, has been able to sustain his career without an active relationship with a specific theatre.

the 1960s.⁴¹ The level of dramatic vibrancy was summed up by the headline to Michael Sheridan's review: "Execution without the drama".⁴²

While the play lacked drama, it was positively brimming with political dogma, celebrating the "just and honest" de Valerian inheritance that had created a proud, isolationist and artistically inert nation. As with Desmond Forristal's play *Kolbe* (1982) -- another untheatrical play which found its way onto the stage with the assistance of Boardroom pressure -- *Execution* brought the Establishment back into the Abbey.⁴³ High Court Judge, Donal Barrington, Lieutenant-General Michael Costello, old Republicans Sean MacBride and Peadar O'Donnell and the former justice minister, Brian Lenihan TD, were all present on the first night. Front page reports, in all the newspapers, told of moving discussions between old comrades. Inside the papers, however, the theatre critics seemed, in the words of Philip Molloy, "positively subversive" as they systematically destroyed the play and the intentions behind its presentation. Gerry Colgan commented that:

As the night wore on, the script inexorably acquired the feel of a scissors-and-paste collage forced into reluctant life. Mr O'Connor is clearly deeply involved with his subject; but this work is finally no more than a belated successor to a failed theatrical genre.⁴⁴

Colm Toibin added that: "Ulick O'Connor ... has removed all the drama from this situation and given us the documents, the justification, the boring speeches".⁴⁵ It was left to Fintan O'Toole, however, to sum up the implications of this presentation, with a cryptic conclusion to his review:

Even when the speeches did generate a modicum of tension or excitement, as John Olohan does in Cathal O'Shannon's speech, it is immediately dissipated by a potted voice-over biography which informs us for instance,

41 Particular examples of the documentary play, popular in the sixties are: *The Investigation* by Peter Weiss(1965); *US* devised by Peter Brook(1966) and *The Knotty* by Peter Cheeseman (1968). Further to these examples, Tomás MacAnna, the director of *Execution* had himself, attempted documentary plays during his successful period as director of the Peacock in the early seventies, notably, *A State of Chassis* (1970). MacAnna's interest in O'Connor's play could be seen as an attempt to take the theatre back to a previous era.

42 *The Irish Press*, 9 November 1985.

43 For discussion on *Kolbe*, see Chapter Four.

44 *The Irish Times*, 9 November 1985.

45 *Sunday Independent*, 10 November 1985.

that Ernest Blythe went on to become Manager of the Abbey Theatre. We need not have been told -- his spirit still hovers in the wings.⁴⁶

The spirit of Ernest Blythe was to remain in the wings of the Abbey for five years. A brief summary of this period, not only outlines the impossibility for long-term planning, but also demonstrates how criticism of the Theatre was concerned solely with the general principle of the role of artistic director. At the end of 1985, MacAnna was replaced as Artistic Director by Christopher Fitz-Simon: the only one of several likely successors to apply for the job, and the least inspirational. Commenting on the announcement made in August 1985, Fintan O'Toole stated: "For a Board anxious to retain its control over the day-to-day running of the Abbey, the appointment of Christopher Fitz-Simon has advantages."⁴⁷ The "advantages" had been seen during Fitz-Simon's lacklustre period as Script Editor: a man well prepared to act as facilitator of Boardroom decree. Certainly it was made clear, according to O'Toole, that the new Artistic Director would enjoy considerably less autonomy than Dowling. The Abbey's developmental role was further weakened by the decision not to appoint someone to fill Fitz-Simon's old job of Script Editor: the new administration had no time for such liberal and ethereal luxuries.

Fitz-Simon lasted from January until July, before announcing that he would not be renewing his one-year contract at the end of 1986. In these seven months of tentative control, the Abbey had lost a further £100,000; produced only one new play of any worth, (*Sensations* by Aodhan Madden); staged two expensive flops, (Murphy's *A Thief of a Christmas* and *The Beaux Stratagem* by George Farquhar) and reduced the seat occupancy to a dismal forty percent: according to Michael Sheridan, "the worst in the Abbey's history".⁴⁸ Fintan O'Toole reported that the Gate Theatre continued to achieve commercial success

⁴⁶ *Sunday Tribune*, 10 November 1985.

⁴⁷ *Sunday Tribune*, 4 August 1985.

⁴⁸ *The Irish Press*, 19 July 1986. In his report, Sheridan could not even get Christopher Fitz-Simon's name right, referring to him as 'Fitzsimons': thus was this Artistic Director's impact on critical reaction.

and, "most damagingly of all for the Abbey", had managed to acquire the services of Frank McGuinness.⁴⁹ O'Toole concluded:

With its continuing financial problems, low morale and uncertainty over the status of the artistic director, the Abbey is now certain to have considerable difficulty in finding a credible replacement for Mr Fitz-Simon.⁵⁰

O'Toole was proved to be correct: none of the obvious candidates applied for the job. The Board, at last showing reason, attempted to attract directors of undeniable talent: looking initially to Patrick Mason, Michael Bogdanov and Michael Colgan⁵¹ and finally to Garry Hynes, the director of Galway's high profile Druid Theatre Company.⁵² All these possible applicants refused the position on the grounds that the relationship with the Board was too restrictive.

The eventual appointment was somewhat surprising. It was announced that in May 1987 Vincent Dowling would take up the office of Artistic Director. At 57, Dowling (no relation to Joe Dowling) had had a long, varied and extremely prestigious career as an actor, director and academic: mainly in America. Although he had started with the Abbey during the late sixties and had been Deputy Artistic Director to Tomás MacAnna during the early 1970s, Dowling had not been near the Abbey since he had decided to move permanently to the US in 1974. This did not seem to be a problem, as he took up the reigns with a blaze and glory attitude, commenting at a press conference in March that during his three years "everything within the theatre will be put under examination. Under my brief I have complete artistic control within certain budget limitations and I intend to look at every aspect of the present operation."⁵³ Dowling's flamboyance seemed like a tonic and it appeared that, finally, the Board had realised the

⁴⁹ *Innocence*, by Frank McGuinness, was duly staged by the Gate on 7 October 1986, directed by Patrick Mason.

⁵⁰ Fintan O'Toole. "Abbey crisis worsens as another director goes", *Sunday Tribune*, 20 July 1986.

⁵¹ Michael Bogdanov, currently Artistic Director of the English Shakespeare Company, was at the time, enjoying success as an associate of the National Theatre of Great Britain. His association with Ireland had extended back to his period as an undergraduate at Trinity College, Dublin. Michael Colgan was, and is, Director of the Gate Theatre.

⁵² See David Nowlan. "Druid director turns down Abbey post", *The Irish Times*, 20 August 1986.

⁵³ Quoted by Michael Sheridan. "New Abbey Chief plans big shake-up", *The Irish Press*, 20 March 1987.

importance of singular artistic vision. But Dowling's isolation from the developments in Ireland, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, was to impose an immovable barrier between the Abbey's repertoire and developmental progress.

In appointing Vincent Dowling, the Board seemed to be attempting to find someone untainted by the controversies of recent years: a man who understood the way the Abbey had been run in the old days. While Dowling provided this, he also provided an artistic vision so outmoded, that the Abbey's repertoire was destined to fail. With hindsight, Fintan O'Toole sums up the problem:

I think there is something fundamentally problematical about the notion of somebody coming to the Abbey, after seventeen years in America, with a map of Ireland in his head which relates to seventeen years ago, and, then, attempting to reapply that map, with very little sense of what's changed -- either socially or theatrically --, by redoing plays that had last been produced in the 1960s. It's simply not going to work: you're not going to have a sense of your audience.⁵⁴

Totally mystified by the ongoing work of MacIntyre's team, Dowling brought it swiftly to a close, with a request to the playwright that he might like to try his hand at social realism.⁵⁵ Further to this, as Colm Toibin comments:

He was, it is reported, shocked at first when he came back to Ireland ... to find a show like *A Whistle in the Dark* having such success at the Abbey. ... The Ireland he had left more than a decade before was a kinder and gentler place. ... He couldn't understand how shows which he put on such as *Madigans Lock* and *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, both full of charm, didn't fill the Abbey.⁵⁶

While Dowling was given a free hand, therefore, it is clear that he never had a specific understanding of what the Abbey needed. In the main house, throughout 1988 and 1989, a series of disastrous productions were presented with an increasing sense of alarm from the critics. After weak and gentle interpretations of *The Shadow of a Gunman* and *The Playboy of the Western World*, that spoke greatly of Dowling's misunderstanding of the Irish audience's needs, he followed these with deadly productions of Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple* and Gorky's *The Lower Depths*. For the Peacock, Dowling had the neat, but ultimately valueless,

⁵⁴ Fintan O'Toole, 28 August 1991.

⁵⁵ See the final part of Chapter Five.

⁵⁶ Colm Toibin. "The Final Curtain", *Sunday Independent*, 16 April 1989.

idea of inviting small, alternative companies to perform. This idea underlined a simplistic approach to developmental work: seeming to welcome the "new wave", but, in fact, reducing the openings for his own company. As Fitz-Simon was to comment: "If all these companies are to work here, what are we doing?"⁵⁷

Vincent Dowling resigned from the Abbey in April 1989, less than two years into his three year contract. He returned to America, a wiser and sadder man, leaving the Abbey in deep turmoil. Colm Toibin summed up the situation: "The Abbey is back then in the same situation as when Joe Dowling left four years ago, offering private management and short term solutions."⁵⁸ In some ways, however, the situation had changed. In 1985, the press had treated the Board with contempt over Joe Dowling's resignation, but now, there was tacit agreement over the removal of his namesake. Further to this, Joe Dowling's resignation had followed a change at Board level, which had led to a backward step. This time a new Chairman was in place, determined to approach his crisis with a pragmatic and stabilising series of policies that looked to the future.

Noel Pearson, a successful theatrical impresario, was co-opted to the Board of the Abbey in June 1987 and attained the Chair a year later. Concerned primarily with making theatre pay, Pearson was committed to reducing the deficit that still hung over the Theatre. He realised that long-term planning would be needed if the Abbey was to have a chance of securing a stable financial position. Confidence had to be imposed and the only way to do that was to assure steady progress within both the main house and the Peacock. With the resignation of Vincent Dowling, the Board chose not to rush into appointing a new Artistic Director, but appointed Pearson himself, as stand-in Executive Chairman. There was a determination to take time over an appointment, making sure that the Theatre would first be in a solvent situation, so that any new artistic director would have freedom for artistic exploration. For the first time in four years, the

⁵⁷ Christopher Fitz-Simon, interviewed in Dublin, 1 August 1990.

⁵⁸ *Sunday Independent*, 16 April 1989.

Abbey management was concerned with development. The Board realised that they needed a year of treading water before giving fresh opportunity for artistic innovation. Such a decision tended to show that the Abbey was finally ready to clarify the balance of power between Board and Executive: the former would worry about achieving proper funding and the latter would develop the artistic interests of the repertoire.

After a year under Pearson's control, the Abbey Board felt that they were finally in a position to appoint a new Artistic Director: an announcement duly was made on 3 August 1990. With the appointment of Garry Hynes, four years after she had first refused the job, there was acknowledgement that the Abbey's battle to get its house in order was nearing the end. Hynes, thirty-seven at the time, had long been acknowledged as one of the most accomplished stage directors in Ireland. Since graduated from University College Galway in 1975, she had been Artistic Director of *Druid*: a company that had, at times, been called the alternative national theatre. Her reinterpretations of classic Irish drama, in particular, *The Playboy of the Western World*, a play which she had produced on three occasions, had brought to light a fresh and aggressive understanding of Irish dramatic traditions: an almost total contrast to the gentle and charming viewpoint of Vincent Dowling.⁵⁹

For the first time in years, the Irish media was enthusiastic about a decision made at the Abbey. Ronan Farren believed that the Abbey was on an "upward curve". He continued: "With the freedom to operate in her own way, and a Board that hopefully has learned the lesson of the Joe Dowling debacle, this is probably the best time for Garry Hynes to take up the challenge of the National Theatre."⁶⁰ Paddy Woodworth believed her to be ...

[t]he outstanding theatre director of her generation, taking into account both the excellence of her best individual productions and the rich

⁵⁹ Hynes had directed the 1986 production of Murphy's *A Whistle in the Dark*, which had shocked the sensibilities of Vincent Dowling.

⁶⁰ Ronan Farren. "Hynes at the Abbey", *Sunday Independent*, 5 August 1990.

contribution to contemporary Irish dramatic life which she has made as Artistic Director of Druid Theatre Company over the past 15 years.⁶¹

It was reported that Hynes negotiated for more than six months before accepting the post, suggesting that her contract was to be free of the restriction of recent years. A *Sunday Independent* editorial concluded:

The new Board members -- the Taoiseach has still not indicated who they might be -- should be warned not to get involved in the day-to-day affairs of the theatre. This is Garry Hynes's job, and it should be said that she does not suffer fools gladly.⁶²

The assumption made by the press in 1990 was that the stagnation was over and the Abbey was now back on the course outlined by Joe Dowling, but, in effect, only the principle that had allowed Dowling the freedom to develop his specific course had been reaffirmed. To the pragmatic Dowling, such a victory was enough. Speaking in 1991, six months into Hynes's period of office, Dowling expressed satisfaction that a new principle had finally come out of the turmoil of his resignation.

I feel that in 1985, the principle had to be established: the Board had to understand that in the modern world, there is a clear distinction between its guardianship and the artistic decisions taken on a day-to-day basis. I think the stand I made was very important and I have no regrets for having done it. I regret that what it led to was a period of considerable difficulty for the theatre, but that was inevitable: the Abbey was not going to change overnight. But in the long run, the debate that followed by decision to resign has meant that on this principle at least, the theatre will never go back.⁶³

Time will tell whether Dowling is correct about the permanence of the change. Hynes's decision not to 'reapply' for her job at the end of 1993 suggests that there is still need for discussion over what exactly is required from the relationship between Board and Executive. But certainly, by 1990, the importance of the issue had become clear to the media. But is the principle of singular artistic vision a valuable legacy from Dowling's era? Was his insistence that the Artistic Director should have sole control over artistic planning the thing that Dowling's work will

61 Paddy Woodworth. "Bringing the Druid Spirit to the stage of the Abbey", *The Irish Times*, 4 August 1990.

62 *Sunday Independent*, 5 August 1990.

63 Dowling, 15 November 1991.

be remembered for? Certainly, it was an essential catalyst to his success, as it provided the opportunities he needed to construct a clear and decisive policy to build a "home of the living writer". But it was this policy -- leading to the creation of a writer's theatre --, and not the mere catalyst of artistic control, that determined the success of Dowling's work at the Abbey. In the intervening years, there had been no debate as to whether the artistic ideal of writer's theatre was the correct direction for the National Theatre to take. Indeed, it could be argued that any such specific debate would conflict with the debate on achieving singular direction: what Dowling chose to do, need not have had any relation to what Hynes proposed to do. In accepting this, however, there is a serious question as to whether Dowling's actual artistic achievement -- the creation of a writer's theatre -- was to be continued by the Abbey.

Garry Hynes's three years at the Abbey, while reasserting the principle of singular vision, has done little to re-establish the "home of the living writer's" policy. Her bold attempts to establish a consistent identity within the Abbey can be exemplified by her first production: a revolutionary, expressionistic production of O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*. Hated by the O'Casey purists,⁶⁴ the production proved her determination to continue her reappraisal of Irish classic work that had started with her productions of *The Playboy*. To open her period as Artistic Director with a radical statement on a play that is to the Abbey what *The Seagull* is to the Moscow Arts Theatre, Hynes was asserting a refreshing confrontation to the conceived Abbey inheritance. Such a policy was strengthened in her decision to programme a production of *Hedda Gabler* as follow up to *The Plough*. Directed by Deborah Warner and starring Fiona Shaw, it was dismissed by some as "essentially an English import",⁶⁵ but it stressed a bold directorial desire to reinterpret the universality of theatrical tradition.

64 In his rather premature attack on Hynes's direction, "A Tough Act to Follow", *Irish Times*, 26 October 1991, Gerry Colgan commented on this production: "One felt short-changed in every department; no poetry, no fun, unfamiliar characters, no empathy." A rather popularist, anti-intellectual reaction that tends to undermine the value of his attack.

65 Colgan. *Irish Times*, 26 October 1991.

Hynes's commitment to developing her already established reputation as an advocate of directorial reevaluation was underlined by a fascinating interview she gave to Lynda Henderson, in the autumn before taking up her appointment, in which she expressed a clarity on the art of direction, but failed to comment on what specific developmental policy she would establish upon her arrival at the Abbey.⁶⁶ Hynes has assumed specific control of the Abbey, therefore, but with a different emphasis to Dowling and in a way that has excluded the specific importance of the playwright.

During the time Garry Hynes has been in control of the Abbey Theatre, several new playwrights have established their work within the Irish theatre repertoire. Both the main stage and the Peacock have been the home to many new plays. *One Last White Horse*, produced at the Peacock for the 1992 Dublin Theatre Festival, was a play that has consolidated Dermot Bolger's bold move, from poetry and prose, into playwriting.⁶⁷ Sebastian Barry has followed up his first two plays, *Boss Grady's Boys* (1988) and *Prayers of Sherkin* (1990), with *White Woman Street* (1992, in association with the Bush Theatre, London). Marina Carr has seen her first play, *Ullaloo*, given a full production, in 1991, after it had first appeared as a rehearsed reading in 1989. In the Abbey, novelist John McGahern had his first play, *The Power of Darkness*, produced in 1991.

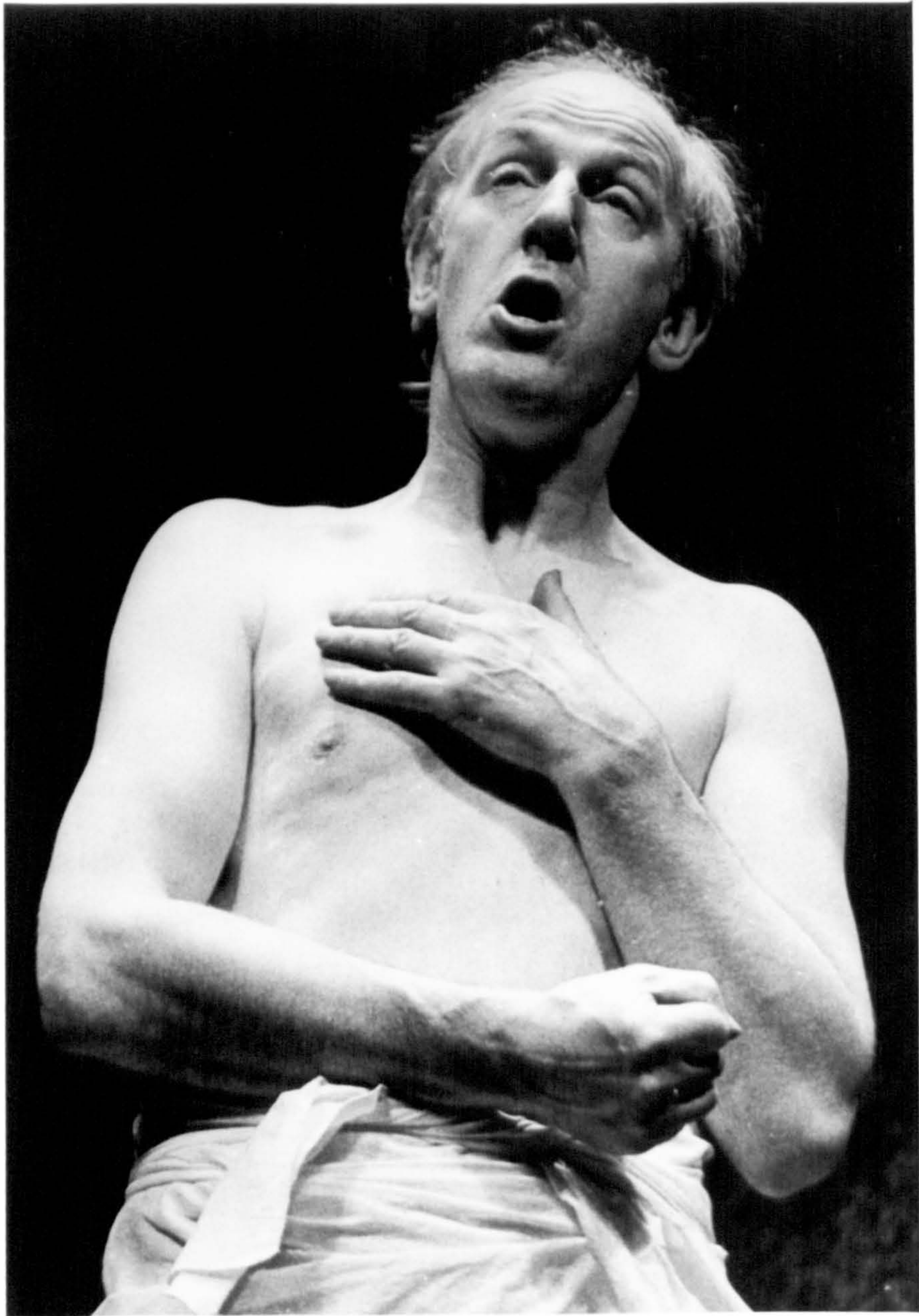
But the Abbey Theatre has always produced new drama. During the five years between Joe Dowling's resignation and Hynes's appointment, a considerable collection of new plays was presented, most notably, Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* in 1990, which prompted the return of Ireland's leading playwright to the National Theatre and re-established the Abbey's reputation internationally.⁶⁸ Tom Murphy, too, has been represented on the Abbey stage, following up his 1983 play, *The*

66 Lynda Henderson. "Climbing the Bell Tower", *Theatre Ireland* 23, Autumn 1990.

67 *One Last White Horse* opened at the Peacock Theatre on 8 October 1991. It followed Bolger's hugely successful first play, *Lament for Arthur Cleary*, which was first produced by Wet Paint Theatre Company in September 1989.

68 See Peter Lewis. "Upstaging the West End", *Sunday Times*, 19 January 1992, in which he asked the question: "Why is Dublin's Abbey Theatre So Successful?"

Figure Sixteen. Tom Hickey in *Misogynist*, by Michael Harding. Abbey Theatre, October 1990.



Gigli Concert, with the very successful *Too Late for Logic* in 1989. Frank McGuinness, in spite of his "defection" to the Gate, returned to the Abbey in 1988, with *Carthaginians*. It was not only established playwrights, either, who graced the stages of the Abbey after Dowling left: Sebastian Barry and Michael Harding both received their first opportunities within the National Theatre, during the late 1980s.⁶⁹ In terms of quantity, there was no drop in the amount of new plays staged at the Abbey Theatre during the five years after Dowling left.⁷⁰ Hynes inherited a seemingly healthy situation for new drama that did not appear to require attention. Her approach to new drama mirrors that of the Executive in the immediate years before her appointment.

There is a considerable difference, however, in merely providing a stage for new plays and actually developing the playwrights. Michael Harding, like McGuinness before him, cannot today be considered an Abbey playwright. He has conducted his own developmental work outside the National Theatre, realising the need for radical reappraisal of his 1990 play, *Misogynist*. In 1992, together with the actor Tom Hickey, he formed a small company, Skehana Productions, providing himself with a vehicle for the specific purpose of restaging a play that had met critical failure when first staged at the Abbey. There is no doubt that the Abbey made a bold decision to stage the play in the first place: *Misogynist* is a difficult play and was almost certainly going to find it difficult to win an appreciative audience. But after its almost inevitable failure, the Abbey seemed to reject Harding. For a year and a half, after *Misogynist*, Harding sent drafts of a new play to the Abbey and received only acknowledgement slips; as he says: "The phone went very dead." Harding continues by stressing that he is not complaining: "As a writer, you are freelance and you have to accept decisions

⁶⁹ Michael Harding's first stage play was *Strawboys*, directed by Tom Hickey in 1987. He followed this up with *Una Pooka*, directed by Patrick Mason in 1989. Sebastian Barry's first two plays, *Boss Grady's Boys* (1988) and *Prayers of Sherkin* (1990), were both directed by Caroline FitzGerald.

⁷⁰ In the six year period, from the start of 1979 to the end of 1984, there were 47 new plays staged by the Abbey Theatre Company. In the six years between the start of 1985 and then end of 1990, there were 45 new plays.

made by institutions." But this attitude only goes to show the nervousness and isolation that this particular playwright feels, when dealing with the Abbey Theatre today.⁷¹ This is in total contrast to Harding's first approach to the Abbey, ten years before, with a short one-act play.

I got a marvellous reaction from a man called Sean McCarthy. I suppose he wouldn't remember me, I was only a kid, in my early twenties, but he wrote suggesting a lunch-time production and invited me to come and talk to him. I was just mesmerised, absolutely staggered, that they wanted to meet me. When I went to the theatre, I remember how well I was treated, as if I was already an established writer. Admittedly, they never produced the play -- something to do with finance -- but it was still an incredible encouragement: it made you feel that you were a playwright.⁷²

The difference between the two eras is thus made clear. During Dowling's term of office, a potential writer could be made to feel at home regardless of the actual quantity of plays put on stage. In the succeeding years, a writer could have successful plays staged by the Abbey and still feel isolated. In effect, the Abbey no longer sees playwrights as members of the company, but as isolated contributors: a distinction clarified by the experience of Sebastian Barry.

Sebastian Barry has become a playwright closely associated with the Abbey. After having his first stage play, *Boss Grady's Boys*, produced in the Peacock in August 1988, Barry became involved with the administration of the Abbey. In 1990, he was co-opted to the Board and had his second successful play, *Prayers of Sherkin*, produced by the company. Barry was also Writer-in-Association during this year and looked to be an established figure at the National Theatre. And yet, his third play was first produced at the Bush Theatre in London. The reasons for this are fairly straightforward. The Bush offered him a commission and he took it. No one in the Abbey objected, believing it to be the right of a freelance playwright to get the best offer he or she can. But there is circumstantial evidence to suggest that Dowling, if he had been in control, would

71 Michael Harding. Interviewed in Dublin, 30 July 1992. Further to Harding's comments, one young and aspiring playwright interviewed at the same time, also complained of her isolation from the Abbey. She felt that it would be unwise to comment openly to me, for fear that it would effect her chances at the Theatre.

72 Harding, 30 July 1992.

have objected,⁷³ and, certainly, Barry's actions are not those of a playwright linked to a specific theatre: it seems that his writing is removed from his daily dealings with the Abbey.

Irish playwrights have returned to being freelance. Frank McGuinness, as already stated, combines his dedication to remain within the academic profession, with a determination not to commit himself to one particular theatre. Neil Donnelly, denied of the developmental assistance provided by the Abbey in the early 1980s that was essential to his success, struggled to have his play, *The Reel McCoy*, staged, needing to canvas the opinions of successive Artistic Directors before getting his opportunity. This experience tended to drain his confidence and he has returned to teaching with a sad acceptance that he is no longer a playwright.⁷⁴ Tom MacIntyre, in spite of being Writer-in-Association during 1991, has only produced one play for the Abbey since *Snow White* in 1988. This was *Kitty O'Shea* in 1990. His most recent play, *Fine Day for a Hunt* (1992), was produced by the tiny Punchbag Theatre Company.

It can be concluded on one level, therefore, that there has been little lasting impact from Dowling's policy to create a "home of the living writer". The Abbey Theatre, today, is not a writer's theatre in the tradition of the Royal Court; nor has it assisted in the close collaboration between playwright and theatre practitioner since Vincent Dowling called a halt to MacIntyre's work with Mason in 1988. New work is part of the repertoire but not necessarily part of the developmental momentum. Joe Dowling's attempt to create "the home of the living writer" was the isolated policy of one individual director and, therefore, can be conceived as a historical moment in the Abbey's development, rather than a contributory factor in

73 In 1980, Graham Reid had a play entitled *Dorothy* produced by Kevin MacHugh at the Oscar Theatre, as part of that year's Dublin Theatre Festival. There had been a certain tension, although no lasting disagreement, due to Joe Dowling always maintaining that Reid should have offered the play to the Abbey. (Reid 28 March 1992).

74 See Chapter Four. *The Reel McCoy* was first staged at the Peacock, on 13 November 1989, four years after the play was submitted to the Theatre. It was described by Gerry Colgan as being "a work that is catastrophically less than the sum of its parts". (*Irish Times* 14 November 1989).

the make-up of the modern Abbey's ingrained identity. The immediate conservative backlash that followed Dowling's period of direction may have been short lived, with the positive effect of stirring up debate over the fundamental issue of who runs the Abbey, but the real success and legacy of Dowling's era -- the creation of a writer's theatre -- has been forgotten within the institution.

It is important to stress, however, that the Abbey, as it is under the direction of Garry Hynes, represents an entirely different theatre scene than the one contemplated by Joe Dowling. Playwrights may be helping themselves -- determining their own theatricality -- but they are doing so in a far more flexible and open theatrical environment than the one that confronted the struggling playwright during the early 1980s. In the last ten years, the Dublin theatre scene, specifically, and Irish theatre, in general, has moved away from the rigid confines of the Abbey/Gate duopoly. More venues have been opened and more small-scale companies have been created than at any other time in Irish theatre history. In parallel to this development, playwrights have become more concerned with the specific theatricality of their work, and less with the journalistic naturalism of previous eras, exploiting the dramatic potential of their medium in a way that suggests that there has been more, not less, developmental experimentation in Ireland, since the early 1980s.

It is here that the legacy of Joe Dowling's work has found its true authority. As the early chapters of this thesis demonstrate, during previous eras, the 1930s and 1960s, when the Abbey fell into determining policy by institutional propriety, new developments in Irish theatre, in general, tended to be halted. But after Dowling, individual playwrights and small theatre companies were not to be so easily put off. Informality and accessibility had been the watchwords of Dowling's approach to playwrights and this has led to a more dynamic and flexible understanding of how to stage drama beyond the bounds of the Abbey. Deirdre McQuillen, looking back on the ten years since she was employed at the

Abbey, sees a direct relationship between what they achieved within the Abbey before 1982 and what was to follow outside the Abbey. McQuillen states:

There was a definite legacy to Joe's work: the stage was set for smaller younger companies. Far more people wanted to get involved with drama and not everyone can work at the Abbey, so, with this incredible enthusiasm, new companies seemed to crop up all over the place. I think people tend to forget how boring Dublin could be for theatre before Joe Dowling came along. The Sheridans could be relied upon to put on a good show at the Project, but there was little else apart from the Abbey and the Gate. Since then, however, the whole scene has become less formal and consequently more exciting.⁷⁵

There is little doubt that there has been an increased interest in drama. The success of *Theatre Ireland*, along with the popularity of the comparatively new undergraduate drama and theatre studies courses at Trinity College and the University of Ulster, and the postgraduate courses at UCC and UCD, proves that there is a growing enthusiasm for drama in Ireland. This enthusiasm has led to an increase in new, small theatre companies and accessible and affordable venues. In the 1979 Dublin Theatre Festival, there were a total of nine venues, including the large theatres, and only three Irish based small-scale theatre companies and only two of these doing new plays.⁷⁶ By the 1992 Theatre Festival, however, the number of venues had increased to eighteen and there were eleven Irish small-scale companies, all producing new work.⁷⁷

There can be no doubt that the increase in the number of smaller companies on the Irish theatre scene has provided the playwright with wider opportunities for the presentation of new plays. There has been a growth in the number of established playwrights who have chosen to première their work in less conventional theatre companies. Tom Murphy started off the trend through his association with Druid Theatre Company during 1985, resulting in a new play,

75 Deirdre McQuillen. Interviewed in Dublin, 1 April 1992.

76 The companies were: Dublin Stage One, producing *American Buffalo*; the Project Arts Centre, producing Jim Sheridan's *Ha'penny Bridge* and Calck Hook Dance Company, producing *Doobally/Blackway*, by Tom MacIntyre.

77 Punchbag (*Fine Day for a Hunt*); Citywide Community Theatre Project (*Moths*); Point Fields Theatre (*Justice*); Storytellers Theatre Company (*Dixie*); Pigsback (*The Ash Fire*); Rough Magic (*The Emergency Session* and *The Dogs*); Second Level Theatre Company (Three short plays); Graffiti and Team Theatre Companies (TIE work); Co-Motion Theatre Company (*Frank Pig says Hello*) and Macas (*Tain*).

Bailegangaire, and a revised work, *Conversations on a Homecoming* (originally, *The White House*). Graham Reid, Neil Donnelly and Frank McGuinness have had plays produced by Team TIE company during the late 1980s. In more recent years, Tom MacIntyre felt able to provide Punchbag with his latest play, while Jim Norton chose in 1992, to première his new play, *Moonshine*, at Waterford's Red Kettle Theatre Company. Sean McCarthy founded his own company, Storyteller's Theatre Company, in 1992, for the presentation of his play *Dixie*. While few of these theatre companies are able to provide the same ongoing commitment and dramaturgical assistance that the Abbey pioneered under Dowling, they have at least continued the informality and accessibility of Dowling's approach, providing a ready and willing home for new drama and proving an indirect, yet very relevant, continuation of understanding of the importance of new drama to the development of Irish theatre.

But the dramaturgical progress at the Abbey, exemplified by the work of Tom MacIntyre, have provided a more direct influence upon the development of new drama, outside the Abbey. Observation of what was going on at the Peacock, and in particular, what Tom MacIntyre was doing, has influenced both the theatrical and technical approach to drama in Ireland. There is little doubt that both playwrights and directors are better educated as to the stylistic possibilities of their work and the various methods of creating new plays. Several directors and playwrights have voiced their appreciation of MacIntyre's work, suggesting that it has been a tremendous influence on their own approach to drama. Patrick Mason sees MacIntyre's work as a tremendous liberation for Irish theatre: "MacIntyre provided the rest of theatre with production possibilities. Here, were visual possibilities; gestural possibilities; musical possibilities: a whole world that had not been contemplated by the literary theatre." Mason recalls a conversation he had with McGuinness: "Frank told me that just having MacIntyre's work

happening, within a serious context, was a great positive influence."⁷⁸ It is clear that while McGuinness has attempted a different form of theatre and has never committed himself to a formal collaborative process, he has at times, allowed his creative vision to be influenced by a two-way workshop process. During the early months of 1988, he assembled a group of actors in Derry and instigated a series of improvisation sessions that clarified his vision of *Carthaginians*.⁷⁹ Michael Harding is another playwright who realised the importance of MacIntyre's work for the development of his own work, as he states: "Those five plays liberated Irish theatre from conventional assumptions of staging and communication. I feel that my approach to writing has been more flexible and more cryptic because of MacIntyre."⁸⁰ His workshopping approach to the recent production of *Misogynist* suggests a desire to encourage actors to get involved with the exploration of his drama. Marina Carr's early plays demonstrate a desire to explore the more absurd and off-beat interactions in Irish society. Her immediate influence in *Low in the Dark* (1989) and *Ullaloo* (1991) was her interest in Samuel Beckett, but she, too, felt the importance of MacIntyre as a guiding light to her work. In 1991, she was to comment:

I think that Tom has done such a lot for drama in this country. There is a belief now, that you can really explore what you, personally, find interesting and in your own personal way. Since I started to write, he has been a close friend and has encouraged me to continue writing and provided good critical support. It's all to do with confidence, and his work and his personality have been a great help in this area.⁸¹

Through work on *Low in the Dark* with Crooked Sixpence Theatre Company and more recently on *That Love Thing* (1991) with Tinderbox and Pigsback, Carr has shown a willingness to experiment with workshopping within an informal playwright's theatre environment. Before the workshop process had started for

⁷⁸ Mason, 30 July 1992.

⁷⁹ Information provided by one of the actors involved, Firenza Guidi, 28 August 1992. She talks of the openness and relaxed creativity in the workshop sessions, with McGuinness observing, taking notes and contributing as an equal, suggesting an approach to the work similar to that of *Joint Stock*.

⁸⁰ Harding, 30 July 1992.

⁸¹ Marina Carr. Interviewed in Dublin, 27 August 1991.

That Love Thing, Tim Loane of Tinderbox explained what the approach would be. "The final script will evolve through rehearsals and exchanges of ideas. But when it comes to putting pen to paper, it's the writer who has the monopoly. Nobody except Marina will write a single word."⁸² Loane's statement, suggesting an approach to collaborative creation similar to that of Joint Stock, demonstrates an appreciation of the strengths of true playwright's theatre from theatre practitioners as a whole. Such a respect for the playwright's positive contribution to the dramaturgy of the work suggests a growing understanding, awareness and knowledge of how the playwright can define the identity of a theatre company. Several theatre companies in Ireland, during the late 1980s, have developed a specific identity in parallel with playwrights who have defined their body of work, in turn, only in the context of the specific company.

Rough Magic are, today, one of the more established small-scale theatre companies working in Dublin. Founded in 1984 by Trinity College graduates, their original intention was to develop a programme of international and classic work. Some of their most successful productions have been of radical reappraisals of established plays. In 1991, they were to achieve acclaim for their production of Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*. In 1992, they followed this up with a brave attempt to rediscover Farquhar's *Love and a Bottle*. This last play was adapted by Declan Hughes, a founding member of the company and joint Artistic Director. This was not Hughes first attempts at writing. In 1990 Rough Magic had successfully staged his first play, *I Can't Get Started*: a production that not only proved their determination to develop the company's new writing repertoire, but demonstrated how this new direction was to evolve from within the company, determined by established company members developing an interest in writing. This pattern has been repeated with the presentation of *The Emergency Session* in 1992, a play by another founder member, Arthur Riorden and indirectly

⁸² Jane Coyle. "Profile of Tinderbox", *Theatre Ireland* 25, Spring 1991. p20.

by the presentation of Donal O'Kelly's *The Dogs* in the same year. O'Kelly was never a full member of Rough Magic, choosing to develop his original writing talent alongside his acting work, in isolation from any company, but in recent years he has become closely involved with the company through their collaboration on his play *Bat the Father Rabbit the Son* in 1989. This preoccupation with writers already closely associated with the company may seem to be tantamount to insularity, but it also demonstrates a belief that the playwright's work should be linked closely to the theatre company's needs and limitations. Hughes, Riorden and O'Kelly know what Rough Magic require in their plays and can "supply on demand" in a way similar to Shakespeare. Without being too conscious of the process, therefore, Rough Magic have developed into a playwright's theatre.

Other examples of this instinctive playwright's theatre can be seen in the work of Joe O'Byrne with Co-Motion Theatre Company and Marie Jones with Charabanc. O'Byrne formed Co-Motion with Declan Gorman in 1985 and, since then, the company has developed a reputation for large-scale, musical and visual theatre productions, moving away from the literary traditions of Irish theatre. O'Byrne's initial interest, therefore, was to find work suitable for such intentions and from this has evolved a growing reputation as a collaborative playwright. Four shows by the company, *Departed* (1988), *The Ghost of Saint Joan* (1989), *The Sinking of the Titanic* (1990) and *The Tain* (1991), were written by O'Byrne, and from the success of these productions, not only has his company established itself within the Irish theatre scene, but he himself has become acknowledged as a writer of some note. In 1990, he was awarded a bursary in Creative Literature by the Arts Council and, in 1992, short-listed for the Hennessy short story award.

Marie Jones is a published playwright and yet, like Joe O'Byrne, started her professional life as an actor and a director.⁸³ She founded Charabanc in 1983,

⁸³ Marie Jones. "The Hamster Wheel", David Grant (ed.). *The Crack in the Emerald*, (London: Nick Hern, 1990).

with a group of unemployed actresses who were unhappy about the limited opportunities for women in Irish theatre. Their intention was to find and encourage new plays which, according to their Statement of Policy, gives priority to strong female roles.⁸⁴ Their first move was to approach the Belfast playwright Martin Lynch for assistance. Lynch's response was to suggest that they write the plays for themselves.⁸⁵ With this advice in mind, the company started to devise their first play, *Lay Up Your Ends*, with Jones in overall control and Lynch as an adviser. They continued the exercise over the next four years, with Jones taking a firmer grasp on the creative side and, since 1987, the majority of the company's plays have been attributed solely to Jones. Like the company that furnished her work, she became a playwright out of necessity and her reputation as a playwright is linked intrinsically to the theatrical reputation of the company.

Perhaps the theatre company that has achieved the highest profile for developing coherent scripted drama relating specifically to the company's reputation is Passion Machine. Formed in 1984, by John Sutton and Paul Mercier, the company's policy was to present theatre that depicted contemporary everyday life and to attract a large audience for its work. At times patronised and dismissed as being a "working-class" company, Passion Machine has provided North Dublin with a passionate cultural focus and, between 1984 and 1989, produced ten original plays with an emphasis on the preoccupations of the specific audience that flocked to its work. Three playwrights, in particular, became involved with the process: Paul Mercier himself; Brendan Gleeson and Roddy Doyle, now, better known for his "Barrytown Trilogy" of novels.⁸⁶ Through concentrating on the needs of the company, the playwrights were given a specific starting point for their writing, providing a natural cushion from the self-consciousness of such creative work. As with the creative development of Rough Magic, Co-Motion and Charabanc, Passion Machine created a strong individual

⁸⁴ Charabanc Theatre Company. "Statement of Policy", 17 January 1990.

⁸⁵ See Fionnuala O'Conner. "Theatre from the Mills", *Irish Times*, 1 August 1983.

⁸⁶ *The Commitments* (1987); *The Snapper* (1990) and *The Van* (1991).

identity that united with the coherent consistency of individual productions provided by the singular development of the specific writers involved.

It could be argued, therefore, that through the work of such companies, the working methods of MacIntyre's Image drama at the Peacock have not only been emulated but developed. MacIntyre, Hickey and Mason created, from developmental ideas that were continued from production to production, a specific identity for their work, but could never have been expected to influence the overall identity of the company to which they belonged. What was impossible for playwright's theatre experiments at the National Theatre have become reality for the smaller theatre companies. They had less pressure to succeed and less need to encourage a universality of drama: in short, they could be artistically selfish, encouraging the specific ideas of the playwright that determined the existence of the company.

It could also be argued, however, that without the MacIntyre work being presented at such a high profile theatre as the Peacock, such methodology would never have received such intense consideration and without the administrative developments of Dowling and Sean McCarthy, such companies would never have had the confidence to trust their own instincts. Indeed, McCarthy would be in favour of the present theatre system, believing that one of the great problems for his work in playwright development was that there were so few theatre companies in which further development could have occurred. He states:

In many ways the Abbey was always a disadvantage for playwrights because, as the National Theatre, it should be seen as the place they are finally aiming for. If they start off at the Abbey, where do they go? Certainly the Abbey has the facilities to assist the writer and it should continue to do that, but after a certain period of being under the Abbey's wing, writers should then go off and work for other companies and only return after their work has refined. But the problem for playwrights, when I was at the place, was that there was nowhere else for them to go.⁸⁷

What McCarthy's comments tend to suggest, therefore, is that the Abbey, as a National Theatre, can never be completely committed to the concepts of

⁸⁷ McCarthy, 3 April 1992.

writer's theatre or of playwright's theatre. For all the specificity that surrounded McCarthy's and Dowling's policy during the early 1980s, the Institution is always going to have a wider identity -- watering down the intensity of developmental work -- with its responsibility for showcasing the best work from the traditional and international repertoire and, more importantly, for reflecting the theatre community that surrounds it.

As the three historical chapters of this Thesis demonstrate, the problem for the Abbey, in its role of reflecting the theatrical community that surrounds it, has been that, traditionally, few developments in Irish theatre have occurred outside its walls. With such a limited horizon, the Theatre tended to respond to its role as custodians of Irish theatre, through a reflectionary celebration of its own history. By opening up the Abbey to the outside world, by encouraging writers to contribute their own individual insight within the company, by allowing such radical experiments as MacIntyre's work, Dowling and McCarthy broke the vicious circle of Abbey Theatre self-consciousness and brought fresh enthusiasm to Irish drama that, in turn, led to a coherent Irish theatre community outside the National Theatre. In 1992, this development was acknowledged by the Tron Theatre in Glasgow, who instigated a Festival of New Irish Theatre. The object and the context of this festival was made clear by Michael Boyd, Artistic Director of the Tron Theatre:

This Festival celebrates the depth and variety of the next generation of work from all over Ireland. Playwrights like Dermot Bolger, Martin Lynch and Donal O'Kelly. Companies like Rough Magic, Pigsback, Macnas and Replay cover the whole spectrum of contemporary theatre, from interactive theatre-in-education, through new plays, exciting revivals of the classics, and highly visual epic drama.⁸⁸

Boyd was unlikely to have invited the Abbey to such a festival, but he would have to acknowledge that without the Abbey paving the way for new developments in Irish theatre, such a festival would have been impossible.

⁸⁸ Michael Boyd. "Introduction", *Festival of New Irish Theatre Programme*, 14 October - 14 November 1992.

With a new and more expansive Irish theatre community, the Abbey, as National Theatre, has been given a clear mandate for its role as central showcase for Irish drama. Garry Hynes has been active in encouraging a new generation of talent into the Abbey, who have, in the words of McCarthy, been "refined" by successful work outside the Institution. It could be argued that her own bold interpretations of Irish classics are in themselves a celebration of her already established theatrical identity and she has followed this up by encouraging directors, like Paul Mercier, the opportunity to develop their specific style within the institution.⁸⁹ Theatre companies, like Red Kettle, have performed on the Abbey Stage⁹⁰ and playwrights and actors from the new generation, who have developed their talent outside the Abbey, are now welcomed to perform at the Abbey.⁹¹ Today, thanks to the developments of the early 1980s, there is a more active free flow of talent between the Abbey and other companies: Hynes has inherited an Abbey that is not writ large in a small Irish theatre community, but an Abbey writ small in a growing external world.

Today, the Irish playwright has less need of the Abbey. But it could be argued that the Abbey still needs playwrights. When Sean O'Casey turned his back on the Theatre in 1928, the Abbey felt confident enough, in its role of established National Theatre, to deny the importance of this defection.⁹² The Institution survived, but in a less than coherent state. O'Casey had defined the Abbey during the 1920s in the same way as Yeats and Synge had done during the first decade of the century. Similarly, the introduction of the policy of writer's theatre by Joe Dowling reaffirmed a specific sense of purpose for the Abbey, allowing it to be more than a reflective national theatre.

89 Mercier directed the 1991 production of Niall Williams's play *The Murphy Initiative*. The production was not a success, but this does not weaken the importance of allowing Mercier the opportunity to develop his talents on a national stage.

90 Red Kettle's production of Jim Nolan's *Moonshine* was staged at the Abbey in the spring of 1992.

91 To name a few: playwrights Dermot Bolger and Marina Carr and actors Marie Mullen, Brian Doherty, Mick Lally and Sean McGinley.

92 See Lennox Robinson's dismissive comments quoted in Chapter Two.

It is true that, as more and more enthusiastic individuals begin to define their own theatrical vision within separate theatre companies, the Abbey could quite easily remain active in the role of benign national theatre. But as I stated in the Introduction, many Irish theatre practitioners believe that the Abbey is more than just a national theatre, as Fitz-Simon stresses: "We don't consider it our function to do what other national theatres, such as the British National Theatre, do, which is to present a wide spectrum of world theatre."⁹³ Joe Dowling resigned over the principle of singular direction, not so that future artistic directors could plan a programme of reflection or of imitation, no matter how exciting such a programme might be. He was concerned with the idea of individual definition determining a specific identity for the Abbey, irrespective of its traditional inheritance or of its role as cultural showcase.

The Abbey Theatre may well be more accurately described as a national theatre than as a writer's theatre, but the attempt to make the Abbey "the home of the living writer" made it a vibrant, living national theatre rather than a gentle, museum theatre. If the Abbey wants to be different from other national theatres it must ensure that such pragmatic coherence is continued into the next generation.

⁹³ Christopher Fitz-Simon, 1 August 1990.



Figure Seventeen. Patrick Mason, Noel Pearson and Brian Friel at the Abbey Theatre Celebration Lunch, in honour of the *Dancing at Lughnasa* Tony Awards Triumph, Abbey Theatre, 19 June 1992.

Conclusion

It is my intention to try and draw together the arguments considered in this thesis, to give a clear indication of the extent of the Abbey Theatre's practical relationship with playwrights.

As I made clear in the last part of Chapter Six, the Abbey's role as Irish National Theatre has tended to discount the legitimacy of its role as a writer's theatre. To justify being called a writer's theatre I believe a theatre has to provide active encouragement and assistance, allowing the playwright constant access to the means of production in order to determine the dramatic validity of his/her work. For the most part, the Abbey has defined its purpose through varied, yet external considerations, attempting to construct an identity from outward considerations of propriety rather than allowing playwrights the freedom to express their own personal identity.

Even in the pioneering years, at the turn of the century, the Abbey responded to the external expectations of a European theatre movement that demanded a literary isolation for the playwright. The Irish dramatist's individual opportunities were further compromised by the Theatre's association with the Irish Literary Revival, whereby the desire to build up a large, coherent and acknowledged body of work tended to limit the chances of practical association and ongoing development. The Abbey built up a large collection of plays, but without a recognised group of playwrights actively working within the theatre. Only J. M. Synge, the one acknowledged writer of genius from the Abbey's first decade, seemed to experience the influence of personality and human contact, made available to him through his unique position on the Theatre's Board.

As Ireland moved into the early years of independence, the Abbey became acknowledged as a funded National Theatre. This development only reinforced

the distance between institution and playwright. With the nonchalant approach and eventual rejection of the work of Sean O'Casey, the Abbey expressed the belief that the institution was now more important than the playwright. The Theatre moved forward, hand-in-hand, with the rest of the cultural establishment, defining its repertoire with a sense of nationalistic propriety and reflective self-importance

By the 1960s, the Abbey eventually caught-up with the changing face of Irish society, which had attempted during the Post-War years to establish a more international perception of Ireland's existence. With the catalyst of a demanding new theatre, the Abbey established under the guidance of an artistic director, a new and varied repertoire that acknowledged its position as a national theatre in the international world. It was hoped that the more interesting European influenced plays that were produced would indirectly influence and encourage the Irish playwright. But without the facilities or inclination to actively support the efforts of the budding dramatist, isolation and separation remained an inevitability.

In the years before Joe Dowling was appointed Artistic Director in 1978, therefore, the Abbey was failing the playwright. Due, no doubt, to its ingrained belief in an historical inheritance, the Abbey had seen little need for long-term development or specific policy. Such assumptions had been consolidated by the complacent belief that the Irish playwright would always turn to the Abbey. New drama had always been part of its repertoire, but this had been due to the fact that, for the most part, Irish playwrights had had nowhere else to turn. When other theatres had come along, such as the Pike during the 1950s, the Abbey's distant and complacent attitude to new playwrights had been exposed.

With Joe Dowling's appointment, the Abbey Theatre appeared to be transformed. The principle of artistic director having overall artistic control was established and Dowling exploited this with pragmatic policy decisions that changed the Abbey into a vibrant working theatre. Dowling's main focus was on

new writing: stressing a commitment to make the Abbey "the home of the living writer". For the first time in the Theatre's history, an actual writer's policy was instigated, following similar lines as the Royal Court, whereby the playwright could consider him/herself a member of the theatre company. Under Script Editor Sean McCarthy's guidance, writers were encouraged to become professional, were given clear and practical dramaturgical assistance in completing scripts, advised on and given commitment for possible future projects and encouraged to contribute to the rehearsal process. Dowling had made the Abbey into a true writer's theatre, and from his efforts came the work of Donnelly, Farrell and Reid.

The confidence and freedom made possible for the playwright by Dowling's attempts to create "the home of the living writer" were exemplified by the work of Tom MacIntyre. The five plays produced, in collaboration with director Patrick Mason and a group of actors, can be seen as the most experimental work to have been staged by the National Theatre. MacIntyre proved that, given active involvement within the rehearsal room, the playwright can express and develop a true theatricality that weakens the implied strengths of literary isolation. It was to the Abbey's great credit that this experimental playwright's theatre was allowed to develop within its walls and represents the high point for the National Theatre's relationship with the dramatist.

While the Abbey deserves credit for allowing MacIntyre's drama to be staged, the growing isolation of this work from the repertoire as a whole -- the production team's need to be 'franchised' -- seemed to expose the difficulty of constructing a long-term and permanent place for such experimental development within the wider responsibilities of the Abbey. Even before *The Great Hunger* was staged in 1983, Joe Dowling was forced into dealing with the financial limitations and the establishment preoccupations of the Theatre. The 1982 production of Desmond Forristal's *Kolbe* and the 1985 production of Ulick O'Connor's *Execution* tend to demonstrate that the historical inheritance of the Abbey could not be removed.

The immediate regression into Boardroom intransigence that followed Dowling's resignation tends to imply that the attempts to create "the home of the living writer" during the early 1980s and the image theatre experiments that followed, were isolated instances of writer's theatre and playwright's theatre -- instigated by a headstrong and visionary Artistic Director -- and have had little effect on the overall identity of the institution. New work has continued to be staged at the Abbey, but only as part of the general repertoire of a National Theatre that, even after the end of the period of "stagnation" during the late 1980s, has tended to see its responsibility to Irish theatre as being reflectionary rather than developmental.

It could be argued, however, that Dowling's efforts have not counted for nothing. As I suggest in the last chapter, the freedom and informality of Dowling's era has rubbed off on a wider theatre environment, encouraging wide scale development of the Irish theatre scene. New theatre companies have established themselves and have attempted their own developmental work. New playwrights express a clear acknowledgement of the experiments of Tom MacIntyre and have explored wider methods of construction than have previously been seen in Ireland. In some cases, playwrights and theatre companies have evolved together, demonstrating an instinctive form of playwright's theatre that was ultimately never possible in such a self-conscious and established theatre as the Abbey.

Garry Hynes's Abbey Theatre has had a clear and exciting external theatre scene to reflect upon: it has achieved a balanced programme of solid drama; encouraged new actors; shown the occasional new play from an up-and-coming playwright and has attempted to show the quality of Irish drama to the outside world. But as Hynes announces her decision not to reapply for her job at the end of the year, the Irish theatre community and the Irish media have again raised the seemingly inconclusive debate on the relevance and identity of the Abbey Theatre. It is clear that, to the majority of people working in Irish theatre, the

Abbey has to be more than just a National Theatre within the European tradition. A specific and coherent identity is required. But whether setting the Abbey up in this way -- demanding a coherence without considering specific policy -- can assist in creating an indigenous unity is a moot point. The Board of Directors, as they settle to their task of selecting a successor to Garry Hynes, would do well to remember that the most coherent period in recent Abbey history was provided by a pragmatic Artistic Director, concerned less with overall identity and more with allowing playwrights the opportunity to develop their own personal vision. In doing this, Dowling not only created an exciting and accessible national theatre, but influenced coherent experimental development -- both inside the Theatre and outside -- and provided a practical and realistic foundation to the Abbey's reputation as a writer's theatre.

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