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J. M. SYNGE: MAN OF THE THEATRE.

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J. M. SYNGE: MAN OF THE THEATRE

by
Arvid Frederic Sponberg

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(English Language & Literature)
in The University of Michigan
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Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Leo F. McNamara, Chairman
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DEDICATION

**To my parents ,
Harold and Grace Sponberg**

and

**to my wife ,
Bonnie**

for everything they have done

and

for everything they have helped me to be

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude for encouragement and assistance to the following persons and institutions: the members of my committee named on the title page, and especially to the chairman, Prof. Leo McNamara; to Dr. Henriette C. K. Naeseth, Dr. Dorothy Parkander, Dr. Roald Tweet, and Miss Zilpha Colee; to Dr. Gwin Kolb and Dr. Arthur Heiserman; to Dr. J. L. Styan, Dr. Frank Huntley, and Dr. Robert Super; to Dr. Richard Hesper; to Mr. John Cronin and Mr. Michael Allen; to Professor Ann Saddlemyer; to Mrs. Dorothy Czamanske; to Augustana College, the University of Chicago, the University of Michigan, the Queen's University of Belfast; to the Trinity College Library, Dublin, the National Library of Ireland, and the Abbey Theatre; to the Ford Foundation, the Northwest Grocery, the Ford Motor Company, Henry Ford Community College, and Valparaiso University.

PREFACE

The subject of this dissertation is 'John Millington Synge. Its purpose is to determine the nature of certain "external requirements" to which Synge subjected himself while writing for the actors and audience of the Irish National Theatre from 1902 until his death in 1909; to determine the extent of the influence of these requirements on Synge; and to determine how and where this influence is reflected in his plays.

Synge's positions on matters of dramatic theory have been studied often and I have used these studies for support but also as a point of departure. I define requirements to include (a) the size and shape of the stage and (b) the training and talents of the actors; (c) the problems of managing a theatre company; and (d) the kind of audience Synge desired as compared with the kind of audience which actually saw and responded to his plays.

This dissertation is not an attempt to re-tell the story of the Abbey Theatre nor is it an attempt to write biography. I have assumed more than average familiarity with the events of the founding of the Abbey Theatre, the early years of the Irish Literary Movement, and with the personalities involved in that history. I have made this assumption precisely to avoid having to re-tell tales which have been told many times already and far better than I could do it. This is intended as a finer, closer look at Synge's role in these well-known events and to draw some conclusions about the influence of those events on his work.

Some of the sources of this study are not generally available; most of them are. The dissertation is basically a compilation and correlation of data, much of it scattered about in one work or another. Many pieces of data are only of marginal significance in the works in which they originally appear. But pulled together and arranged as they are here, I believe they shed new light on some old and, in at least one case, neglected problems.

All citations of Synge's works are from the Oxford edition. Roman and Arabic numerals in parentheses at the end of a citation refer to volume and page number, respectively, in the Oxford edition. In citing Synge's letters, I have followed his punctuation and emphasis, unless otherwise noted.

Not all the entries in the bibliography name the publisher. I have followed the MLA Style Sheet which changed its rules with respect to my research in midstream, and I have not bothered to re-find sources upon which I made bibliographical notes before the change, assuming that the old system provided sufficient identification of a source.

After we have beheld splendid characters playing their parts on the great theatre of the world, with all the advantages of stage effect and decoration, we anxiously beg to be admitted behind the scenes, that we may take a nearer view of the actors and actresses.

--Maria Edgeworth

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iii

PREFACE iv

LIST OF APPENDICES vii

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS viii

CHAPTER

 I. THE STAGE 1

 II. THE FAYS, THE ACTORS, AND SYNGE 17

 III. OTHER COLLABORATORS 41

 IV. SYNGE AND HIS AUDIENCE 67

 V. THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN 93

 VI. RIDERS TO THE SEA 105

 VII. THE TINKER'S WEDDING 116

 VIII. THE WELL OF THE SAINTS 131

 IX. THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD 144

 X. DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS 161

 XI. CONCLUSION 172

APPENDICES 181

BIBLIOGRAPHY 189

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix	Page
A. A floor plan of the Abbey Theatre showing the relationship of the stage to the auditorium	181
B. A floor plan showing the relationship of the total stage area to the effective acting area, including sightlines .	183
C. Photocopies of the stageplots from promptbooks in the W. G. Fay Papers in the National Library of Ireland . . .	185

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

For convenience and variety, but with no rigid consistency,
I have used the following abbreviations for the plays of J. M. Synge:

RS - Riders to the Sea

SG - The Shadow of the Glen

TW - The Tinker's Wedding

WS - The Well of the Saints

PW - The Playboy of the Western World

DS - Deirdre of the Sorrows

CHAPTER I

THE STAGE

In his book All I Can Manage, More than I Could, a study of the plays of Samuel Beckett, Alec Reid wrote:

When a man writes a piece for performance in a theatre, he at once subjects himself to certain external requirements. He must so construct his play that the actors can be seen and heard, and he must mould it into some framework of acts and scenes: Such limitations are the basic rules of the game, and if they are not observed the piece cannot be performed.¹

It has been noted, often, that William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, and J. M. Synge came to the writing of drama with little experience of the difficulties imposed by the "rules of the game." In 1894, Yeats had been praised in London for Land of Heart's Desire. But when the Irish Literary Theatre produced its first plays in 1899, George Moore, because of his experience with the Independent Theatre, knew best how to satisfy the "requirements." None of the other founders felt competent at the time. But by 1910, when Lennox Robinson became manager, Yeats could advise him that the roles of manager, producer, and dramatist were synergetic. Robinson recalled that Yeats urged him to accept the position because "a dramatist should know his instrument and to make me a good dramatist I should work in a theatre." Their discussion of Robinson's duties included references to Ibsen and especially to Yeats, whose "early plays had to be re-written and re-written" because they were composed "'before I had any practical experience . . . they were full of defects.'" But he had "worked hard at production . . . and in ten years he had learned his craft."² Willie Fay

had been a witness to that progress and commented upon it in his book, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre. He remembers a production of The Countess Cathleen and

. . . the admirable delivery of Mr. Yeats' verse which was not so speakable then as in his later plays for he had had little experience of writing for the stage. Later he had the Abbey Company to experiment with and made On Baile's Strand as easy to speak as any play of Shakespeare's.³

After she helped found the Irish Literary Theatre, Lady Gregory absorbed theatrical lore for five years before her first play was produced. She records her hesitant beginning in Our Irish Theatre:

I began by writing bits of dialogue, when wanted. Mr. Yeats used to dictate parts of Diarmuid and Grania to me, and I would suggest a sentence here and there. Then I, as well as another, helped to fill spaces in Where There is Nothing.⁴

The value of the theatre as an inspiration was not lost upon Lady Gregory nor upon the other playwrights who made their reputations on the stage of the Abbey:

It is the existence of the Theatre that has created play-writing among us. Mr. Boyle had written stories, and only turned to plays when he had seen our performances in London. Mr. Colum claimed to have turned to drama for our sake, and Mr. Fitzmaurice, Mr. Ray, and Mr. Murray--a National schoolmaster--would certainly not have written but for the chance of having their work acted.⁵

Synge's theatrical background was no more elaborate. Professor Saddlemyer notes that during the '1890s, Synge's diaries record only two visits to the theatre. In September, 1892, he saw Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree in Hamlet in Dublin. In Paris, six years later, he saw a performance of Ghosts at Antoine's Theatre. Dr. Saddlemyer believes his early scenarios (before 1896) were meant more for reading than for the stage and observes that:

Not until he had become a director of the Abbey Theatre and began to establish his own dramatic method do his manuscripts begin to indicate a conscious sense of Stagecraft.⁶

Synge did not become a director until 1905, after In the Shadow of the Glen and Riders to the Sea had been produced. Those first two plays are simpler than the last four in conception and execution. In Chapters V-X we shall see that as Synge's sense of stagecraft improved, so did his ability to treat complex themes and characters.

Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Synge learned stagecraft from Frank and Willie Fay. In matters of adapting plays to various kinds of stages, no persons in Ireland were more expert. During the 1890's Frank Fay produced dozens of amateur productions all over Ireland. He trained the Abbey actors and knew the deficiencies of Irish authors who showed a "lack of familiarity with the footlights." He knew it was impossible to writeactable plays in the study. He knew that Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Moliere were intimately connected with theatres as actors and managers. He knew, as well, that a play is not complete when the author finishes writing: "a great deal has to be done at rehearsals."⁷

As a dramatist learns his craft, one of his first responsibilities is to know the limitations and possibilities of the particular stage for which he writes. The stage of the Abbey Theatre presented the playwright with some special problems. An understanding of these problems will deepen our appreciation of the writers, producers, actors, and, more particularly, J. M. Synge.

The first limitation of the stage was its size: small; the second, its shape: long and narrow, like a shoe box for one shoe, with a rectangular opening in one of the long sides. (See attached scheme.) The dimensions were width (wall to wall): 40 feet; width (proscenium opening): 21 feet; depth (curtainline to back wall): 16 feet, 4 inches.⁸ Willie Fay recalled an "acting area" of about "20 feet by 15

feet."⁹ The height of the proscenium opening was 14 feet. The auditorium was 42 feet wide and 51 feet deep. It seated 562 persons.¹⁰ These measurements imply certain sight lines for which a scene designer would have to account. Ideally, no member of the audience should be able to see over or past any part of the wings, flats, or drops (unless the playwright intends it). To illustrate the limitations of the Abbey Theatre, I have appended two diagrams to the end of the dissertation. The first is a floor plan showing the dimensions of the stage in relation to the dimensions of the auditorium. The second diagram shows the dimensions of the usable acting area in relation to the dimensions of the stage.

The stage presented other difficulties for the production of plays:

There were only two dressing-rooms at first and, while they were large, there were few other facilities. There was no scene dock and all scenery and properties had to be stored underneath the stage. The shallow stage presented one great problem for the actors; if they had to cross the stage out of sight of the audience there was no covering backcloth. They had to go out by the stage door and walk along a lane leading to a small door at the far side of the stage. Even when later additional dressing-rooms and a scene dock were provided on the left hand side the same procedure had to be followed owing to the shallowness of the stage.¹¹

The lighting of the stage was designed and installed by W. G. Fay. It was perfectly simple standard stage lighting as used in almost every theatre at that time "except that there were no moveable spots." There would have been no place to mount them and their use "would have offended against the very foundations of Abbey acting"; Fay also notes that there was no cyclorama and adds that "even a decent backcloth was difficult because the stage was so shallow."¹² Yeats had to rein in his visions of elaborate lighting. Professor Saddlemyer notes that::

The Abbey Theatre had limited lighting equipment only, and Yeats eventually was forced to give up his dreams of diffuse and reflected lighting.¹³

The auditorium has been described best in an unidentified article contained in W. A. Henderson's scrapbooks in the National Library of Ireland. The stalls held 178 persons. Behind them the pit held 186 persons and both sections "ranged in an upward slope." The balcony curved around three sides and sat 198 persons also ranging upwards. "Polished brass work" separated the seats upholstered in "scarlet leather." There was no gallery above the balcony and all passages "within the interior, and also leading into it," were "richly carpeted." From the center of the ceiling there hung a large lamp and 14 triple lamps "about" the theatre. All of the lighting was electric. The wall colors harmonized with the rest of the interior and the walls bear medallions of the city's arms, an Irish harp, and "other devices appropriate to the national character of the entertainments." Orchestra space could be augmented by the removal of the front row of seats. Corporation safety, heating, lighting, and ventilation requirements were "strictly complied with." There was also a safety curtain.¹⁴

The effects of the limited resources of the Abbey stage were seen in the sets and set designs. As Professor Saddlemyer indicates, Yeats yearned for powerful, yet simple illusion. In 1902, after seeing a production of Dido and Aeneas and The Masque of Love, designed by Gordon Craig, Yeats wrote to the editor of The Saturday Review:

I saw the only admirable stage scenery of our time, for Mr. Gordon Craig has discovered how to decorate a play with severe, beautiful, simple effects of colour, that leave the imagination free to follow all the suggestions of the play. Realistic scenery takes the imagination captive and is at best but bad landscape painting, but Mr. Craig's scenery is a new and distinct art. It is something that can only exist in the theatre. It cannot even be separated from the figures that move before it.¹⁵

Yeats was attracted to the Fays by their power to speak beautifully. But he was impressed, too, with their ability to produce

beautiful stage effects with a minimum of material and expense. The Fays rejected realistic settings for Yeats' The Hour Glass. Maire nic Shuibhlaigh records that to achieve a "classic simplicity of decor," they relied merely on background of dark green tapestries, a rough desk, a heavy book, a bell pull, and a wrought iron bracket holding the hour glass. She also notes that in 1911, Gordon Craig, ironically, tried a setting with "manoeverable screens and passage ways, characters masked and brightly dressed. . . . Many considered it out of place at the Abbey where box scenes were always employed." (Emphasis added.)¹⁶

We can get an idea of how W. G. Fay went about designing these sets from an article in a New York paper dated 20 February, 1908. The Fays had left the Abbey and had gone to New York to perform Irish plays for American audiences. Undoubtedly Willie drew entirely on his amateur and Abbey experiences.

There is a clearly defined color scheme in the scenic setting of each piece staged by the Irish National Theatre Company. And this is brought out in slight experiments by Mr. Fay himself who will take the theatre an afternoon or two before the first performance, light the scenery by the footlights, and borders and then, standing in the auditorium, scheme out "a little bit of color for it all." Often his first touches seem aimless or incongruous but soon it is clear that a fine emphasis is got by these judicious splashes of color.¹⁷

The "box scenes" and splashes of color are very evident in the surviving prompt books of the Fays, now stored in the National Library of Ireland. Appended are examples of set plans for two of William Boyle's successful plays, The Building Fund and The Eloquent Dempsey.¹⁸ They are helpful in revealing how the Fays visualized the acting area of the Abbey stage, at least for these plays. Two features are especially noteworthy: (a) The Fays were not afraid to reduce the already small acting area to provide doorways up stage. (Thus, it was not always necessary for an actor to leave the theatre if he had to exit left and re-enter

on the right.) Further reduction of the acting area resulted from the diagonal placement of room "walls" which prevented the actor from getting "lost" in the dramatically weak upstage left and right areas. This design would also enable the audience better to see the entire set, especially those who were seated on the extreme right and left of the house.

(b) Given the reduced acting area, the Fays compensated by using a minimal amount of furniture and arranging much of it against the walls. This freed stage center for the actors.

In the scene from The Eloquent Dempsey, Fay has indicated where he wishes the characters to be at the end of Dempsey's speech. The arrangement reveals the Fays coping with the limitations of the acting area. First, we note that the general pattern of positions roughly reflects the shape of the set, giving a good view of each character to as many of the audience as possible. Second, we note that the crosses leading up to this position belong to Dr. Bunbury; further, those crosses are strictly functional. They temporarily give center stage to Bunbury during his first speech and then indicate his intention to leave. The small area will not permit much movement and there is none. Third, the arrangement focuses attention on Dempsey, the character whose words and actions are of greatest interest. He occupies the strongest position on the stage throughout the scene. The other characters hold weaker positions and are turned toward Dempsey, subtly directing the audience to do the same. As we shall learn in Chapter III, curtailing movement and amplifying attention were two of the foremost principles of the theatrical art of the Fays. But we must not forget that those principles developed, at least in part, from attempts to prevail over the limitations of the small acting area.

Similarly, the costumes, especially during the first few years, reflect efforts to overcome the limitations of low funds and small skills. Simplicity of style and color helped produce a stately effect for the plays of Yeats, but they also eased the burden on the treasury and the seamstress. W. Fay could purchase and dye the cloth; Miss Hormiman could sew the costumes, and Yeats could be satisfied that he was leading the theatre out of the dark Prison of "Realism."

Kathleen Ni Houlihan

Patrick - Boneen, Kneebreeches, Stockings, Pampooties
 Michael - same plus hat
 Peter - White sleeved waistcoat, Kneebreeches, Stockings,
 Hat (soft)

Pot of Broth

Beggarman - Torn black morning coat, Dark corduroy trousers,
 Grey shirt, Canvas shoes, Brown soft hat
 John - Light-coloured sleeved waistcoat, Soft blk hat, Shoes
 Sibby - Red skirt, Red bodice, Check apron, White handkerchief,
 ring

The Hour Glass

Wise man - Blue purple cloak, Black half-flowing wig
 Fool - Long haired red wig, Blue tunic and trows, Skin
 pampooties, Leather bag and belt, Shears, Dandelion,
 Cross-garterings
 3 Pupils - Tunics, Trows, Pampooties, Cross gartering,
 half-flow wigs, belts
 2 Children - Tunics, Trows, Pampooties, Cross gartering¹⁹

Synge's plays required realistic treatment, but, fortunately, real pampooties, native flannel, spinning wheels, and the like were not hard to acquire.

The scenery for some of Synge's plays did well to suggest a real setting. In a letter to Lady Gregory, Yeats wrote that his brother "Jack is to design scenery for Synge's play; some tall wings, a cottage and two big chairs."²⁰ Yeats gives more detail. The background had, "Mountains in one or two flat colors . . . without detail, ash trees and

red salleys with something of a recurring pattern in their woven boughs."²¹

While Yeats could argue that these designs helped express what "No eye has ever seen,"²² it is apparent from other comments that the company was contending strenuously with limitations of skill. In his book Curtain Up, Lennox Robinson tells of finding in the Abbey wardrobe costumes from Yeats' plays made more than thirty years earlier,

many of them stitched by Miss Horniman's own fingers. They are incredibly graceless and ugly, cumsy material cut skimpily and often broidered with mock fur which would not tempt a puppy.²³

Perhaps even more revealing is the difference expressed by the Abbey's carpenter Seaghan Barlow when confronted with the task of executing the designs of Charles Ricketts;

. . . the directors had decided to produce [The Well of the Saints] in the autumn with a proper setting; it had already been done, but only with such scenery as we could at the time afford. Mr. Synge went to London to get designs by Mr. Ricketts. When he returned they were handed over to me, and I felt a bit nervous when I saw what I was expected to do. But Mr. Ricketts had sent very clear and definite instructions about the painting and I had plenty of time so I did my best.²⁴

Yeats could find matter to praise in the designs but the effects on the audiences of these "limitations" could hardly have escaped his notice. The empty seats testified nightly to the desire of Dublin playgoers for something other than what "no eye has ever seen." The newspapers were quick to express in words what the box office receipts expressed in numbers. Among the W. A. Henderson Papers in the National Library of Ireland, an unidentified review of an early production of The Well of the Saints notes that the theatre was "by no means crowded" and asks if the Abbey "should not concede a little to the frailty of ordinary popular tastes. . . . It is, we know, heresy to suggest an amplification of the scenery that, it is said, would unduly distract attention from the literary matter." But there were periods "when a little

distraction from the long drawn dialogues would have been a relief." The scenery was "particularly crude." The background of the first and last act was a tolerably well painted mountain more reminiscent of West than East Ireland.²⁵

This review obliquely acknowledges the existence of Yeats' philosophy of scene design and those who wish to explore it should read his words in Samhain and Plays and Controversies. But no amount of Yeats' theorizing should make us forget that the practices of the Abbey managers and producers were also a response to the conditions imposed upon them by the size and shape of the stage and playhouse. Any playhouse imposes conditions more or less restrictive. And moving from one stage to another might be less an improvement than a swap.

Frank Fay knew this well. Compare his words about the Camden Street Playhouse with the description of the Abbey on page 4.

But I find the stage very small and the want of dressing-rooms makes it very difficult to manage about the scenery, as all your actors have to stand against the walls while it is being changed. I think, however, we can struggle through if we don't attempt very large pieces.²⁶

The size and shape of the stage determines the kind of play which can be performed upon it, and even the nature of a play composed for it. The Playboy of the Western World is one of the more famous examples of "stage" influence in Irish drama. Lady Gregory writes that Synge

. . . had first planned the opening act in the ploughed field, where the quarrel between Christy and his father took place. But when he thought of the actual stage, he could not see any possible side wings for that "wide windy corner of high distant hills." He had also thought that the scene of the return of the father should be at the very door of the chapel where Christy was to wed Pegeen. But in the end all took place within the one cottage room. We all tried at that time to write our plays so as to require as little scene shifting as possible for the sake of economy of scenery and of stage hands.²⁷

Apparently the Abbey directors finally became impatient with the limitations of the stage. In an intriguing footnote, M. Bourgeois, Synge's early critic and biographer, writes

No doubt [the technical uncouthness of the "average" Irish play] is largely due to the fact that the Irish plays ought really to be played (as Shakespeare was played) on a "platform stage" with the audience round three sides of it. Drama so primitive is half pageant, and demands a closer touch with the audience. Recent experiments at the Abbey Theatre have marvelously proved this.²⁸

Bourgeois, however, gives no details about these experiments and I have been unable to learn anything about them. Such details as who was involved, how the stage was altered, what plays were used, would be of interest.

Nevertheless, as long as five years after the departure of the Fays, Bourgeois described several adjustments to the restrictions of the Abbey of which Frank and Willie would have approved, despite their disaffection with the management. Bourgeois writes that the "diminutive" house and "limited" resources make "out of place" stentorian voices or tawdry stage appliances. He notes that "in almost all cases" the scenery is elementary and describes as "usual" the "cabin interior with the typical halfdoor. Stage mechanism is "remarkable for its absence." "The backcloth has been so designed that it sets out the characters in the cast without in any degree competing with them in importance."²⁹

The phrase "stentorian voices" is of interest because the Abbey actors were known above all else for their beautiful speech. A stentorian voice was not a hallmark of a pupil of Frank or W. G. Fay. Not everyone, though, was happy with these accommodations of the acting style to the resources of the house. Refer momentarily to the analysis of the scene from The Eloquent Dempsey on page 7.

Then consider James Flannery's note in his study of Miss Horniman, who approved "Norreys

Connell saying that Fay made the actors 'stand around like "stuck pigs" so as to be more effective for himself.'" Here she was obviously referring to the Fay method of blocking or stage composition, in which focus on principal characters was brought about through positioning of the actors rather than through traditional stage business.³⁰

The size of the theatre undoubtedly had one beneficial effect on the creation of drama. It enhanced, not without friction, the collaboration of producer, writer, designer, actor, and stage hand. As Una Ellis-Fermor has written:

Co-operation between the different workers was necessarily very close and, indeed many of them filled several functions at once. This meant an almost ideal condition of give and take between them, the playwright orders or designs his own setting and prescribes or advises on the acting and speaking, while a stage designer like Fay can teach the playwright in his turn much of the significance of his own play.³¹

Some of the happy and unhappy aspects of this collaboration will be discussed in Chapter IV. But we can note here that Synge was a great beneficiary, especially in the matter of scene design. Over the years, a symbiotic relationship developed between him and the Fays. The most detailed account of this relationship appears in Willie Fay's book,

The Fays of the Abbey Theatre:

Synge always finished a play in his mind to the last detail before he started writing it down, and once it was on paper he could not alter it. I remember asking him once if he did not think that a certain speech might be improved. He replied: "I quite agree, but these were the words he used and I only set them down." He told me that as the play came into being in his imagination the characters took on a life of their own and said and did things without consulting him at all. It is a fact that you cannot cut a line in any of his plays without damaging the whole structure. His power of visualisation was perfect. I would work out a scale plan of the stage and furniture, and he would say, "That is just the way I saw the room as I was writing the play." It was very lucky that there seemed to be a sort of pre-established harmony between my mind and his, for I always wanted to produce his plays as nearly as

possible as he saw them. If I asked him, "Was Dan standing where he is on the right, behind the table, when he said these lines?" he would say, "No, he was on the right-hand side of the table with his hand on it." He was a great joy to work with, for he had a keen sense of humour and plenty of patience, and above all he knew what he wanted, and when he got it said so--which is a virtue very rare in dramatic authors.³²

This fruitful relationship broke apart in 1908. (See Chapter III.)

But by that time, Synge had learned to write for the Abbey stage. The small, square playing area influenced his judgment in theatrical matters large and small. In turn, he used the stage to help express the joy and reality to which he believed the drama must give form and voice. By the restrictions it imposed upon movement, the stage intensified Nora Burke's desire to escape a withering marriage. By barely containing them, the stage made grander the tales and the personality of Christy Mahon. By the simplicity it forced upon the designer, the stage focused upon Deirdre's restrained, dignified acceptance of her fate. Other kinds of practical restrictions influenced Synge's writing and we will examine them in the following chapters. But none were more stringent than those presented in this chapter. They were imposed by the theatre building itself. The remainder, accidentally or deliberately, were levied by human thought and action.

Certainly there were times when Synge longed for theatre facilities such as the great cultural centers of Europe could offer. Early drafts of The Playboy of the Western World and Deirdre of the Sorrows show that he imagined settings far beyond the capacity of Molesworth Hall or the Abbey Theatre. We should remember, too, that the Abbey Company toured the smaller towns of Ireland and performed in halls of the scantiest means for producing plays. These facts combined to make Synge reduce his scenic requirements to manageable proportions. But in the Abbey, manageability was not a virtue in plentiful supply, especially

when its members were concerned. Synge could learn the limitations of the stage for which he wrote and they were learned for good. If he learned them well enough he could make them work for his art instead of against it. But people were something else again.

Synge never knew from one week to the next what to expect from actors, producers, directors, and especially from the theatre's financial angel, Miss Annie Horniman. Synge was never ungrateful to these people. He owed them too much for the opportunities they provided, directly and indirectly. Had he never joined forces with Yeats, Lady Gregory, and the Fays, he would never have met and fallen in love with the actress, Molly Allgood. But his relationship with Molly concentrated all the elements of his relationship to the Abbey Company. Synge loved her passionately and deeply. She loved him, too, but never in quite the way he wanted to be loved. She was beautiful, talented, vivacious, puzzling, capricious, vexing, careless, stubborn, and exasperating. Molly displayed these qualities in her work, too, and she was not alone. Of all the people who, from Synge's point of view, muddled the achievement of his artistic aims, perhaps none exasperated him so much as those who interpreted his plays on stage. His attitude toward them is summed up vividly in a remark made to John Masefield, who wrote: "I remember asking him what sensation an author had when his play was being performed for the first time. 'I sat still in my box,' he said, 'and cursed the actors.'"33

FOOTNOTES

¹Alec Reid, All I Can Manage, More than I Could: An Approach to the Plays of Samuel Beckett (Dublin, 1968), p. 20.

²Lennox Robinson, Curtain Up (London, 1942), p. 23.

³William G. Fay, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre (London, 1935), p. 112.

⁴Lady Augusta Gregory, Our Irish Theatre (London, 1913), p. 80.

⁵Ibid., pp. 98-99.

⁶J. M. Synge, Collected Works, ed. by Robin Skelton (London, 1962-1968), III (1968), xii.

⁷Frank J. Fay, Towards a National Theatre: The Dramatic Criticism of Frank J. Fay, ed. by Robert Hogan (Dublin, 1970), p. 88.

⁸Information in a letter to the author from Ronan Wilmot of the Abbey Theatre, 16 March 1972.

⁹W. G. Fay, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre, p. 162.

¹⁰Ann Saddlemyer, "Dramatic Theory and Practice in the Irish Literary Theatre" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of London, 1961), p. 583, n. 3.

¹¹vid., n. 7.

¹²Gerard Fay, The Abbey Theatre: Cradle of Genius (London, 1958), pp. 89-90.

¹³Saddlemyer, p. 582.

¹⁴W. A. Henderson Papers. National Library of Ireland (NLI), MS 1730.

¹⁵W. B. Yeats, The Letters of W. B. Yeats, ed. by Allan Wade (London, 1954), p. 366.

¹⁶Maire nic Shuibhlaigh, The Splendid Years (Dublin, 1955), p. 34.

¹⁷Henderson Papers, MS 1731.

¹⁸Fay Papers. NLI, MS 10,950. In a letter of 1 February 1972, Ronan J. Wilmot, Publicity Manager of the Abbey Theatre, informed me that the Abbey has "no original material about the Synge plays." Most of their scripts and photographs were destroyed in the fire of 1951. However, the attached stage plans made by the Fays for Boyle's plays are similar to the plan made by Synge for The Well of the Saints and reproduced in the Works, IV, facing p. 68. The Fays' plans accurately illustrate the Fays at work in the Abbey Theatre.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Yeats, p. 442.

²¹W. B. Yeats, "Preface to The Well of the Saints," Essays and Introductions (New York, 1961), p. 305.

²²Ibid.

²³Robinson, Curtain Up, p. 49.

²⁴Lennox Robinson, Ireland's Abbey Theatre: A History 1899-1951 (London, 1951), pp. 71-72.

²⁵Henderson Papers, MS 1730.

²⁶Lady Gregory, p. 32.

²⁷Ibid., pp. 131-32.

²⁸Maurice Bourgeois, John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre (London, 1913), pp. 140-41.

²⁹Ibid., pp. 131-32.

³⁰James W. Flannery, Miss Annie F. Horniman and the Abbey Theatre (Dublin, 1970), p. 39.

³¹Una Ellis-Fermor, The Irish Dramatic Movement (London, 1939), p. 78.

³²W. G. Fay, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre, pp. 138-39.

³³John Masefield, John Synge: A Few Personal Recollections (Letchworth, 1916), p. 20.

CHAPTER II

THE FAYS, THE ACTORS, AND SYNGE

When the Ormond Dramatic Society joined with the Irish Literary Theatre in 1901 to produce Cathleen Ni Houlihan by William B. Yeats, the actors were recruited from the ranks of Cumhan na hEirann, a nationalist woman's organization lead by Maud Gonne, a friend of Yeats, who took the role of Cathleen. It is not recorded what guidance Miss Gonne received from the producers Frank and Willie Fay. Probably they were content that she knew her lines, her cues, her crosses, and could execute them without embarrassment to herself, the company, or the audience. Miss Gonne was, after all, a famous political person who knew what to do in front of an audience--at least a political audience. Apparently she portrayed Cathleen very well; Yeats thought she was magnificent--but Yeats had other reasons than aesthetic ones for thinking so. But if Miss Gonne had requested counsel from either of the brothers about some matter of pronunciation, projection, articulation, interpretation, movement, gesture, make-up, lighting, setting, or theatre history, she would have found herself politely and thoroughly answered by two men no less knowledgeable in theatrical affairs than she herself was in political ones. Carefully and patiently they would have taken her through the steps necessary to resolve the problem. They would have urged her to practice the line or gesture or movement over and over again until it appeared natural and easy. And they would have concluded by drawing from the

incident some general lesson, linking it to the whole art of acting and perhaps the history of the theatre as well. The Fays would have done all this for her not because she was, after all, the Miss Gonne, but because in their minds, whatever else she might have been, she was, at that moment, though they might never tell her so directly, an amateur actor.

Willie and Frank Fay¹ knew about amateur actors. They were amateur actors themselves. They knew how to select amateurs, how to train them, how to rehearse them, how to get good performances out of them. They even knew how to turn amateurs into professionals. They became professionals themselves and sent on to greater heights than they themselves ever achieved a number of actors and actresses who became world famous. How did they do this?

Strangely, the story has never been told in detail. Many books and articles pay lip service to the Fays and their contribution to the success of the Abbey Theatre. Gabriel Fallon explains the "Abbey Method" or the "Fay Method" in terms of the influences of Antoine, Coquelin, and Stanislavsky.² His attempt to place the Fays among other great teachers of acting is useful and interesting as far as it goes. But for a fuller understanding of Synge's plays as acting pieces, we need to know as precisely as possible what kinds of skills Synge could command in the interpretation of his art on stage. We know, from his letters, that by 1908 he could depend on competent acting, though he was aware of an unevenness of quality within the company. We also know, from the Fays and from the actors themselves, that all the actors who interpreted his plays between 1904 and 1908 began as amateurs. The Fays transformed amateurs into competent professionals by unrelenting study, practice, and by mining a large quarry of concrete theatrical knowledge.

Among the Fay Papers in the National Library of Ireland, there is a manuscript (10,953) entitled "Some Thoughts on Acting." It is a lecture by Frank Fay to an English group called "The Playhouse Circle"; it was probably delivered sometime after 1923. This lecture constitutes a primer for amateur actors. At the time of its delivery, Fay had been away from the Abbey for at least fifteen years. For our purposes, therefore, we must take it with a grain of salt because we cannot say what changes in his thinking might have taken place between 1908 and the time he delivered the lecture. But it is probable that his ideas do not differ greatly from those which guided his training of the Abbey actors. The degree of experience which they assume is so low and the level of skills they encourage is so fundamental that Fay had probably acquired the better part of these ideas in his own amateur days. The value of this lecture lies in its assumption of an audience of people eager to learn how to act but who have little or no experience. It assumes an audience not unlike the kind Fay must have faced when he began training actors for Cathleen Ni Houlihan, The Laying of the Foundation, and Riders to the Sea.

The lecture covers practically all aspects of acting, but many of Fay's comments concern two for which the Abbey actors were praised: speech and movement. An influential actor of Fay's time was the Frenchman Antoine who won a reputation as a "natural actor" by "affecting the conversational tone." Fay rejected Antoine's style even as he admired Antoine's courage:

I have seen Antoine act and do not like his kind of acting but that does not prevent my admiring intensely what he did in the face of outrageous attacks from the Parisian Press.³

To give his listeners an idea of Antoine's acting in relation to Abbey

acting, Fay quotes a letter he says was written him by William Poel during the time the Fays were at the Abbey.

What I mean about your acting not being amateurish is this, that all of you show technical skill and understand the art of impersonation, of standing still, of listening, of playing up to each other, of getting quickly on and off the stage. Now when I saw Antoine's company over here they were amateurs. Probably by intention, under the mistaken idea that being realistic: it was fine art. But to speak slovenly and without inflection of voice, to stand in any position you fancy because it is done so in real life, forgetting that the picture frame, or l'optique de theatre makes real movement seem unnatural from the auditorium--this sort of art which one often finds outside of the professional stage, and which I have the greatest dislike for, was never for a moment detected in the performance. A fine dramatic instinct, alertness, resourcefulness, subtlety, these qualities (which may be innate in every member of your company) makes you artists and not amateurs. But having these fine instincts, you never forget that your art consists in presentation and that you are before an audience which has to be kept spell-bound by your technique and moved mentally and physically by what you say and how you say it.⁴

Speech, movement, and consideration of the audience were the keystones of Fay's acting method. He liked to draw on his knowledge of the techniques of great actors of the past. He quotes Macready criticizing Lady Pollock:

Your words merged into one another and your mouth was not sufficiently opened. Sweetness alone is not enough--a constant sweetness tires the ear. You must do yourself a violence and shock yourself by the sound of your own voice in its full power before you can so control the inflection as to make a good reader. Practice alone for a time, aiming only at distinctness, then consider the breathing and then think of the expression. Talking also of elocution, Macready said, "I know none more perfect than that of Miss O'Neill. It was a pleasure to watch the movement of her lips." The movement of the lips is pleasant to look at if one is speaking rhythmically as nature intended us to do. All good speaking is rhythmical.⁵

Fay used modern actors as examples, too. Coquelin was his favorite and Fay quotes him on many topics:

On the necessity of projection and articulation: "The stage is not a drawing room."

On Antoine: "He scarcely pronounces one word louder than another, he lets the ends of his phrases sink, hesitates, abridges, pretends to be at a loss for words, repeats his words two or three times,

drawls along for ten minutes and then hurries his delivery in order to arrive at the effect."

On tempo: "Do not hurry" [Coquelin's master, Regnier's, advice] "when you find that you are saying to yourself, good heavens! How slowly I am going. I shall never get to the end. I must be boring the public to death! Then and then only you may be sure that you are just beginning not to go too fast."⁶

These precepts guide his own thinking and echo clearly in his writing:

One thing the old actor learnt which the younger people today on the stage seem to know nothing of--and that is to articulate without which we cannot have clear speech. He took great care to get full value out of his finals and he knew how to keep his voice alive at the end of his sentences.⁷

He then lists several actors who impressed him during his formative years. "Edwin Booth, Barry Sullivan, Samuel Phelps, Vergin, Fenandey, Osmond Tearle, Edward Compton, J. L. Toole, Edward Terry, Forbes Robertson, Louis Calvert, Mrs. Kendal ("a marvelous speaker!"), Marion and Ellen Terry, George Thorne. Among recent actors he "can only think of: Godfrey Tearle, Fisher White, Allan Aynesworth, Sybil Thorndike and Hubert Tomas ("a magnificent actor.") "⁸ These models impressed him so that he had no qualms about imposing on the stage a heavy didactic burden. "The stage ought to be our standard of speech and deportment instead of holding the mirror up to the slovenly speech of the man in the street and copying his lack of deportment."⁹

Proper speech, for the Fays, was not merely a matter of social correctness. It was the foundation of the actor's art and its practice deserved the same diligence that musicians, dancers, or painters give to the fundamentals of their art:

Actors, professional and amateur, ought to exercise their voices daily for at least an hour. . . . Very few actors have to use their voices long enough at night on the stage to get real control over it. All other artists practice daily (some for hours), why not the actor.¹⁰

The Fays gave equally careful attention to movement and gesture.

Making a movement or gesture look natural was a considerable task:

I always advise amateurs to get a professional to teach the principles of acting and movement. To get amateurs to move at the right moment and with intention is difficult, but it is the difficulties to be conquered that make a thing work doing is it not?¹¹

The Abbey Actors were sent to professionals. The Fays required their pupils to see the performances of all the companies which visited Dublin. If they could not learn on their own, Frank was glad to help and he started with fundamentals.

Avoid standing in profile. Show that you have two hands. If speaking to someone on your right hand, your right foot should be slightly advanced. If speaking to someone on your left, your left foot should be slightly advanced. If you enter from the left hand of the stage start walking with the right foot. Face the audience as much as possible. Don't move about when you have anything important to say. Everything connected with the plot of the play should be spoken with the greatest distinctness and ease. Send your voice straight to the audience and not into the sides of the stage. Kneel on the knee nearest the foot lights. All gesture should be made from the shoulder not from the elbows. No gesture should be made without a reason. The more one uses gesture the less valuable it is. In crossing the stage to right or left, look in front of you, not at the audience, speak more loudly and distinctly (than if facing them). In rising from a chair don't let the audience see the back of your head; don't let anyone get in front of you and don't get in front of you. [sic] If you are masked by anyone accidentally, move a little to one side or the other. You are of no use on the stage unless you are seen. Every action of importance ought to be performed as near the center of the stage as possible, so that everyone will see it. Keep as much down the stage as possible.¹²

Other advice on movement included rules for crossing and conversing.

When a cross is made it should be made in front as a rule, though occasionally it has to be made behind and it should not be obviously a cross. . . . When two people are standing talking on the stage they should not be too close to each other or one may be hidden from some of the spectators. Keep an arms length away is a rule that dates back to the Restoration theatre.¹³

When speech and movement had been carefully studied, it was time to bring them together. But as he explained how word and action

reinforced each other, Fay never let the actor forget the importance of attention to concrete detail and fundamental principles.

All positions on the stage are marked from the actors right and left; down to the stage is down to the footlights, up stage is moving in the opposite direction. A famous actress has said that it is only when the actor stops speaking that the audience begins to listen, so if you have to say anything vital to the play, make a slight pause get the audience perfectly still and then speak. Another way is to speak the unimportant part of the sentence very loudly, then stop, pause and speak the part you wish to emphasize very distinctly, quietly and slowly. Don't look on the floor, unless you are supposed to be sheepish; look straight in front of you or better still at the person you are addressing or who is addressing you. Before the curtain rises, if you have to make an entry through a door, go on the stage and try whether the door opens on or off the stage. Many an exit or entrance is spoilt by inattention to little details of this kind. If you are playing a labouring man, see that you [sic] hands are made-up. Some people make up their faces excellently for such parts but their hands show that they never did a day's work in their lives. In crossing in front of people on the stage, keep clear of them and don't brush against them. Don't get above people on the stage, so that they have to turn their backs upon the audience. People who practice this selfish trick can be punished by the person on whom they try it refusing to turn his back on the audience.¹⁴

It is in this soil that the Abbey actor found the roots of a famous style.

When two people are speaking, any others with them on the stage with them not otherwise employed should keep their eyes fixed on the speaker. The famous Machlin once said to an actor with whom he was rehearsing--keep your eye fixed on me sir, keep your eye fixed on me. [sic] If you take your eye off me you rob the audience of any effect and you rob me of their applause. And the great American comedian, Joseph Jefferson, said on this subject--learn to stand still when speaking; don't sway about or fidget with your hands. It takes the audience's attention from what you are saying on to what you should not be doing. Don't drop the last word of a sentence; it should have as much energy behind it as the first. Also make the final consonants of your words with energy and precision. Don't look at the audience. Keep your eyes fixed on the business of the stage unless it be something you are not supposed to see. If you have to take some [sic] off a table on your left and give it to someone on your right, take the article off the table with your left hand pass it into your right hand and give it to the person.¹⁵

Keep your eyes fixed on the speaker, stand still when speaking.

How Montague, Walkley, and other English critics praised the style

founded on these two simple ideas. Fay knew well that these traits were Abbey hallmarks and he was anxious to dispel any notion that they were accidental or that he and his brother had made a virtue of necessity. Fay learned the art of standing still from Coquelin in Tartuffe.

. . . in the opening scene of Act I, all the characters stand in a line in front of the footlights and all eyes were fixed on the one who was speaking, so that one's attention was concentrated in a wonderful way on the speaker. I dwell on this because Mr. Yeats in Plays and Controversies has a note that it was done because our actors did not know how to do anything else. All we did was done deliberately, and with knowledge.¹⁶

Finally, Fay urged his actors to read the critics: He recommended: A. Symons' Plays, Acting, and Music; G. G. Lewes' Acting and Actors; and Louis Calvert's Problems of the Actor, especially the latter. Fay thought Calvert's book an "excellent exposition."

Again and again in his training and his thinking Fay returned to the example of Coquelin, especially in matters of speech.

As Coquelin says, articulation is at once the ABC and the highest point of acting. The only way to master distinctness is to go back to the alphabet and learn to use each vowel and consonant with precision and force and beauty. The modern actor thinks he can speak on the stage as he does in the drawing room; the older school of English actors, and all the continental actors, know that this is impossible, and that speech on the stage must be a thing of art, if it is to interest, please, or move an audience.¹⁷

The comparison between French and English actors was implicit and the latter were at a great disadvantage. Indeed, Fay saw in English acting, another example of British hegemony over Irish culture. He called "Irish Drama at the Theatre Royale" an indictment of the poor state of Irish actors and of the tendency to rely on English talent excessively.¹⁸ Fay found the French style much more appealing.

. Its [French acting] lightness and briskness and variety, and the way the play is kept moving towards the climax, come as a great relief to the heavy, slow English acting, in which every scene gets the same emphasis and the attention is distracted by lavish scenery, fiddle-faddle business, and the incompetent acting . . .¹⁹

The difference between French and English speaking was especially notable. "French actors recite their speeches instead of breaking them up" as English actors do. French speech has effect of song.

... there is not a great deal of variety of pitch, but there is considerable variety in tempo, and each speech is worked up for all it is worth, instead of being dribbled out in the modern English manner. . . . The French actor is not afraid to behave like a human being, whereas the modern English actor is afraid of being taken for anything but a tailor's dummy.²⁰

The more he considered the matter, the more Fay believed there were similarities between the French Style and the Irish, especially in the matter of speaking verse.

One notes the same tendency to use the monotone, the sudden jumping from one note to another; the upward tendency of the voice at the end of the sentence and the prevalence . . . of what singers call the 'chest register."²¹

These lessons were not lost on the Abbey actors. In her book The Splendid Years, Maire Nic Shuibhlaigh notes Fay's enthusiasm for the French players who "cast off the genteel conventions which burdened the work of the English players."²² She then echoes Fay's analysis of the two styles: The English produced "a robot effect; a lack of spontaneity," resulting from an apparent working out "to the minutest detail before hand" the "movements of all the minor actors" "to fit in with the idiosyncrasies of the 'star.'"²³

The Continental actor

cast all these conventions aside, and apart from the principal movements essential to the picture they presented, moved as they considered the characters they portrayed should, quietly or noisily --mostly noisily, and with a delightful freedom.²⁴

The Fays drew the attention of their actors to these qualities because they wished " . . . to enforce the most rigid economy of gesture and movement to make the speaking quite abstract, and at the same time to keep a music in it by having all the voices harmonised."²⁵

The means of enforcement was rehearsal--and more rehearsal. Even after the Fays left, an Abbey actor could expect several hours of work each day. Lennox Robinson recalled that "the company, in 1910, rehearsed in the morning from 11 to 2 and again in the afternoon or evening if we were not performing--since they only played the last 3 days of each week."²⁶

The nature of the playhouse imposed difficulties on the training of actors; sometimes the claims of the theatrical art were self-contradictory. The Abbey's chief set builder, Seaghan Barlow, remembers

Frank Fay and I had many arguments as to who should have the stage, as he would come along with a pupil to coach when I would be engaged in rather noisy work, and I had no other place to work. The result was usually a hot argument . . . after one of these, Willie Fay said to me, "Tell him you'll sack him, Seaghan, if he's not careful."²⁷

When Frank had the pupils on stage for coaching, he put them through a variety of exercises. A letter from Synge to his fiancée, Molly Allgood, one of Frank Fay's star pupils, indicates that as late as 1907, she was taking a "verse class" from Fay.²⁸ At that time she had been a company member for nearly two years. Maurice Bourgeois remarks that the actors were taught to lower the pitch of the voice "to act pianissimo, in a tone hushed as if in a sickroom, all grave and as it were careworn"²⁹ without losing any distinctness of elocution. Fay would sometimes set a group of players to reading a novel aloud among themselves and the reader was stopped whenever the pronunciation became indistinct.

Maire Nic Shuibhlaigh remembers not only the trips to theatres to observe great actors but "long, not very comfortable sessions which we passed learning the fundamentals of correct speech."³⁰

Dudley Digges has even more specific recollections of those sessions.

. . . I went through my "O's" and "A's" and my final consonants and the "D's" and "T's" and the ending in "ing". An exercise line that I particularly remember was "The lecturer was full of his subject".³¹

Montague and others praised the Abbey actors for their naturalness, especially in comparison to English actors. But we see now that the style of the Abbey resulted from many hours of careful thought and painstaking work. Had we not the records of many observers, we might believe from the Fays' own accounts that a rather mechanical, passionless style had developed. The brothers must have recognized the dangers of too studied an approach to acting because they worked hard to match the actors' skills to the material. Of Willie's efforts in this area, Frank wrote in an article on the early Abbey history:

In training the actors, my brother, from the start, was compelled to depart from the kind of acting and stage management required by the plays he had played in on the regular stage. What are known as Irish dramas, for instance, are played too rapidly to be true to Irish life, which is leisurely. Again, the plays which are now being written in Ireland have a dialogue so lifelike that it would be ruined if made in the least theatrical in its delivery . . . our dialogue allows us to talk exactly as Irish peasants talk in a cottage or on the road or in the field . . . the talk of the Irish peasant is as a rule wonderfully interesting and often even unconsciously poetic. . . . Depending so much on dialogue my brother from the first suppressed all but absolutely essential movement.³²

Willie attended to details of every kind.

My brother had to rehearse everyone of these new plays, create the action, choose the dresses, often paint the scenery, and until quite recently, look after the business side of the Abbey Theatre as well.³³

His eye for detail was especially hawk-like on matters of interpretation. Joseph Holloway, Dublin's indefatigable theatrical archivist, remarks that during rehearsals of In the Shadow of the Glen, Willie was "very particular" about how "Dara" counted Nora's money. Sinclair had crumpled them carelessly and laid them on the table. He was "hauled up by the chief who explained that 'you should have done so with loving

care and folded them carefully as if they were all the world to you before laying them down."³⁴ Holloway concludes: "It is by such care to detail that the national players have made their reputation."³⁵ In fact, Willie's diligence impressed the obstreperous Holloway, who often found much to carp at in the Abbey production.

If care on the part of W. G. Fay will command a successful representation, then its success is assured for no amount of pain is spared by him in making the stage players as perfect as possible in every detail. Making the actors repeat over and over again those lines which did not sound quite right on his ear, until he was satisfied with every little intonation and shade of inflection. Because of this attention the "finish and art" become such that if the play isn't liked, "the interpretation seldom if ever leaves anything to cavil at."³⁶

Maire Nic Shuibhlaigh defined the character of the brothers' collaboration. Each contributed his own special abilities. Willie's theatrical judgment was "unerring" and though he consulted his brother on all matters "it was always the younger man's suggestions [Willie's] which were implemented. . . . He always had plenty of authoritative arguments to back up his theories."³⁷ Frank was "an actor of merit," but a "dramatic instructor of genius," particularly in matters of voice control. Maire Nic Shuibhlaigh doubts Yeats' verse plays could have been "as effective without him." Frank brought out "the peculiar inflections of the Irish voice, so important in plays of this sort." He "laid the utmost emphasis on the importance of words and made beautiful speech, whether it was the delivery of dialect or the lyrical speaking of verse, his goal."³⁸

Ultimately, for Maire Nic Shuibhlaigh, these contributions, though distinct, were inseparable. "To Frank Fay must go the credit of training the actors. Without Willie Fay there might never have been an Irish theatre company; without Frank Fay there might never have been a competent one."³⁹

Where did the actors come from--or where were they found? In an interview with the New York World not long after his departure from the Abbey, Willie Fay remarked, with perhaps some slight hyperbole:

Dramatic talent runs wild in the Dublin streets. We never had to look for actors. But we were always careful to take them from the working classes. The upper ten [sic] ape the English accent, they are not themselves, and therefore they cannot act. We always selected young men and women who had sprung from the peasant class. Every one of them can act native drama. But the women are quicker at it. In Ireland, it is every poor young man's business to get work and therefore he has little time for the less sordid side of life. The women are nearer to other things. We would get more out of an Irish girl in eighteen months than we could out of a man in two years: The girls are more natural, the men more inclined to "act". They all want to be Martin Harvey's.⁴⁰

Frank Fay stressed their rural connections in his reflections on early Abbey history: "The actors have most of them peasant blood, if they are not the children of peasants, and instinctively talk, move and act as peasants would and are familiar with the habits of country folk."⁴¹ (He raised this point in defense of the Abbey's policy of putting on peasant plays.)

Maire Nic Shuibhlaigh trumpets her amateurishness--"None of us, apart from Willie Fay, who was responsible for our appearance together, had ever acted professionally."⁴²--and she is less impressionistic about the actors' background. The actors tended to be young, "no more than thirty," from Dublin, and unknown. They knew little of drama except what they were told of continental drama and saw in Dublin. They were drawn into the theatre because of an interest in acting and Irish nationalism: "Most of us came out of Nationalist Clubs in Dublin, or were connected in some fashion with the Nationalist movement. Almost everyone in the Irish Theatre was, during its first years."⁴³

Maurice Bourgeois' picture is the most vivid, though it seems to echo Frank Fay a little. The actors were

for the most part, clerks, tradesmen's assistants, typists, artisans, railway servants, coming straight from the prosaic life of shop and factory, from the rank and file of the average working class . . . of peasant stock--though most of them still have no Gaelic--⁴⁴

and the managers had "no difficulty" making them perform plays of country life.

The effect these actors had on audiences and critics gets better and better as the years pass. Those who were close to them in the early years knew the limitations of the company. As we shall see, Synge was especially critical of the skills of certain players and thought the company was supported by two or three strong actors. Professor Saddlemyer records a letter to Synge in which Frank Fay states the relationship between the actors' limitations and the problem of gaining an audience:

We have an audience to get which I believe can be got, but it will take a lot of hard and excellent work, and while much of the work of the society is excellent in intention, that won't suffice. The Irish distaste for thoroughness and love of laziness will have to be got over too.⁴⁵

In the very early days, even Yeats knew that the acting was not all it could be.

Our actors were amateurs--but amateurs who are trying to act with a wonderful simplicity and naivety. Their method is better than their performance, but their method is the first right one I have seen. In Deirdre, a dim dreamlike play, they acted without "business" of any kind. They simply stood still in decorative attitudes and spoke.⁴⁶

A year later, after the company had bowled over the London critics, Yeats was still being cautious:

Our people have neither the accents nor the knowledge nor the desire to play typical modern drama. We will always be best in poetical drama or in extravagant comedy or in peasant plays.⁴⁷

The critics' reaction, of course, has become legend, and it will suffice to let C. E. Montague stand in for the majority, the views

of which are adequately summarized in A. Malone's Modern Irish Drama:

The Irish actors from the Abbey Theatre have found means to come at [an] effect of spiritual austerity. More than others they leave undone the things that ought not to be done. None of them rants or flares, trumpets or booms, or frisks about when he had better be quiet, or puts on intense looks for nothing. . . . They know how to let well alone; they stand still when others would "cross stage to right" to no purpose; when one of them has to be thrown up in high relief, the rest can fade into the background like mists at a dawn, or emit from their eyes an attention that fixes your eyes on the central figure more surely than the fiercest limelight that ever beat on an actor-manager. . . . In a world of things overdone, like the stage, mere quietude has the value of epigram, like a thing soberly said in a newspaper. Throughout one half of Lady Gregory's Rising of the Moon there is scarcely a movement: merely that no one should strut or fret tickles you. Miss Maire O'Neill as Nora, in The Shadow of the Glen, stands almost stock still through a scene where most English actresses would pace the stage like lionesses in a zoo. The result is that when she does move you can see the passion propel her like a screw. . . . The Irishmen keep still and white, and tragic consequence enfolds them; set on that ground of grave and simple exposure, the slightest gesture carries you far in divination of what prompts it; whole scenes put on a comely vesture of delicacy and containment and a haunting expressiveness, as, in the painting of some masters, every tree, you know not how, has its hamadryad.⁴⁸

In the thirties, scholars amplified the cheers. Una Ellis-Fermor wrote that they possessed "an exceptional capacity for translating poetic intention in terms of gesture, voice, verse-speaking and setting. . . . The whole theatrical art seems to have been tested and built up again from its beginnings by these people."⁴⁹

By 1941, Lennox Robinson was reminiscing about the good old days in a way that sounded suspiciously like any number of newspaper critiques.

If the plays seemed real, so did the players. I had been accustomed to players who moved somewhere, anywhere, at the end of almost every speech, who never made a direct exit but always turned halfway and again at the door to deliver their penultimate and ultimate speeches. But these players behaved on the stage like human beings. They moved only when movement was natural and necessary, they used very little gesture and so when a gesture happened it took on tremendous importance. They spoke beautifully and clearly, they used an Irish accent and were seemingly not ashamed of it, they never looked at their audience and seemed unaware of its paucity.⁵⁰

What was Synge's opinion of the actors who performed his plays? Professor Saddlemyer says that "Synge admitted that he had not known the company when he wrote his first two plays, and stubbornly refused to alter the musical-poetic form he had laboriously evolved in each play."⁵¹ By 1904, however, Synge had developed firm views about the abilities of some of the actors. He did not hesitate to express them in a letter to Frank Fay in April, 1904, following the company's trip to London.

I don't know that I can give you any criticism of the acting that would be of value. You should try and get more people--though I suppose that is not easy. The soldier and the monk in Seanchan were dreadful,⁵²--the soldier especially. You are perfectly right that it is practice the crowd needs most--i.e. of course, practice of playing in public. Camden Street work is all very well but it will never take them beyond a certain pitch. Again all our women are too young; where else will you see such girls holding an audience--as they did after all--in serious drama? It was worst in The Shadow of the Glen, Miss W. is clever and charming in the part, but your brother is so strong he dominates the play--unconsciously and inevitably--and of course the woman should dominate. You were admirable I think in both your parts.⁵³

Five months later, in September, the situation seems not to have changed. There was still a mixture of competent and incompetent actors, about whom he writes to Lady Gregory. Two notable changes are his mixed feelings about Frank Fay and his willingness to involve himself in the preparation of his own play:

I have seen about four rehearsals since I came up, which include two or three of the first act of Kincora. It works out, I think, as a thoroughly sound healthy act, but I cannot say so much for the cast. There are three very gawky strangers--one of them--who does Malachi I think--with a trick of intonation that is very irritating and will be very hard to stop. Wright is doing Phelan and is also very bad. Roberts and Starkey seem by comparison finished actors, and F. Fay almost a miracle. Miss Walker is not promising as Gormleith. Among so many men in vigorous parts her voice and manner seem hopelessly languid and girlish. For the first time both the Fays take a gloomy view of her, and admit that she seems to have no feeling for the part. A few evenings ago Russell raised the question of the opening programme and there was a somewhat violent discussion. W. Fay is very reasonable, but F. F. is as mad as a March hare. A. E. and myself urged W. Fay--and I am sure you will agree--to rehearse Kincora as hard as he could for some weeks, and then, if he found it impossible to get a

satisfactory show out of his cast, to reconsider his opening programme. . . . They have very little to show for the two months work they have given my play. F. F. and Miss Esposito are the only ones who know their parts at all beyond the first act. I think W. F. will be very good though [it] is not easy to judge him all through yet, as he is so much taken up with the words. Miss Esposito is better than I expected, Miss Allgood much worse, Roberts is very middling, and I don't quite like F.F. though he is always adequate. So you see my prospects are not very golden either. F.F. sits in the corner during my rehearsals muttering he'd like "to cut their [bloody] throats." Holloway suggests that we should begin with old work as we are sure of a new audience, it is not a bad idea, but I don't know what we could take. I think it would be no harm if you would write to W. Fay in a couple of weeks and ask him how things are getting on; or it would be better still if W.B.Y. could come up towards the end of the month and have a look at things. Even if I do not go to Aran I will go away somewhere for a month. W. Fay has asked me to stay for a week more to help with the Well of the Saints rehearsals so I will not get off till the end of the week. I am very glad I came up.⁵⁴

From Synge's letters, it is apparent that 1905 was taken up more with managerial than aesthetic matters. (Some of the problems he encountered as a manager will be discussed in the following chapter.) But sometimes the roles of producer and critic coincided. In March 1906 he wrote to Lady Gregory.

Everything is going well at the Abbey. I have just performed the delicate operation of getting Sara Allgood out of Nora Burke's part --where she was impossible--and getting Molly Allgood in. Molly A's voice is too young for the part but she feels it, and has some expression.⁵⁵

A little over a week later, he reported again from Dundalk, and again it was Fay and Molly Allgood who impressed--but something was not quite right, as the audience's reaction attested:

We got a tremendous House in Dundalk--the largest we have ever played to in Ireland--but our reception was not very good. The Pot of Broth failed absolutely and there was no applause at all when the curtain came down although it was an excellent performance, I never saw Fay better. Dempsey just got through with a certain amount of applause here and there and I think an interested house. Kathleen went off best, and Miss Allgood was wonderful, especially in her singing part at the end. A number of people were very enthusiastic about her and the play, but there was hardly any applause at the end, and one did not feel any real enthusiasm (apart from one or two political outbursts)--in the

house. The audience was quite different from any we have played to yet, very intelligent, ready to be pleased, but very critical, and, of course, not perfectly cultured--Dr. Bunbury was a favourite!⁵⁶

By the middle of 1906 two events had occurred which illumine our understanding of Synge's perception of the actors. He had fallen in love with Molly Allgood and he had begun writing her letters which are full of the life of the Abbey as well as his view of the actors. His attachment to the Abbey centered increasingly on the Fays and on Molly, whose talent and temperament inspired his great female characters, Pegeen Mike and Deirdre. Of the other actors in the company, he had little to say that was positive. Brigid O'Dempsey, who married W. Fay, impressed Synge least of all. References to S. J. Morgan, Kerrigan, and O'Rourke indicate that he thought them overpaid.⁵⁷

He was very solicitous for Molly's talent. In a letter to Lady Gregory dated 7 May 1906, he urged the purchase of a new spinning wheel for a production of Riders to the Sea. Fred Wareing, the manager, wanted the properties as "perfect as possible" and Synge wanted Molly to "learn to spin so that there would be no fake about the show."⁵⁸ In August 18, 1907, he wrote to her directly about his appreciation of her abilities but wondered if she liked applause and fame or if her ambition was

a real love for acting good plays, and a real desire and determination to do it well. You have real talent I think and real talent of any kind is a very priceless thing so I would be sorry to see you give up⁵⁹ the stage unless you could use your talent in some other way.

By November of 1907 they were even able to joke about the development of her talent, but along lines that pay tribute to the thinking of Frank Fay.

I think if the Abbey breaks up soon we might go to Paris for a while, and then you could be my literary secretary and at the same time study the French stage and the French art of speaking.--of course your French blood predestines you to be the bringer of the essence of the French tradition for the Dublin stage! Nish!!!!!!
 !!!!!!!!!!!!!!! I hope you will not keep up your feud with E.J.F. first because he is a man--with all his drawbacks--that deserves sympathy and friendship rather than anything else; and also because you can learn, and ought to learn, a great deal from him--taking of course nothing he tells you for granted, and testing everything by your own intuition.⁶⁰

Synge's opinion of the Fays' acting ability varied. There were times when he depended on their talents and took them into account. In October of 1906 he wrote to Molly "I am going to make Christy Mahon come in dressed as a jockey from the mule race in the third act, won't Fay look funny!"⁶¹ And after the Fays left in 1908, the effect of their absence was clear--Synge wrote to Molly:

I wish I could see a show of the Well of the Saints. The third act used to go so well, and I thought I had improved it, but now you say it drags. At Cambridge Fay got round after round of applause during the last half of the third act.⁶²

During the preparation of the Playboy he found himself in prolonged consultation with the brother:

I am taking in the 3rd Act of the Playboy tomorrow and I believe I am going to lunch with W. G. Fay and then work at it all the afternoon with Frank, so that there may be no delay. I don't feel quite so sure of the third act as of the others. I have been a little hurried at the end of it. However, it will play all the faster.⁶³

But it is obvious from Willie's account that they did not see eye to eye.

As soon as I cast eyes over the script of The Playboy of the Western World I knew we were in for serious trouble unless he would consent to alter it drastically. Many and many a time I strove with him, using all the arguments I could muster, to get him to see that if you attack your audience you must expect them to retaliate, that you might as well write to a newspaper and expect the editor not to insist on the last word. The emotions displayed on the stage are designed by the author and interpreted by the players to give the audience a vicarious experience of them, and if the audience reacts to them, that is the measure of the author's and actor's success. Thus, laughter on the stage makes laughter in the house and anger makes anger. But by laughter I mean straight laughter, not wrath

disguised in a grin which the average audience is quick to see through and resent accordingly. Synge could never be made to understand that.⁶⁴

Nor was Synge very content with the final results. In a letter to Molly the day after Playboy opened, he wrote:

W.G. was pretty fluffy, and Power was very confused in places, then the crowd was wretched and Mrs. W.G. missed the new cue we gave, though she can hardly be blamed for that. I think with a letter Mahon and crowd and a few slight cuts the play would be thoroughly sound.⁶⁵

Two months later, another letter to Molly shows that affairs had not changed much:

Tell W.G. I would be glad to see him any evening after eight, but that the afternoon is uncertain. I hope I shall often be out now. I fully agree that the third Act wants pulling together. I hope if they go on tour Power won't be able to go so that we may get a decent Old Mahon. It would make all the difference in the world.⁶⁶

Synge found the Fays, as he did most of the company, at once a help and a burden. He respected their judgments on theatrical matters, but he found them limited and separated from many domains of experience which engrossed him deeply. In July 1907 he wrote to Molly:

The purple grapes are ripe here now I got a lot of them last night on our nook road. The nightjar is singing every night also in the heather. I took F.J. to hear it last night, but he was so busy talking about pronunciation that he would hardly listen to it.⁶⁷

FOOTNOTES

¹ Frank J. and William G. Fay were the first and second sons of a Dublin civil servant. Frank was born in 1870 and died in 1931. William, born in 1872, survived his brother by 16 years. They were, therefore, almost exactly Synge's contemporaries. They got their first exposure to drama at Belvedere College, Dublin, and in the theatres and music halls of that city. A practical philosophy of the theatre, supported by historical knowledge, marked their careers. Though trained as a clerk and an electrician, respectively, Frank and Willie spent most of their time learning about the theatre. Frank's reading made him an expert on theatre history and contemporary Continental drama; Willie knocked about the countryside with various troupes and circuses, staging "fit-ups" in all manner of halls and arenas. For a while, he even played in black face with an American repertory company led by a Negro. The next step was W.G. Fay's Comedy Combination followed by the Ormond Dramatic Society. This latter venture with Frank had grander ambitions than the production of music hall comedy. Both men wanted to do something for Ireland. They joined in the nationalism of the time and, with the Daughters of Erin, performed AE's version of Deirdre, which was seen by W. B. Yeats. The collaboration with Yeats began in 1901 and lasted seven years. Following their departure from the Abbey, they traveled in America under contract to the producer, Charles Schuman. The remainder of their careers was spun out on a variety of stages in England, America, and the Continent, acting, directing, and re-telling the story of the beginnings of one of the most important theatres in dramatic history, The Abbey. Willie died somewhat better known than his brother, having just completed the role of Father Tom in the James Mason film, Odd Man Out, at the time of his death. His death was noticed by the New York Times; Frank's was not, nor was he accorded the posthumous honor of an article in the Dictionary of National Biography, as was Willie. On the whole, one cannot help feeling that their artistic lives would have been better served by staying with the Abbey.

² Gabriel Fallon, "The Abbey Theatre Acting Tradition," in The Story of The Abbey Theatre, ed. Seamus McCann (London, 1967), pp. 101-25; and The Abbey and the Actor (Dublin, 1969).

³ Fay Papers, MS 10,953.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

- ¹⁰Ibid.
- ¹¹Ibid.
- ¹²Ibid.
- ¹³Ibid.
- ¹⁴Ibid. These notes appear on an undated piece of paper approximately 7"x4 1/4" clipped inside "Some Thoughts on Acting."
- ¹⁵Ibid. These notes appear on an undated piece of paper approximately 6"x4 1/4" clipped inside "Some Thoughts on Actings."
- ¹⁶Ibid.
- ¹⁷Frank Fay, Towards a National Theatre . . ., p. 88.
- ¹⁸Ibid., pp. 17-20.
- ¹⁹Ibid., p. 94.
- ²⁰Ibid.
- ²¹Ibid., p. 64.
- ²²Shuiblaigh, p. 9.
- ²³Ibid., p. 9.
- ²⁴Ibid., p. 10.
- ²⁵William Fay, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre, p. 134.
- ²⁶Robinson, Curtain Up, p. 30.
- ²⁷Robinson, Ireland's Abbey Theatre, pp. 71-72.
- ²⁸J. M. Synge, Letters to Molly: John Millington Synge to Maire O'Neill, 1906-1909, ed. by Ann Saddlemyer (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p. 93.
- ²⁹Bourgeois, p. 130.
- ³⁰Shuibhlaigh, p. 9.
- ³¹W. Fay, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre, p. 69.
- ³²Frank Fay, MS 10,953.
- ³³Ibid.

³⁴Joseph Holloway, Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre: A Selection from His Unpublished Journal "Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer" (Carbondale, Ill., 1967), p. 70.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid., p. 29.

³⁷Shuibhlaigh, p. 8.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 8-9.

³⁹Ibid., p. 9.

⁴⁰Fay Papers, MS 5975, an interview with Charles Darnton in the New York World on February 22, 23, or 24, 1908.

⁴¹Fay Papers, MS 10,953.

⁴²Shuibhlaigh, p. 1.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Bourgeois, p. 132.

⁴⁵Saddlemyer, p. 563, n. 1.

⁴⁶Yeats, Letters, pp. 369-70.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 406.

⁴⁸Andrew E. Malone, The Irish Drama (London, 1929), pp. 291-93.

⁴⁹Ellis-Fermor, p. 43.

⁵⁰Robinson, Curtain Up, p. 18.

⁵¹Saddlemyer, p. 596.

⁵²A reference to Yeats' play, The King's Threshold, in which the poet, Seanchan, goes on a hunger strike to compel the King to restore the poet's traditional rights at court. The soldier and the monk were played by Fred Ryan and Thomas Koehler, respectively.

⁵³Fay Papers, MS 13,617.

⁵⁴J. M. Synge, Some Letters of John M. Synge to Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats, selected by Ann Saddlemyer (Dublin, 1971), pp. 9-11.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 25.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 26.

⁵⁷Synge, Letters to Molly, p. 176.

⁵⁸Synge, Some Letters, p. 28.

⁵⁹Synge, Letters to Molly, p. 180.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 218.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 32.

⁶²Ibid., p. 302.

⁶³Ibid., p. 86.

⁶⁴W. G. Fay, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre, pp. 211-212.

⁶⁵Synge, Letters to Molly, p. 87.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 108.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 167.

CHAPTER III

OTHER COLLABORATORS

In a letter dated December 19, 1906, the Abbey financial angel, Miss Annie Horniman, proposed to Lady Gregory that certain changes be made in the organization of the theatre.

I propose that they should engage a Managing Director at a good salary (say 400 or 500 a year) who would be able to stage manage all the plays and produce such as would be performed, except when the Directors wished to do them themselves or to leave them in the hands of an artist; Fay to retain the production of all Irish peasant plays and to have nothing to do with the rest except his own parts. This would free him from much wear and tear and allow him to perfect himself in his own lines.

The engagement of this Managing Director would of course be under the control of the Directors and he must be recommended by some one of known theatrical position. This wd [sic] remove my objection to touring under the present state of affairs and would I believe be extremely advantageous to all concerned.

I should not engage him and he would be responsible to the Directors and I would pay the money for his salary to you. I leave this offer open until my return on Jan 21 but as time is of value, if you accept it Mr. Yeats holds a formal letter authorising such an engagement immediately. Will you kindly communicate this to Mr Synge as I should like all the directors to accept this; but as in the case of the subsidy a majority is sufficient, Mr Synge never having accepted it.¹

Lady Gregory informed Synge of the proposal and on December 24, 1906, he replied in a letter to W. B. Yeats:

Dear Yeats

Lady Gregory has sent me Miss Horniman's letter, with her very generous offer, and asks me to write what I think of it to you at once. I think the arrangement would be an excellent one for us all if her proposal can be modified or made more clear on the following lines.

1. The Managing Director would not, I should think, be entitled to a vote on the Board of Directors.
2. He would have no power to dismiss or engage actors without permission from the Directors.

3. Fay should continue to produce--in the sense that he would direct actors as to their speaking, movements, gestures and positions, etc., all DIALECT PLAYS--(a better term than peasant plays as it would include work like The Canavans.)

4. Other plays should for the most part be produced by the Managing Director, but there could be no hard and fast rule which would compel us to give him, say, a play of Boyle's not quite in dialect, like The Eloquent Dempsey, or possibly an historical play of mine which I might think Fay would understand better, and lastly and most important of all, we must not be bound to give him the production of verse plays till we see that he is able to produce them according to our views, or as we may call them, The Samhain Principles. Some of the most aggressively vulgar stage-management I have ever seen was in Irving's production of The Merchant of Venice, so that the fact that the Managing Director is to [be] recommended by some one of known theatrical position, is no guarantee whatever on this point. Therefore a certain freedom must be left to the Directors or their position will be a false and absurd one.

5. Whatever arrangement is arrived at, it must be of such a kind that Fay will be able to co-operate in it cordially. We owe this to him, as he has in reality built up the company.

6. I trust Miss Horniman understands that there is no likelihood of our undertaking a large amount of touring, as we have seen so plainly that except in a few centres of culture our time and energy is thrown away.

I have written these notes on the proposal rapidly, and, except as to Fay, I am quite willing to discuss them with you if you are not in agreement with them.²

While awaiting Synge's reply, Miss Horniman wrote to Yeats on December 28th.

I had a charming letter from Lady Gregory; she seems to understand that my offer was well-meant, but she does not want to decide at once. I wrote her a long letter giving my own personal views on the subject and saying that I consider it necessary to take action at once, so as not to lose any of the advantages of the present growth of the audiences. I told her how I understand that I am extrinsic to the Irish idea, but that on the other hand all that side is extrinsic to my scheme itself. But maybe she will send you the letter to read. I did not mention or refer to Miss Darragh at all. That is a matter in which I must not interfere. The more I think of it, the better I like the idea of a professional hand on the reins. I dread more and more the scheme of letting Fay practise on classics and so to make us ridiculous in the eyes of the few who matter. It comes to this--why am I to be sacrificed to Fay's vanity & Mr Synge's egotism? That is the root of the whole difficulty. They would "moan" loudly enough if I wanted you to produce an Irish play written by me, wouldn't they? That would be damaging the whole scheme to please me and not any worse, as if wanting to insult Sophocles to please Fay.³

By the 31st, she had studied Synge's reply and written to Yeats.

My letter to Lady Gregory may cause her to be willing to take her right position in the matter; whether for or against acceptance of the scheme. I cannot alter my offer in any way, it was carefully considered at the time & no new evidence has been laid before me. Any modification on Mr Synge's lines would simply be the undoing of my intentions. I will make some remarks on Mr Synge's letter & you can dispose of this as you think fit.

1. The right of voiting [sic] on your board is not a matter in which I can interfere.

2. He must be free to engage or dismiss actors; if not supported by the board (or a majority) he must go. In this I should have to decide whether I should authorise you to engage a new man. If he were unsuitable we could try another; but if otherwise suitable & yet not supported by the directors, things would return to their present position.

3. I carefully left it open for a play, at the wish of the author, to be put in the hands of any Director or artist instead of the new man: if an author chooses Fay, let him take the risk. But only the author can choose the producer; where the author is not at hand it must be done by the new man. If the "Samhain Principles" are to be stretched into an intention to go in every way against the rules of the ordinary stage where these rules are right and necessary, I have been under a serious delusion. At present my position is "false and absurd" in the eyes of the public and I naturally object.

I leave the Directors free to carry out their own ideas as long as they are in harmony with the "Samhain Principles." I consider the decorative staging of plays anti-dramatic but I put no obstacles in the way of your experiments. Any consultation with Fay or modifications to please him are not in my province. He is amply represented at present on your board.

I never saw anything in the old Lyceum stage-management as common & vulgar as Fay's behaviour in "Hyacinth Halvey" at Edinburgh when he deliberately turned to the audience & spoke certain sentences as if they were vulgar gag [sic].

The offer must be accepted or refused finally by Jan 21st.⁴

This exchange of letters shows Synge more or less in direct conflict with Miss Horniman. This was not a usual posture for Synge; it was more the style of Yeats. Synge usually let the poet lead in situations requiring strong self-assertion. (A month after the exchange of these letters, Yeats, single-handed, defended The Playboy against the public.) Synge was more often a mediator among the actors, directors, and Miss Horniman. He preferred to suggest, inform, counsel, and negotiate rather than confront or dispute on matters of theatrical management.

Nevertheless, even the smoothest line of mediation skips and swerves as it encounters vested interests. This particular crisis occurred at a point in time about half way between Synge's becoming a director of the Abbey in 1905 and the departure of the Fays in 1908. Both events resulted from Miss Horniman's involvement in the affairs of the theatre. Her money changed the Irish National Theatre Society into a professional theatre and revised its legal organization. In the shuffle, three directors were appointed, Lady Gregory, Yeats, and Synge, and a number of actors departed in protest. They saw an end to "participatory democracy" in the selection of plays and a corresponding diminution of nationalist zeal. During the next two and one half years, Miss Horniman became increasingly dissatisfied with the work of the Fays and was not saddened by their departure, for which she bears no small responsibility. Synge usually supported the Fays, but he acquiesced in their departure. The reasons for his acquiescence were personal and aesthetic. They are important because they link his work as a playwright to his work as a theatre director and manager.

In 1913, Maurice Bourgeois wrote that Synge was not a product of the Abbey Theatre:

It did not create him as it created others; nor did he create it. Personally, he loathed the idea of "movements" and of "schools"; and in this as in other cases, his individual independence may be safely vindicated. He did not catch the mannerism--nay not even the manner--of the Celtic Renaissance; he was simply caught up in it. It so happened that by some fortunate or unfortunate synchronism, he found in Dublin a stage to produce his plays, actors to perform them, and a public somewhat noisily critical.⁵

Much in this passage confirms an image of Synge which has come down to us: Synge, the cool, detached observer of life. Yeats said he was incapable of a political thought. Mansfield saw him "outside the circle, gravely watching, gravely summing up, with a brilliant malice,

the fools and wise ones inside."⁶ Had Bourgeois and Mansfield access to Synge's letters to his fellow directors, they would have revised their opinions. Synge did not like management. It distracted him from writing and cooked his days into a gallimaufry of administrative detail, liberally seasoned with conflict and rancor. After the Fays' exit in 1908, he became more active as a producer and the added pressures probably contributed to his final decline in health. But his distaste for the task, amply expressed in letter to his fiancée and protégé, Molly Allgood, did not prevent him from understanding the importance of the position. Nor did dislike make him ignore its potential for advancing his own aims as well as those of the Abbey. If chance brought him to the Abbey, he was not content to "sum up" from outside its follies and profundities. He argued vigorously and clearly for policies he thought proper. During these arguments he skirmished with Miss Horniman and became an expert on her moods and views.

Miss Horniman was attracted to the Abbey by her admiration for Yeats and her desire to be known as an artist as well as as a patron of the arts. She was not talented as an actress, designer, or writer. But she did have opinions about the Abbey's future and, with her money, attempted to convert them into policies. She eagerly supported Yeats' idea of reviving verse plays mainly because it was Yeats' idea. She was not enthusiastic about the peasant plays and their restrained style of acting and setting. She had been raised on continental Repertory Companies, the theatrical practices of which were in many ways abhorrent to Frank and W. G. Fay. The Fays' style she decried as "amateurishness."⁷ Moreover, as a middle-class English woman, she disregarded the connection, felt by many in the company, between the

theatre and Irish Nationalism. At times, apparently, she was derisive about Irish Nationalism and Padraic Colum withdrew from the theatre in 1905 partly because of her "continual jibes about politics and the Gaelic League, capped by a remark that 'Colum knows on which side his bread is buttered.'"⁸ In 1906, during an English tour, company discipline did not conform to her standards, a fact which she attributed to the laxness of Synge and the Fays. Following the tour she became increasingly dissatisfied with all aspects of the Fays' work, and it was only a matter of time before she or the brothers moved on.

As we have seen in a previous chapter, Synge criticized the Fays, too, but he trusted their theatrical judgment and worked closely with them producing his plays. His letters to Molly are sprinkled with references to visits with the Fays, usually Frank. They often discussed theatrical affairs more or less emotionally, but their disagreements were easily reconciled. Synge supported the Fays because he needed them to produce his plays and because he believed that their talents advanced his purposes and those of the Abbey.

By June of 1906, Miss Horniman was exasperated with the Fays. The actors' misbehavior during the spring tour included blowing a trumpet in a hotel so that Miss Horniman could not sleep until after 2:00 a.m.; girls sitting with "their hair down their backs" while waiting for trains; girls talking to intoxicated men out of the carriage window; and various attempts by the actors and actresses to share the same compartments.⁹ It was part of W. G. Fay's job to ensure good discipline; in Miss Horniman's eyes, he had failed.

She became irritated at the difficulties in handling accounts which seemed to arise when the Fays became involved. In an unfinished letter dated 19 June 1906, she referred to the cost of new scenery, the

"fit-up." (Robert, Lady Gregory's son, designed for the Abbey.)

Lady Gregory says that Robert knows nothing of the cost of the fit-up, he had nothing to do with it except a preliminary talk with Fay. Now what can I do? I can't pay accounts that have not been sent in to me can I? Fay has never acknowledged the Glasgow £10 in any way nor told me even roughly what the previous money was spent on.¹⁰

By June 23rd, she was preparing to take action:

. . . I believe that all arrangements for after this tour have been left in such a tentative "pencilled condition" that no-one will be bound by them. Fay tells you one thing and other people another thing so as to get his own way. The only possible course of action for me now is to resign all connection with the theatre except that I shall hand over to the Directors the money to carry it on. I have been virtually dismissed by Fay & as the performances are absolutely under his control, the only way I can practically help the Directors is by putting the power of the purse into their hands.¹¹

Meanwhile, her criticism of the acting, expressed in a letter to Yeats, had trickled down to the company. (See chapter on "Actors.") Lady Gregory prevailed on Fay to write to Miss Horniman. Fay immediately consulted with Synge who, in turn, reported back to Yeats in a letter which succinctly exposes the complexities of theatrical politics.

Aesthetics and personalities are inextricably entwined:

Dear Yeats

I am glad to gather from your letter that you are going to Longford so that the care of the company will be for a while off my shoulders. Fay wrote to Miss Horniman at Lady Gregory's wish. He showed me his letter in the theatre. I did not think it very good but I let him send it as I did not really know what he was to say. I did not tell him much of what Miss H. said to me as I thought she did not wish it. The way she speaks about the company's work in her letter to the directors is MOST ABSURD. She is simply repeating what Wareing and Co. have been saying and his quarrel with us really is that we are not stagey. Our kind of people as I said are as enthusiastic about our work in Edinburgh as they have ever been. Paterson, the artist, gave the three girls bouquets in Edinburgh this day week. Miss O'Dempsey has taken to starting conversations out of our window with bystanders during our journeys, but it is nothing very serious. I was going to speak to Fay about it today but after all the irritation about Miss H. I think it is better to let things stand. Fay and Miss O'D. will flirt till

they are married. Don't make more of the matter than it deserves unless you want to please the mischief-makers and make a permanent split with Fay.¹²

Here is evidence of Synge defending the Fays. Yet if another Horniman letter is reliable, his defense of the Fays' approach to drama did not prevent him from criticizing the quality of their acting. On July 22nd she wrote:

. . . What does Mr Synge mean by telling you that Fay "has fallen off in his acting" & yet he objected to my presumption in seeing it for myself. I'm one of the educated public who mar or make & whose verdict is the final one. It is an impertinence of Mr Synge to write about me to you as he did, now it is impudence to avow an opinion as his own which he had not the courage to express until he found that I had support. Perhaps cowardice is the root of what I call impudence. . . . The Mollie Allgood affair is not as serious in one way as the influence of Fay; if he marries her & she gives up acting, he will be far from Fay; yet on the other hand he may keep close to Fay so that she shall have good parts & have in time a larger salary. . . .¹³

Eight weeks later she detailed again her criticism of the Fays:

If ever solid Art work is to be done at the Abbey Theatre it must be done on a firm basis of solid effort. Its of no good to only use people's natural ways for big work, that teaches them nothing & when the first freshness has gone, there is only a dull uninterested amateur left. As to Mr. Synge--he too has proved himself to be of no good. Any holiday can be put off for a few days when necessary. Has he had the courage to take Mollie Allgood with him? Or has he gone to escape from her? Is the man content with what he has done already or does he think that he can get along without the help of the theatre?¹⁴

On September 30th, W. B. Yeats wrote a letter to his friend Florence Farr which indicates that feelings had been further incensed by an artistic decision of his. To play his Deirdre, Yeats had chosen an English actress, one Miss Darragh, over the Irish actresses in the company. Miss Horniman did not think that "one or two appearances by Miss Darragh can have much effect on the company; she won't have long enough experience of them to be able to manage to impress them. They

will despise her as being 'commercial' and 'made in London.'" Her assessment, as Yeats' letter shows, was both right and wrong:

I have had a bad time with Miss Horniman, whose moon is always at the full of late, but hope a letter yesterday has quieted her. Miss Darragh is trying to play her for the chances it may lead to: but Fay is doing quite the reverse, for he has just encountered an enemy and they have fought with fists and with a result about which each is confused, for each seems to mix up what he did with what he had hoped to do. In other words each claims that he has licked the other and Fay's enemy says he will attack him next time "before the public on the stage." Fay meanwhile writes that the enemy 'will be sorry before he (Fay) has done with 'him.' I think after careful investigation that Fay had slightly the better for he was dragged off while imploring to be let finish. It is all about a young woman. Do not talk about it just now as I don't want it to get round to Miss Horniman's ears that people know about it. I have not tried to interfere but I think, for certain reasons, they will have to fight it out.¹⁵

On a Sunday in October, in another letter to Miss Farr, herself an English actress, he gives us a measure, not only of the Abbey, but, one suspects, any large artistic enterprise:

Miss Darragh is I notice not popular with the company. She says such things as 'Why do you not get that castor screwed on to the table leg?' instead of making enquiries and finding out that that castor cannot be screwed on because the woman who washed the floors and the stage carpenter have quarrelled about it-- and the stage carpenter would sooner die than screw it on. She is considered to lack tact and the finer feelings. At any rate she has got them into the right state to welcome you.¹⁶

On November 14th, Miss Horniman urged Yeats not to "kow-tow" to the "patriots" by "dropping" Synge. "The 6d seats are quite enough of a climb down to their desires." She had ambitions of elevating Dublin tastes by playing continental plays. The Fays did not fit well into the scheme and she reiterated her previous criticism. The Fays used "messily the material already in the amateurs not to increase and broaden them into professionals and learn to act not merely to be as life has taught them only. That is not Art at all."¹⁷

At this time Synge was preparing to rehearse the Playboy. On

November 25th, he asked to postpone rehearsals until January for reasons of health.

Dear Lady Gregory

I have had rather a worse attack than I expected when I wrote my last note, but I am much better now, and out as usual. One of my lungs however has been a little touched so I shall have to be careful for a while. Would it be possible to put off *The Playboy* for a couple of weeks? I am afraid if I went to work at him again now, and then rehearsed all December I would be very likely to knock up badly before I was done with him. My doctor says I may do it, if it is necessary, but he advises me to take a couple of weeks rest if it can be managed. A cousin of mine who etches is over here now and he wants me to go and stay with him for a fortnight in a sort of country house he has in Surrey, so if you think *The Playboy* can be put off I will go across on Thursday or Friday and get back in time to see *The Shadowy Waters* and get *The Playboy* under way for January. What do you think? If I go I would like to read the third act of *Playboy* to you before I go, and then make final changes while I am away as I shall have a quiet time. I hope to see Deirdre on Tuesday or Wednesday if all goes well.¹⁵

But he was not too ill to respond at length to a question pertinent to the basic philosophy of the Irish Dramatic movement.

I think we should be mistaken in taking the continental Municipal Theatre as the pattern of what we wish to attain as our "final object" even in a fairly remote future. A dramatic movement is either (a) a creation of a new dramatic literature where the interest is in the novelty and power of the new work rather than in the quality of the execution, or (b) a highly organized executive undertaking where the interest lies in the more and more perfect interpretation of works that are already received as classics. A movement of this kind is chiefly useful in a country where there has been a successful creative movement. So far our movement has been entirely creative--the only movement of the kind I think now existing--and it is for this reason that it has attracted so much attention. To turn this movement now--for what are to some extent extrinsic reasons--into an executive movement for the production of a great number of foreign plays of many types would be, I cannot but think, a disastrous policy. None of us are suited for such an undertaking,--it will be done in good time by a dramatic Hugh Lane when Ireland is ripe for it. I think Yeats's view that it would be a good thing for Irish audiences--our audiences--or young writers is mistaken. Goethe at the end of his life said that he and Schiller had failed to found a German drama at Weimar because they had confused the public mind by giving one day Shakespeare, one day Calderon, one day Sophocles and so on. Whether he is right or not we can see that none of the "Municipal Theatres" that are all over Europe are creating or helping to create a new stage-literature.

We are right to do work like the Doctor and Oedipus because they illuminate our work but for that reason only. Our supply of native plays is very small and we should go on I think for a long time with a very small company so that the mature work may go a long way towards keeping it occupied.

As you [Lady Gregory] say Miss Horniman's money--as far as I am aware--is quite insufficient for anything in the nature of a Municipal Theatre. The Bohemian Theatre has £12,000 a year and all scenery. The interest on the £25,000 would be I suppose £800 or £900, so that for us all large schemes would mean a short life, and then a collapse as it has happened in so many English movements. If we are to have a grant from some Irish State fund, we are more likely to get one that will be of real use if we keep our movement local--I do not see a possibility of any workable arrangement in which Miss Horniman would have control of some of the departments. That is my feeling on the general question raised by Yeats's statement. Now for the practical matters. W. Fay must be freed, that I think is urgently necessary if he is to help to keep up the quality of his acting. An Assistant Stage manager as we agreed will do this if we can find the right man.¹⁹

Lady Gregory also opposed the idea and she and Synge carried the day. Synge had used his influence as a director and manager to preserve his own aesthetic aims and those of the movement. The concluding paragraphs of the letter remind us of the specific conflict with Miss Horniman about the Fays, a conflict temporarily resolved in the letters quoted at the beginning of the chapter. After further negotiations, in which Synge played a significant part, Willie Fay was prevailed upon to accept a more limited role directing only peasant plays. But he was to get £100 a year added to his wages and a written contract specifying his duties. These conditions were specified by Synge in a letter to Yeats on 11 January 1907. Another condition was included as well: 'We--the authors--to be free to withdraw all our plays at the end of six months--in other words that the agreement we signed as to the Irish rights to be cancelled at the end of six months.'²⁰

Synge, of course, could not have known that a week of violent reaction to the Playboy was in his future. But this condition fore-shadows dissatisfaction with the theatre movement and a longing to

branch out, artistically, in new directions. During 1907, his discontent grew, fostered by his management duties, and he considered invoking the withdrawal condition.

On January 9, 1907, Synge was rehearsing The Playboy. His first concern was for the successful production of the play and the Fays were important to that aim. On that day, therefore, he stressed to Yeats his belief that, artistically, the company was in good condition. He urged, as well, that the plans for a new producer not disrupt the Fays' concentration on The Playboy.

All things considered it is not surprising that Fay decided as he did. If he is unfair to his fellow workers will not Miss Horniman be so to far greater extent if she throws us over when we have carried out our side of the original bargain so rigourously? [?] came round after one of the shows last week in the greatest enthusiasm over the progress we had made since he last saw us about a year ago. Jimmy O'Brien--from the Queen's--was in on Saturday and was immensely taken by the Hour Glass and Frank Fay. In the evening Madame Luzan--the Prima donna of the Moody-Manners Opera Co. now in the Royal came in and went to tea with them afterwards in the Greenroom. She told them she had never heard such beautiful speaking in her life and was greatly pleased with the whole show. If Miss Horniman gives us up she cannot pretend to do so because we are an artistic failure.

The Playboy is going very well in rehearsal--and for the time --all is smooth. Please do not bring or send over new man till the Playboy is over as it is absolutely essential that Fay should be undisturbed till he has got through this big part. It will be well--I think--to impress on the new man that he is to cooperate with--and help Fay in the friendliest way.²¹

A little more than two weeks later the condition of the company was a matter of national interest. The audience broke up in disorder and the hated police had to be called in to keep order. Synge, recovering from pneumonia, sat stoically through it all, commenting only briefly in public on his purpose in writing the piece. He left the public battles to Yeats but he could not help being aware of the discussion which rumbled within the ranks. Neither Lady Gregory nor W. G. Fay had cared for the language and made many cuts over Synge's

objections. The diarist Joseph Holloway recorded on January 27th that "the players had expected the piece's downfall sooner" than the third act.

W. G. Fay expressed it that "Had I not cut out a lot of the matter, the audience would not have stood an act of it." I praised the acting and said it was a fine audience to play to. I frankly did not like the play and frankly expressed itself on the matter, having patiently listened to it until the fatal phrase came and proved the last straw. Frank excused Synge on the score that he has had no joy in his life, and until he has had some you may expect drab plays from him. . . . The influence of the Elizabethan dramatists was on Synge, and he loved vigorous speech. Frank partly defended him on this score. He was in a terrible state about the piece. Both brothers wondered what would be the result of last night's scene and I said, "Bad houses next week, but a return when the right stuff would be forthcoming again."²²

Holloway himself thought the play was "not a truthful or just picture of the Irish peasants, but simply the outpouring of a morbid, unhealthy mind ever seeking on the dunghill of life for the nastiness that lies concealed there."²³ He "pitied the actors and actresses for having to give utterance to such gross sentiments and only wonder they did not refuse to speak some of the lines."²⁴ Holloway was not a member of the company, though he was the architect of the theatre building. His tastes, perhaps, corresponded more closely to those of the average Irishman than any one else's in the company, with the possible exception of W. A. Henderson. On January 28th, Holloway recorded a conversation with the man who had been hired the previous fall, at Miss Horniman's behest, to relieve W. G. Fay of managerial duties.

. . . Henderson and I went down to the Abbey . . . and on our way spoke of Synge's nasty mind--to store those crude, coarse sayings from childhood and now present them in a play. The influence of Gorki must be upon him.²⁵

Most likely Holloway did not express those sentiments directly to Synge and there is no record of Synge's opinion of the architect. To their credit, the Fays played loyally, frequently urging the audience to be quiet so the play could be heard. But there is no question that Synge

felt his position within the company had been altered and that he was no longer on the same footing with other members of the company. On March 15th, in a letter to Molly, he reported receiving a letter from Henderson on tour in England: 'He added at the end 'What fine times we had with the Playboy.' Little Hypocrite!!"²⁶ His relations with Miss Horniman were colored by a calculated wariness which had not existed before. On February 12th, he wrote to Molly:

Miss Horniman wrote to say The Playboy was "splendid", and I am to make haste and write another play. She wants to make peace, I suppose, I have written to thank her a little dryly.²⁷

Perhaps it was this uncertainty which made him eager to insure a place for his works in an American tour. Charles Frohman had expressed an interest in bringing the Abbey to the United States and was becoming acquainted with the repertoire. Synge learned from W. G. Fay that Frohman had seen several plays of Lady Gregory and Yeats but only one of his, Riders to the Sea. He wrote to Molly: "I am raging about it, though of course you must not breath a word about it." He threatened to "find out what is at the bottom of it, and I am not getting fair play, I'll withdraw my plays from both tours, English and American. It is getting past a joke the way they are treating me."²⁸ He wrote to Frank Fay asking for an accounting of the number of times his plays had been performed as compared to those of Yeats and Gregory. Then he reported again to Molly:

I expect their pieces have been done at least three times as often as mine. If that is so there'll be a row. I am tied to the company now by your own good self, otherwise I would be inclined to clear away to Paris and let them make it a Yeats-Gregory show in name as well as in deed, However it is best not to do anything rash. They have both been very kind to me at times and I owe them a great deal.²⁹ [Emphasis added.]

We ought not to read more into this letter than is truly there. Synge was ill and shaken, no doubt, by the reverberations of the Playboy

affair. Moreover, Fay's reply calmed him significantly. It showed that his plays had been performed more frequently than he had presumed. Nevertheless, the tone of a large portion of Fay's letter could only have strengthened his belief that his status had changed; that Molly and not the Abbey held the key to his future as a dramatist:

There is a strong feeling in the company against the Playboy and I doubt if they will agree to take it to the other side, but I may be wrong here and they may raise no objection. One thing is certain, no crowd of professional actors would have gone thro' what the company went thro' during the Playboy week and if we go to London there will probably be a storm. I will face that storm and all its consequences, so will the brother; but will the others? I think that having done the play here, it must be done everywhere. It is no more a libel on Ireland than a French play about husband, lover and mistress is a libel on France.

I absolutely agree with you that a Yeats-Gregory theatre would not benefit anybody. Boyle's action unfortunately has put us in that predicament but Fitzmaurice and Norreys Connell may get us out of it.

You have doubtless thought the thing out well, but so long as you write plays like the Playboy, the other directors will always have an excellent answer.

I have no ties and am not likely now ever to have any, so it doesn't matter whether I live in the gutter or as I am doing. I shall not shirk playing in any play that I think good, but how many others can do so now.

I am deliberately arguing against you. Quite likely the London Irish will only boycott the season or with their broader views--if they have such--may like the play, but the whole thing is problematic.³⁰

In fact, Synge had in mind a work which proved uncontroversial--Deirdre of the Sorrows. But the motivation for its writing was not appeasement of actors, directors, or audience. He had written to Molly in December of 1906 from the comfort of his cousin's house in Surrey: "My next play must be quite different from the P.Boy. I want to do something quiet and stately and restrained and I want you to act in it."³¹ As the play had progressed, he became increasingly aware of the importance of the Abbey to Molly's career. It was acceptable, when necessary, for him to oppose the directors and Miss Horniman, but Molly must be more discreet. Gently, he reminded her of her position:

I had two friendly letters from Miss Horniman yesterday. A great deal depends--as to future tours--on the impression she gets of the acting and what she calls the "discipline" of the company--this is strictly between ourselves--the acting in our peasant plays is all right, I hope the discipline, the orderliness of the company is the same. How are W. G. and Mrs. F. behaving themselves this tour? You had best be steadily polite--I don't mean effusive--to Miss Horniman if you come in contact with her. It is the only way to keep oneself right. One gets into the way of wearing a sort of mask after a while, which is a rather needful trick.³²

In addition to these concerns, Synge was wrestling again with theatrical problems ranging in importance from petty to crucial. There was friction between W. G. Fay and Ben Iden Payne, who had been retained to direct non-peasant plays. One issue was the company letterhead. Fay objected to Payne being listed as a "producer." "I see no reason," he yelled, "why the words 'stage manager' should have been removed from the notepaper without the society's permission. Is Mr. Payne the society's servant or its master?"³³

The old vexations, from which, sadly, only illness could release him, resumed in the late spring of 1907. On crucial questions, it was still not possible to separate issues from personalities. In a letter to Lady Gregory and Yeats in May, the issue was the preservation of "all the Samhain principles." It was raised by the presence of the English, Mr. Iden Payne, and Miss Darragh.

Payne showed me a letter from Miss Darragh claiming to be "starred" in Oxford and London. I do not think that it should be done, or if it is W. G. Fay, and Miss Sara Allgood should be starred equally. We go to the cultured people of these places to show them something that is new to them--our plays and the ensemble acting of our little company. If however we placard Miss Darragh, a very ordinary if clever actress, as the attraction, we put ourselves on a very different, and, I think, a very ridiculous footing. I am vehemently against it. I talked it over at length with Payne. He is against it definitely. He says it could do Miss Darragh no professional injury to play without being starred, although obviously, to be starred on a large scale would be an excellent advertisement for her. It would be better to double or treble the salary she is to get than to do so.

The first show of Fand was deplorable, it came out as a bastard literary pantomime, put on with many of the worst tricks of the

English stage. That is the end of all the Samhain principles and this new tradition we were to lay down!! I felt inclined to walk out of the Abbey and go back no more. The second Saturday was much less offensive. Payne is doing his best obviously and conscientiously and he may come to understand our methods perhaps in time. I am getting on well but still coughing so that nothing has been settled about the operation.³⁴

An operation on his swollen neck would not be performed until later in the year. But the combination of poor health, the new play and management was becoming unbearable. On May 26th he wrote to Molly that he was thinking of resigning his directorship.

I am not satisfied with the way things are going in the company (--Miss H. is "at" me again, so far in a friendly way, about some "fit up" that was to have been made last summer, and that I know nothing of--) and I wrote to Yeats yesterday proposing to resign my directorship. It does not do me or anyone else any good, that I can see, and it is an endless worry to me. I will not do anything in a hurry, however, and please don't speak of this to anyone. I do not think things can go on much longer as they are, and I think I would have a freer hand to ask for what arrangements I want made for the working of the company if I was outside it. I will not desert W. G. F. if he wants me to stay on, so I must consult him.³⁵

In letters to Molly on the 28th and again on the 30th he repeated his desire to shut himself of the director's duties.³⁶ His vow to be loyal to W. G. Fay becomes ironic in retrospect. Partly as a result of his own inability to maintain discipline on tour, but also because of Synge's love for Molly and his concern for their art, Fay was to lose the support of Synge. Through the summer of 1907, Synge's spirits were buoyed by the success of The Playboy in London and especially by Molly's acclaim. "You were capital last night in almost all of it," he wrote her, "and everyone is speaking well of you, Yeats especially. He says you are excellent in The Shadow of the Glen and that he withdraws all his former criticisms of you."³⁷ In July, he spent two weeks in a cottage only half a mile from Molly. David Greene, Synge's biographer, calls them the happiest two weeks of his life. As

the fall tour approached, though, old and new worries cropped up. He objected to her excessive touring: "Too much touring in little Irish towns would be a dog's life for you and it would mean doing our un-intellectual work, L. Gregory's etc. only."³⁸

Four days later, on August 18th, he was again frustrated by theatrical affairs in general. "One thing is certain I'm not going to kill myself anymore for the theatre. I get no thanks for it, on any side, and I do no good--at least as things are going now."³⁹

Occasionally, the director's position brought small satisfactions. He was in a position to criticize and encourage the work of new playwrights. At these times, he helped the dramatic movement fulfill one of its primary functions. As late as November of 1907, he still relied on the judgment of Frank or W. G. Fay, about whom, on other recent occasions, he had been skeptical. (In September he had written of W. G. Fay, to Lady Gregory, "I do not think Fay will be able to do much that is worth doing, unless we keep with him, and over him."⁴⁰ In November, he queried Lady Gregory about Frank's role in The Unicorn. "Is F. J. Fay to play Martin? A great deal will depend on how far he can make himself felt.")⁴¹ But if there was doubt about Frank's abilities as an actor, there was apparently none about his power as a critic:

I return the "Fragment". It is hard to know what to do with it. It has real dramatic gifts of characterization and arrangement, and general power of building up something that can stand by itself, but the treatment of the hero at the end is so sentimental and foolish I hardly see how we can stage it. It would [be] well perhaps to write to the author telling him how much we are interested in his work--and saying that we have no place for his play at present but that we might do it towards the end of the season. Meanwhile we would suggest that he should carefully revise the part of his principal character who would be likely in his present form to appear ridiculous on the stage--Then if he revises--I think it a case where Fay's judgment would be

useful, and we might be guided almost by reasons of utility. It is good promising enough to play if it would be useful to us, and crude enough to refuse, if it would be likely to do us harm.-- That is my very hasty view of the matter.⁴²

But other forces were pulling apart the Fays and Synge. As Deirdre of the Sorrows progressed, Synge grew ever more anxious to make the piece right for Molly. On October 22nd, he wrote to her of his good "go off" during which he wrote ten pages of dialogue "in great spirits."⁴³ Two weeks later, he was working energetically, the vision of a great role for Molly sustaining him:

I've been working at Deirdre till my head is going round. I was too taken up with her yesterday to write to you--I got her into such a mess I think I'd have put her into the fire only that I want to write a part for you, so you mustn't be jealous of her.⁴⁴

Throughout November, Synge studied his letters to Molly with references to the play. Two other references in these letters indicate that he was linking his future as a dramatist more firmly to Molly's talent than to the Abbey. His report of a meeting with the producer William Poel shows that acclaim from outside the Irish movement pleased him and that, within it, he was still sensitive to apparent slights to his works.

I was greatly pleased with Poel who is most enthusiastic about my work. We dined together Poel and the three directors--every now and then Poel launched out into praise of my work, and it was amusing to see Lady G. dashing in at once with praise of Yeats' work. They have put off The Well of the Saints till Lent I feel angry about it, and sick of the whole business.⁴⁵

Synge began to write of a time when he and Molly would be free of the Abbey. A year earlier he had rejected the expansion of the Abbey's repertoire to include continental drama. Now, prompted by his vision of Molly's potential success, he responded enthusiastically to the talk that Count Markiewicz planned to start a "sort of municipal theatre to play all the good plays of the day on a wide basis . . . including Irish

ones. If that comes off there will be a hope for us after the Abbey is buried."⁴⁶

At this time, the final events leading to the resignation of the Fays were unfolding. During the fall tour, W. G. Fay's inability to maintain discipline was confirmed for good and all. Fay's remedy demanded that the players sign personal contracts with him. The players rejected the idea emphatically. The split appeared irremediable: either the Fays resigned or several talented players would leave the company. As ever, the issues were complicated by personalities. Among the actors who had rows with Fay were Molly and J. M. Kerrigan. Synge knew the nature of these quarrels and gave details to Lady Gregory in a letter dated 18 December 1907. W. G. Fay, he wrote,

is very bitter against Miss O'Neill. She is, I dare say, hard to manage, all artists with highly excitable tempers are, but I know a whole series of little things by which Fay has broken down his authority with her.⁴⁷

The "little things" he explained in a letter to Yeats on December 19th.

One other matter. I think Miss M. Allgood's unpunctuality is very serious, but it is not, as Fay thinks, merely aggressive insubordination. She is just as unpunctual in everything she does. Further, on this tour when she had her sister seriously ill in rough theatrical lodgings and was playing and learning new heavy parts, a reasonable stage-manager would have treated her with a little extra consideration, instead of singling her out as Fay has done.⁴⁸

Kerrigan's case was more serious because his row had caused him, temporarily, to leave the company. By December 18th, though, he was apparently anxious to return. Synge, mediating, wrote to Lady Gregory:

I met Kerrigan today and had a long talk. He is ready,--eager,--to come back to us. He speaks of Fay quite simply and without temper. On the day in question he was in time for his cue--he only comes on in the second act--but Fay cursed at him and spoke badly to him personally--as he puts it--but there was nothing out of the way. Kerrigan, however, lost his head and temper and gave notice. He says Fay is unfortunate in his manner with them; at one time too confidential and the next lowering himself by undignified personal abuse so that none of them can feel any respect for him.⁴⁹

Of Fay's demands for contractual power, he wrote in the same letter:

If we gave Fay the power he wants we would lose the two Miss Allgoods, Mac, and, of course, Kerrigan. Otherwise we shall I fear lose the "Fay family" as Kerrigan called them. (I think we shall have to lose the Fays.) He, Fay, as it is, flatly refuses to have Kerrigan back. . . . He is in favour of closing for a fortnight after the Stephen's night show and getting a rest, and then putting things on whatever new basis we decide on afterwards. I do not know if that will seem best to you and Yeats. I think the matter is so very important, that we three MUST meet and talk it over with Fay, and then with the company. I am sincerely sorry for Fay; he has put himself in an impossible position by a generally unwise behaviour that he is largely unconscious of. . . . What shall I say to Kerrigan? I told him I would try and smooth matters down so that he might come back but it does not look hopeful unless Fay goes.⁵⁰

In 1959, Synge's biographer, David H. Greene, was forced to write that the reasons for Synge's desertion of the Fays were not clear, though he suspected that Molly had influenced his attitude.⁵¹ The publication, in 1971, by Professor Saddlemyer, of the letters between Synge, Yeats, and Lady Gregory reveals that Molly's influence is only part of the answer. In Synge's eyes, the issue was not so much Fay's treatment of Molly as it was Molly's future as an actress. Crucial to that future was Molly's continuing as an actress in the Abbey company and, he saw now, his continuing as a director in order to be near her and to guide her development. As the dispute with the Fays developed, he wrote to her on December 6:

I have had long talks with the Directors and we have come to some important decisions which you will hear of in good time. Meanwhile you are to stop Kerrigan leaving the company--if he is taking his notice seriously--just tell [him] to stay on till he has seen the Directors this PRIVATELY from me. If he is not really meaning to leave dont say anything about it. You know, I suppose, that we are to have Miss H[orniman's] subsidy for three full years more--if nothing unforeseen happens--that is great news for "US-TWO"--as by three years I ought to have a much better position than I have now and I think we'll come through all right--so that it is really worth while to fight the battle on and we the Directors are going to do it at all risks.⁵²

At the center of Synge's concern for his and Molly's future was the fate of Deirdre of the Sorrows. It was this play, Synge must have believed, which would secure their reputations. Unfortunately for the Fays, the success of the play required the talents of one other actor besides Molly. On December 19th, in a postscript, Synge wrote to Yeats: "N. B. My Deirdre is impossible without Kerrigan."⁵³

In a last effort to find a way to keep both the Fays and the dissident actors, Synge proposed that "there should be a permanent committee--the Directors--Stage-manager--and two or three of the company elected by themselves, who will keep up a link between us and the rank and file and aid discipline. I am all for more democracy in details."⁵⁴ Yeats saw dangers in such a proposal: the actors could vote against performing unpopular plays, such as The Playboy. He wished to remain above the dispute as an arbitrator and "make it impossible for Fay if we decide against him, to raise a popular cry against us. It is important that we should not seem to be the aggressors." But Yeats would not act without Lady Gregory "as the loss of Fay affects her work chiefly. She knows what I think. If he is to stay it should be as a defeated man. I believe him to be unfit to manage a company."⁵⁵ No compromise was reached and the Fays resigned less than a month later. Their leaving plunged Synge more deeply into management. By February of 1908, Synge was forced, ironically, to write to W. A. Henderson, who had left the company during 1907, offering the "little hypocrite" his old position "at former salary."⁵⁶

In spite of failing health and the pressures of creative writing, Synge was not a bystander when the principles of the Abbey were at stake. After The Playboy riots, however, and as his love for Molly

deepened, he viewed the purpose of the Abbey less philosophically than he had during his earlier days as a director. The fate of the Abbey became secondary to the fate of the vision of himself and Molly flourishing as artists and lovers. Deirdre of the Sorrows was made to fulfill that vision. When the practices of the Fays threatened to dissolve the dream, Synge hesitated only momentarily before he agreed to their removal.

This chapter is not a full account of Synge's life during the years 1906 and 1907. Nor does it presume to be a complete record of his work as a director of the Abbey. It does demonstrate that there is an intimate and complex relationship between Synge's artistic aims and his actions and opinions as a theatre manager. "All art is collaboration," Synge wrote. His career as writer-manager reveals the intricate nature of that collaboration. It is not merely a conversation between writer, actor, and director; it also occurs within the mind and heart of a single person. It affects not only a work of art; it can have the most profound effect on the lives of the artists.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹Gerard Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland, MS 10,952 (I)(ii).
- ²Synge, Some Letters, pp. 45-48.
- ³G. Fay Papers, MS 10,952 (I)(ii).
- ⁴Ibid.
- ⁵Bourgeois, pp. 142-143.
- ⁶Masefield, p. 8.
- ⁷Flannery, p. 18.
- ⁸Ibid.
- ⁹G. Fay Papers, MS 10,952 (I)(ii).
- ¹⁰Ibid.
- ¹¹Ibid.
- ¹²Synge, Some Letters, pp. 30-31.
- ¹³G. Fay Papers, MS 10,952 (I)(ii).
- ¹⁴Ibid.
- ¹⁵Yeats, Letters, pp. 479-480.
- ¹⁶Ibid., p. 481.
- ¹⁷G. Fay Papers, MS 10,952 (I)(ii).
- ¹⁸Synge, Some Letters, pp. 40-41.
- ¹⁹Ibid., pp. 41-43.
- ²⁰David H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens, J. M. Synge: 1871-1909 (Collier Books ed.; New York, 1961), p. 235.
- ²¹G. Fay Papers, MS 10,952 (I).
- ²²Holloway, p. 82.

- ²³Ibid., p. 81.
- ²⁴Ibid., p. 82.
- ²⁵Ibid., pp. 82-83.
- ²⁶Synge, Letters to Molly, p. 111.
- ²⁷Ibid., p. 96.
- ²⁸Ibid., pp. 112-113.
- ²⁹Ibid., pp. 114-115.
- ³⁰Synge Papers, Trinity College Library, MS 4425, #316. Also cited in Greene and Stephens, pp. 259-260.
- ³¹Synge, Letters to Molly, p. 145.
- ³²Ibid., p. 139.
- ³³Synge Papers, MS 4425, #325.
- ³⁴Synge, Some Letters, pp. 50-51.
- ³⁵Synge, Letters to Molly, p. 145.
- ³⁶Ibid., pp. 149-151. His exasperation reached a peak on these dates. On 28 May he wrote: "I feel indescribably sick of the continual worries of this company, worries with F.J.F. Miss Horniman, Lady G. Yeats." On the 30th he complained "there are so many possible points for friction that one never knows when a bad row may break out."
- ³⁷Greene and Stephens, p. 271.
- ³⁸Synge, Letters to Molly, p. 145.
- ³⁹Ibid., p. 179.
- ⁴⁰Synge, Some Letters, p. 60.
- ⁴¹Ibid., p. 62.
- ⁴²Ibid., p. 61.
- ⁴³Synge, Letters to Molly, p. 207.
- ⁴⁴Ibid., p. 210.
- ⁴⁵Ibid., p. 215.
- ⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 221-222.

- ⁴⁷Syngé, Some Letters, p. 66.
- ⁴⁸Ibid., p. 70.
- ⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 65-66.
- ⁵⁰Ibid., p. 67.
- ⁵¹Greene and Stephens, p. 280.
- ⁵²Syngé, Letters to Molly, p. 226.
- ⁵³Syngé, Some Letters, p. 70.
- ⁵⁴Ibid.
- ⁵⁵Greene and Stephens, p. 282.
- ⁵⁶Henderson Papers, MS 1731.

CHAPTER IV

SYNGE AND HIS AUDIENCE

For whom did Synge write? Daniel Corkery answered this question in his book, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature.¹ We will examine Corkery's answer later in this chapter. It was, at bottom, a wrong answer, but its tone of finality enabled critics to draw away somewhat from the slough of the Playboy riots. Before the appearance of Corkery's book Synge's art was discussed primarily in the light of the excitement it caused. Writers expended large numbers of words explaining the causes of the excitement, judged it moral or immoral to cause such excitement, and damned Synge for rousing it or the audience for becoming aroused. After Corkery, the critics moved into other fields. They remembered that Synge had talents other than that of rabble-rouser and that, in fact, he had written plays other than The Playboy, as well as prose and poetry. The publication of Synge's biography in 1959 opened a new era of Synge scholarship.² Recent years have produced many helpful studies of Synge and have seen the most important event of all: From 1962 to 1968, the Oxford University Press published the first scholarly edition of Synge's works.³ Despite all this new work the identity of Synge's audience is still not clear. The purpose of this chapter is to make such an identification and to place it in relation to several other audiences who have been candidates at one time or another.

During the early stages of the Irish Literary Theatre, Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Edward Martyn issued a "Preliminary Announcement" which implied certain traits in a theoretical audience:

The Irish Literary Drama will appeal rather to the intellect and spirit than to the senses. It will eventually, it is hoped, furnish a vehicle for the literary expression of the national ideals and thought of Ireland such as has not hither-to been in existence.⁴

The founders assumed the existence of playgoers interested in thoughtful, evocative drama which shunned easy, stereotyped characters, situations, and effects. They conceived an audience desiring to experience its Irishness in terms of intellectual ideals. Lady Gregory had written more directly of this audience in her letter of 1898 soliciting support for the theatre:

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 audience. . . . 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.⁵

This statement expresses a complex and ironic ideal. Lady Gregory's hope that the desire to show Ireland its soul would ensure tolerance is, in light of events, a touching expression of faith in her countrymen. One suspects that her knowledge of the real effects of a passion for oratory must have made her skeptical that such an ideal audience could be found. We should probably take it as proof of the founders' ardor that they could envision political and religious oratory as training for appreciating artistically inspired drama. In 1898, in Ireland, to do drama poetically, artistically meant tiptoeing around political quicksand in order to delve vigorously, even cheerfully, about the roots of Irish culture. In the context of Irish life at the turn of the century, the founders' statements express the highest artistic

ideals. They hoped for and, presumably, intended to write for an experienced audience, desirous of intellectual and spiritual elevation, open-minded and willing to set aside political ambitions, at least the time it occupied a theatre. The audience which actually occupied the seats of the Abbey was nearly an exact opposite of the ideal. Unacquainted with new theatrical theories and practices, wanting entertainment, opinionated and willing to resort to violence if its political toes were trod upon, the audience was a bitter disappointment to the founders. Occasionally, it was dangerous.

The founders struggled with their breathing, muttering, tramping audience. One can open Yeats' letters at just about any point during the first ten years of this century and find that it was never far from his mind. The Abbey, of course, was his child and he constantly took its temperature. Usually the heat was up when Synge's work was presented. Synge's plays somehow necessarily raised the question of audience and Yeats thought he knew why. After the performance of Well of the Saints in February 1905, he wrote to the American publisher John Quinn,

You will have judged the play for yourself. The audience always seemed friendly, but the general atmosphere has for all that been one of intense hostility. Irish national literature, though it has produced many fine ballads and many novels written in the objective spirit of a ballad, has never produced an artistic personality in the modern sense of the word. Tom Moore was merely an incarnate social ambition. And Clarence Mangan differed merely from the impersonal ballad writers about him in being miserable. He was not a personality as Edgar Poe was. He had not thought out or felt out a way of looking at the world peculiar to himself. We will have a hard fight in Ireland before we get the right for every man to see the world in his own way admitted. Synge is invaluable to us because he has that kind of intense narrow personality which necessarily raises the whole issue. It will be very curious to notice the effect of his new play. He will start next time with many enemies but with many admirers. It will be a fight like that over the first realistic plays of Ibsen.⁶

In 1905, Yeats saw Synge as extending and enriching the tradition of Irish National literature. If the audience was hostile, the

cause was the discrepancy between its understanding of the tradition and its perception of Synge. Yeats' explanation indicates, that, in 1905, he and, presumably, Lady Gregory and Synge still approached their audience on a level near their original standard. They believed in moving an audience through intellect. The issue which Yeats thought Synge raised--should each man be allowed to see the world in his own way?--could be rationally discussed. It was a question of "rights" which an audience could be persuaded to "admit."

By 1906, Yeats knew that such a tractable audience was not to be his, or the Abbey's. Those most familiar with Ireland's national literature were also those who banded together in intellectually restrictive clubs, leagues, and associations. They were no friends of the Abbey. In a letter to George Russell (AE), Yeats professed to be undisturbed by their enmity. He had a different audience in mind, now.

I know quite well--I knew when Synge wrote his first play--I will never have the support of the clubs. I am trying for the general public--the only question with me (and it is one I have argued with Synge and Lady Gregory) is whether I should attack the clubs openly. Our small public at the theatre is, I am glad to say, almost entirely general public.⁷

Yeats' ability to attract an audience was hindered by his devotion to verse drama. The general public was more interested in prose and its "passion for oratory" had not produced careful listeners after all. But playing to the general public had its satisfactions, too. After his Deirdre was presented on November 24, 1906, Yeats wrote to Katharine Tynan.

We are beginning to get audiences. Last winter we played to almost empty houses, a sprinkling of people in pit and stalls. Now we have big Saturday audiences. Last Saturday we turned away people from all parts of the house. My play Deirdre, after leaving me doubtful for a little, is now certainly a success. It is my best play and the last half of it holds the audience in as strong a grip as does Kathleen ni Houlihan, which is prose and therefore

a far easier thing to write. The difficulties of holding an audience with verse are ten times greater than with the prose play. The modern audience has lost the habit of careful listening. I think it is certainly my best dramatic poetry and for the first time a verse play of mine is well played all round. I think the Irish accent in blank verse is rather a shock to whatever ordinary theatregoers find their way to us, but they will get used to it. Miss Darragh, an Irish star on the English stage, who is playing for us, says our pit is a wonder; she never knew a pit to listen to tragedy with such silent attention. I think we are gradually working down through the noisy and hyper-critical, semi-political groups to a genuine public opinion, which is sympathetic.⁸

Miss Darragh's comment about the pit is interesting in light of two later letters by Yeats concerning the Abbey audience and Synge's relationship to it. The pit was the backbone of the Abbey audience, financially and critically. In 1908, two years after Miss Darragh's appearance, Yeats wrote to John Quinn.

The Abbey has been doing very well lately; for the last three months or so it has even been paying, and if it can keep on like this, which I doubt, we'll be able to do without a subsidy. The curious thing is that in spite of all the attacks upon us we have nothing but a pit and that is always full now. The stalls won't come near us, except when some titled person or other comes and brings guests. All the praise we have had from the most intellectual critics cannot bring the Irish educated classes, and all the abuse we have had from the least intellectual cannot keep the less educated classes away. I suppose the cause of it all is that, as a drunken medical student used to say, "Pitt decapitated Ireland."⁹

The pun is explained, in a way, by a letter Yeats wrote to Quinn in October 1907. The Abbey had produced a new play called The Country Dressmaker by George Fitzmaurice. Yeats described it as a "harsh, strong, ugly comedy" and said that it gave "a much worse view of people than the Playboy." He then explained why the audience received Fitzmaurice's play "with enthusiasm" and rejected Synge's:

The truth is that the objection to Synge is not mainly that he makes the country people unpleasant or immoral, but that he has got a standard of morals and intellect. They never minded Boyle, whose people are a sordid lot, because they knew what he was at. They understood his obvious moral, and they don't mind

Fitzmaurice because they don't think he is at anything, but they shrink from Synge's harsh, independent, heroic, clean, wind-swept view of things. They want their clerical conservatory where the air is warm and damp. Of course, we may not get through tomorrow night, but the row won't be very bad. Nothing is ever persecuted but the intellect, though it is never persecuted under its own name.¹⁰

Yeats' drunken medical student referred to William Pitt's prime ministry which dissolved the Irish Parliament in the Union of 1800. At the Abbey, the audience is largely the pit. The pit objects to intellect; therefore the pit decapitates Ireland.

These passages reveal the ambiguous position in which the Abbey found itself relative to its audience. On the one hand, there was a strong desire on the part of the founders to play to an audience with high moral and intellectual standards. But that audience would not come to the theatre. On the other hand, the audience which came most frequently to the theatre had little desire to see plays with moral and intellectual standards. But Yeats would not write for them. Neither, apparently, would Synge. The ambiguity could not go long unresolved. Without an active, sympathetic audience to support his original design, Yeats saw the Abbey's repertoire molded into a shape he disdained by a force he abhorred:

We were to find ourselves in a quarrel with public opinion that compelled us against our will and the will of our players to become always more realistic, substituting dialect for verse, common speech for dialect.¹¹

By this analysis, the audience should have have hailed Synge's plays. Their actual reception shows that realism was not wanted either. Often realistic content or interpretations drove the audience from their seats. Not even Riders to the Sea was exempt from disapproval. That eminent average playgoer, Joseph Holloway, recorded his impressions of the audience's response on the first two nights of the play's debut.

The contrast is startling and can be explained, in part, I believe, by possible differences in the composition of the audience. On Thursday, February 25, 1904, Riders to the Sea had its premiere "before a very distinguished audience." The manner of the interpretation was, apparently, gratifying,

. . . as it was presented with rare naturalness and sincerity, it held the interest of the audience in a marvellous way . . . a profound impression was created . . . the author was called at the end and very heartily applauded.¹²

The following night, an audience composed of more regular theatregoers had a different reaction. Holloway changed his tune, too:

. . . a more gruesome and harrowing play . . . has seldom, if ever, been staged before. The thoroughly in-earnest playing of the company made the terribly depressing wake episode so realistic and weirdly doleful that some of the audience could not stand the painful horror of the scene and had to leave the hall during its progress. . . . The audience was so deeply moved by the tragic gloom of the terrible scene on which the curtains close in, that it could not applaud.¹³

The previous fall, audiences had given a somewhat kinder reception to In the Shadow of the Glen. But underneath the cordiality Holloway sensed a strong feeling of suspicion. It was a feeling which he shared. When the play was in rehearsal, he wrote that "the tone of it is not quite Irish in sentiment, at all events, and the wind up strange, to say the least of it. The dialogue is capital and most amusing in parts."¹⁴ The first performance "met with a mixed reception" warranted by the "nature of the plot." Despite clever dialogue and concise construction,

This subject . . . could never pass with an Irish audience as a "bit of real Irish life" and, though most applauded the clever interpreters of the literary and dramatic merits of the play, they had little to say in favor of the matter of the story contained therein. The author got a call at the end.¹⁵

According to David Greene, the call came amid a chorus of hisses and boos.¹⁶ On the second night, the audience was more enthusiastic.

The humours of the strange little comedy . . . were thoroughly appreciated and won nothing but applause. . . . After all, there is very little harm in this strangely conceived domestic scene set in peculiarly real Irish everyday talk.¹⁷

The audience in the theater was much kinder than the newspapers. Motivated by a zealous concern for the image of Ireland, they pilloried Synge for slurring Irish womanhood and stealing his plot from corrupted versions of old world folk tales. The attack was led by the reviewer of the Irish Times and by the fierce nationalist, Arthur Griffith, in his paper, The United Irishman. (David Greene gives a detailed summary of the controversy in his biography of Synge.¹⁸) Synge enraged nationalist Irishmen. Their wrath was less damaging, however, than the censorious exit of Dudley Digges and Maire Quinn. In 1903, they were Frank Fay's proteges, the finest actors in the company. Synge's play so shocked them that they refused to act it and resigned from the company.

Other actors did not share the feeling. The actress Maire nic Shuibhlaigh called the "storm of protest" "stupid and ridiculous . . . amazing to most of us, who had never looked upon the play as anything but an exceptionally well written comedy."¹⁹ She knew that part of the protest was a cry of pain at a bruised image. Synge's "unpleasant if realistic picture of the peasantry" went against the canons of the renaissance which was "at pains to eulogize over the beauties of the Irish character." But she also recognized that the Irish playgoing public had been so dulled by decades of the "genteel comedy of the established theatre--entertaining but not very realistic stuff-- . . . that it could not swallow a credible satire."²⁰

Greene says that there is no record of Synge's reaction to the criticism.²¹ Maire nic Shuibhlaigh, though, records that "poor Synge, bewildered by the attacks, retired completely into his shell . . .

puzzled and very deeply hurt that his play should be received in such a fashion."²²

The Well of the Saints debuted in February, 1905. Joseph Holloway had read it during the summer of 1904 and pronounced it flawed in two ways. First, the language approached sacrilege:

Much of Mr. Synge's writing in this too long drawn out play is very coarsely and bluntly put. While the way the holy name is used frequently is almost blasphemous in my way of thinking . . . to call it Irish is distinctly a libel on our race and country.²³

Second, the treatment of certain subjects offended Irish tastes:

If there are two things ingrained in the Irish character above all else, they are respect for all pertaining to their religious belief and their love of chastity . . . the very subjects Mr. Synge has chosen to exercise his wit upon.²⁴

Willie Fay, too, called it a "difficult" play and sensed that it would be troublesome for the Abbey audience. He made it a practice to read the crowd's psychology and "discern any factor that will militate against success and try to eliminate it before the public sees the play." He consulted with Synge but could not get him to understand that

there are certain rules that you cannot break without destroying the sympathy between the stage and auditorium. The rules I refer to are not technical but psychological. For example, as The Well of the Saints took shape, I realised that every character in the play from the Saint to Timmy the Smith was bad-tempered right through the play, hence, as I pointed out to Synge, all this bad temper would inevitably infect the audience and make them bad-tempered too. I suggested that the Saint anyway might be made into a good-natured easy-going man, or that Molly Burne might be made a lovable young girl, but Synge would not budge. He said he wanted to write "like a monochrome painting, all in shades of the one colour." I argued that all drama depended on contrast and on tension. All in vain. We had to agree to differ.²⁵

To Fay, the reception of the new play differed little from that of

In the Shadow of the Glen. His comments indicate that the audience

viewed Abbey productions with a mixture of bewilderment and suspicion:

As before, few of our public knew what to make of it. Was it a piece of harsh realism or was there something else behind it? The lyrical speeches were beyond them, and there was the old suspicion that most of the plays we produced were intended in

some way to debunk the saintly Irish character. Who, for example, would be trusting Mr. Yeats? Hadn't he always something up his sleeve? If it wasn't the birds of Angus Oge it might be a political rabbit of some kind. Then, Synge, of course had heard of a man called Boccaccio and a story about the Widow of Ephesus. In short the play was admired and enjoyed by those who were capable of regarding it simply as a play without reading into it a criticism of the Irish people or an attack on their religion. But these were too few. The great majority, thinking of religion and themselves, abominated the play on both counts. It had a bad Press and we lost money and audience over it.²⁶

According to Holloway, the opening night was a success "as far as one could judge by applause." That comment in Holloway's diary came on February 4th. On the 7th, Willie Fay's premonitions appeared to be confirmed. Holloway wrote that night that The Well of the Saints "has failed to catch on . . . no one, other than those connected with the theatre, has a good word to say for it . . . some fifty people had come in." On February 11th, he remarked that the general public had heard the sort of piece it was and showed good sense in remaining elsewhere.²⁷

The newspapers were equally unkind but on grounds different from those of Holloway and Fay. The W. A. Henderson Papers in the National Library contain an unidentified review of the play. The writer refers to its commonplace subject and announces the action as "barren of anything really noteworthy. . . . The play is chiefly given over to wearisome dialogues between Martin and Mary Doul" which consists of "mutual recrimination and there is not much point to the rustic repartee." Synge "beats out certain peculiarities of Irish speech thread bare." Cited as an example is: "It's as deaf as blind you're growing if you're not after hearing me say it's in this place the wonder would be done."²⁸

For two years, no new play by Synge was produced at the Abbey. During 1905-1906, Synge was active as a theatre manager, reporter, and reviewer. He became engaged to Molly Allgood and wrote The Playboy of the Western World. After the Playboy riots in 1907, Robin Skelton

writes, Synge was "extremely sensitive to criticism and . . . chose to experiment with poetic and romantic drama rather than continue on his previous road."²⁹ It is probable, then, that an additional cause of the hiatus of 1905-1906 was Synge's reluctance to overtax the hospitality of the Abbey audience. (His first play, The Tinker's Wedding, was in manuscript during this period. The directors considered it too dangerous for performance. Though it was published in 1908, it was never performed in Synge's lifetime.)

The Playboy is set on a wild coast of Mayo and its heroine is a young, beautiful, willful girl whose marriage is prevented, in part, by her own dreams and temperament. Synge began the play after he and Jack Yeats, the poet's brother, visited Mayo and Connemara to write a series of articles for the Manchester Guardian on the people and poverty which they found there. In a letter to his close friend, Stephen MacKenna, written during the tour, Synge wrote of the people and relationships he found there. It is an interesting letter for its expression of a desire to put these people on the stage, and for the affection and mischievousness it reveals:

There are sides of all that western life, the groggy-patriot-publican-general-shopman who is married to the priest's half-sister and is second cousin once-removed of the dispensary doctor, that are horrible and awful. This is the type that is running the present United Irish League anti-grazier campaign, while they're swindling the people themselves in a dozen ways and then buying out their holdings and packing off whole families to America. The subject is too big to go into here, but at best it's beastly. All that side of the matter of course I left untouched in my stuff. I sometimes wish to God I hadn't a soul and then I could give myself up to putting those lads on the stage. God, wouldn't they hop! In a way it is all heartrending, in one place the people are starving but wonderfully attractive and charming, and in another place where things are going well, one has a rampant, double-chinned vulgarity I haven't seen the like of.³⁰

The Playboy began to take its final shape after Synge was sure that Molly could perform Pegeen Mike. The long silence ended on

January 26, 1907, and it ended thunderously. The audience refused to let the players perform. There is no point, here, in reviewing the course of those disturbances, the most clangorous and raucous row in the history of modern drama. My research has uncovered nothing which has not been reported already. It has, in fact, only confirmed the nature of the forces opposing Synge and the Abbey. The review of audience reaction to Riders to the Sea, In the Shadow of the Glen, and The Well of the Saints shows that the reaction to The Playboy was not a sudden aberration. Rather, it was an inevitable release of accumulated bewilderment, suspicion, and hostility, abetted by a heavy dose of calculated rabble-rousing.

There were some who viewed the riots with satisfaction. Arthur Griffith of Sinn Fein (formerly The United Irishman) probably was not displeased to see the company lose face by depending on the police for protection. A. E. Malone in The Irish Drama assures us that extreme sections of the Gaelic League and "several theatrical bodies using the drama as a vehicle for political propaganda"³¹ were undisturbed by Synge's discomfort. Yeats wrote that the audience protested a "slander on Irish womanhood" because they believed no Irishwoman would sleep under the same roof with a young man without a chaperone, nor admire a murderer, "nor use a word like 'shift'"; nor did they recognize the countrymen and women of Davis and Kickham in those "poetical, violent, grotesque persons, who used the name of God so freely, and spoke of all things that hit their fancy."³²

Professor Saddlemyer analyzes the fracas in literary terms:

What they [the audience] objected to even more was Synge's refusal to allow his audience or himself to dissociate themselves from his art. While hysterically denying the truth of his image, they

denounced him for eavesdropping through cracks in the floor. Synge recognized the contradiction in their attitude, and further realized that he was being categorized by the contemporary popular reaction to naturalism. Hence his violent objections to the Ibsenite drama, his desire not to be linked with the "decadent drama" of France, and his refusal to explain his plays to the public. He wished to remain an individual writer, writing out of his own material. "I don't care a rap" was his immediate reaction to criticism, while at the same time he insisted that he wrote for that audience only.³³

According to these commentators, Synge was opposed by political, cultural, and literary forces. I have no reason for believing these analyses to be inaccurate. It seems apparent that, with the exception of John Masefield and Stephen McKenna, Synge received little or no encouragement from anyone outside the Abbey.

In spite of declaring that he didn't care a rap for his critics, Synge was discomfited. On April 9, 1907, he wrote to McKenna:

I sometimes wish I had never left my garret in the rue d'Assas, . . . the scurrility and ignorance and treachery of some of the attacks upon me (because of The Playboy) have rather disgusted me with the middle-class Irish Catholic. As you know I have the wildest admiration for the Irish Peasants, and for Irish men of known or unknown genius--do you bow?--but between the two there's an ungodly ruck of fat-faced, sweaty-headed swine.³⁴

Such a statement as the preceding enables Professor Skelton to reject Yeats' assertion that Synge was unfitted to think a political thought. It permits Professor Saddlemyer to argue that Synge, Yeats, and Lady Gregory maintained an "autocratic" attitude toward their audience: "Their ideal audience, like their ideal dramatist and subject, came not from that amorphous 'middle class' of the intellect, but from the leaders of men and the simple folk of the country."³⁵ Professors Saddlemyer and Skelton have overreacted to Yeats' charge by claiming what Synge would never have claimed for himself; in so doing they have made a faulty analysis of Synge's audience. While correcting Yeats' mistake, they

inadvertently send readers to Synge's works looking for political thought which isn't there. They should stress, as Professor Saddlemyer has done elsewhere, Synge's desire to remain an individual, free from political or aesthetic pigeonholing. John Masefield recognized that Synge could think about politics but accurately pointed out that:

He never played any part in politics: politics did not interest him. He was the only Irishman I have ever met who cared nothing for either the political or religious issue. He had a prejudice against one Orange district, because the people in it were dour. He had a prejudice against one Roman Catholic district because the people in it were rude. Otherwise his mind was untroubled. Life was what interested him.³⁶

Moreover, the impact of Synge's letter to MacKennis is not that he drew his audience from the nobility and peasantry--but that he did not draw it from the middle class.

Daniel Corkery argued at length that Synge's intended audience was the Irish peasantry. In his book, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, published in 1931, he wrote: "The fact is that even in literature he wished to have about him only such unsophisticated hearts as he would willingly make speech with on a country road."³⁷ Corkery believed that the spirit of folk songs such as Douglas Hyde collected and talks such as Synge himself heard from the peasants was like the spirit of Synge's plays. He believed that Synge deliberately made them similar and expected that a peasant audience would relish them.³⁸ Having so argued, Corkery then explained why the plays found little favor among great numbers of the people. The cause was Synge's

own lack of spiritual delicacy [which] made him unaware of the wound his flippant use of holy words caused to sincere believers. The use of such words and phrases was in no wise necessary to the completion of the pattern; and perhaps one cannot therefore help thinking that he took some illicit pleasure--illicit, that is, not aesthetic--from the surprise that he knew such phrases would produce in his audience.³⁹

The location of a spiritual flaw in Synge's character allowed Corkery a luxury as a critic: He could praise Synge without risking the disfavor of conventional minds. He identified Synge and the Irish peasant while placing the peasant a niche or two closer to God's throne than Synge. The proof of the peasant's "spiritual delicacy," of course, was in the rejection of Synge's plays.

The desire to "identify" Synge with Irish culture did not cease with Corkery. As recently as the Synge centennial celebration in Dublin in 1971, Sean O'Tuama said that Synge was "culturally pre-conditioned" to understand Aran life. His reasons are similar to Corkery's: all non-Dublin culture gives high status to poetry, music, and story telling. All Synge's work "contains, in a quite uncontrived manner [emphasis mine]. many of the most typical and well recognized traits of the 2,000-year-old native Irish literary tradition."⁴⁰ O'Tuama goes on to assert:

For Joyce and Yeats, the conflict arising from the problem of whether to identify or not to identify with facets of Irish culture was clearly one of the most dynamic and productive factors in their whole work. For Synge, a much more monolithic character, the effort to identify never assumed the proportions of a problem: he merely went through the process simply, rigorously and successfully.⁴¹

This passage implies that Synge wrote the plays for the Irish peasants. It supports the belief that Synge envisaged an audience of nobles and beggars. Synge surely thought of his audience in other terms. A good deal of evidence suggests that he did. Moreover, his expressed views of the Irish peasants suggest a relationship considerably short of identification. The attempts to force identification upon Synge are reactions, at least in part, to critics who criticized Synge for his "un-Irishness." But some of those critics help us understand the true relationship between Synge and the peasants. In an interview with Charles Darnton in the New York World in February 1908, W. G. Fay made this observation.

Synge would never have written (The Playboy) if he had been a peasant. He is a great observer--the greatest of all the Irish authors--but he is merciless in his realism. And the Irish do not like to see themselves under a microscope. Others are more kind. Boyle, who is the son of a peasant, and Colm and Fitz Morris [sic] are more sympathetic in their treatment of the peasant, and therefore have a greater place in the hearts of the people.⁴²

In 1905 Joseph Holloway made the following observations.

. . . when asked [by W. Fay] if he found the people [in Aran] like those he writes about, he answered, "No, I found them genial and lovable when amongst them, but when I write of them they turn out as you see!" That is to say that Mr. Synge converts them into creatures to suit his own warped, cynical bent of mind and labels them Irish peasants to prove his generosity for the kindness shown him by the real article in the isles of the west. A nature soured by the world's neglect is a cruel foe to have, and I greatly fear such a one have the Irish in Mr. Synge. . . . [Mr. Synge] has as much sympathy for the humbler Irish and their Catholic faith as a maxim gun with an Englishman at the side of it has for a lot of unarmed savages! It [Well of the Saints] raised my gall every time I saw it.⁴³

That was in February. In April he added these notes to his diary:

"The truth . . . the plain, straight forward honest truth, no matter how unpalatably it maybe put before us or rubbed into us, is never resented by Irish folk."⁴⁴ But they objected to Synge and Well of the Saints

with its strange, powerful, unIrish dialect and Irish folk evolved out of his own morbid brain and alien alike to the sentiment and actuality of the humble peasantry . . . the great literary quality of Mr. Synge's work cannot be denied, and as literature must rank immeasurably above Mr. Boyle's homely, real, flesh and blood talk; but . . . there is no denying that much of his work rings so false to Irish ears, that a red rag to a bull is the only way to describe its effect.⁴⁵

Even through Holloway's bias, we can gather the more correct analysis that Synge's relationship to the Irish peasant was not that of writer and audience but observer and subject. This conclusion is born out by Synge's own writing. The whole of the Aran Islands is a masterpiece of observation and selection which would have been vitiated by identification. Consider the following passage:

There is a quaint humor, and sometimes wild humor, on the middle island, but never this half-sensual ecstasy of laughter. Perhaps a man must have a sense of intimate misery, not known, before he can set himself to jeer and mock at the world. These strange men with receding foreheads, high cheek-bones and ungovernable eyes seem to represent some old type found on these few acres at the extreme border of Europe where it is only in wild jests and laughter that they can express their loneliness and desolation.⁴⁶

These are not the words of a man identifying with others but of a man studying and speculating about the human condition as observed in particular persons. Key words set the tone and reveal this stance:

"Quaint," "perhaps," "strange," "seem." Even more conclusive, however, are passages from his drafts of the Wicklow essays, as quoted by Professor Saddlemyer in Volume IV of the Works. They reveal a balanced view of the Irish peasant:

The younger people of these glens are not so interesting as the old men and women, and, though there are still many fine young men to be met with among them who are extraordinarily gifted and agile, it too often happens, especially in the more lonely places, that the men under thirty are badly built, shy and despondent. Even among the old people, whose singular charm I have tried to interpret, it should perhaps be added that it is possible to find many individuals who are far from admirable either in body or mind. One would hardly stop to assert a fact so obvious if it had not become the fashion in Dublin, quite recently, to reject a fundamental doctrine of theology, and to exalt the Irish peasant into a type of almost absolute virtue, frugal, self-sacrificing, valiant, and I know not what. There is some truth in this estimate, yet it is safer to hold with the theologians that, even west of the Shannon, the heart of man is not spotless, for though the Irish peasant has many beautiful virtues, it is idle to assert that he [is] totally unacquainted with the deadly sins, and many minor rogueries. He has, however, it should never be forgotten, a fine sense of humour, and the greatest courtesy. When a benevolent visitor comes to his cottage, seeing a sort of holy family, the man of the house, his wife, and all their infants, too courteous to disappoint him, play their parts with delight. When the amiable visitor, however, is once more in the breen, a storm of good-tempered irony breaks out behind him, that would surprise him could he hear it. This irony I have met with many times, in places where I have been intimate with the people and have always been overjoyed to hear it. It shows that, in spite of relief-works, commissions, and patronizing philanthropy--that sickly thing--the Irish peasant, in his own mind, is neither abject nor servile.

.....
 There has been some discussion in Dublin on the character of the

Irish peasantry. The controversy is a futile one. The crimeless virtuous side of Irish life is well known and cannot be disputed. The wilder--the Rabelaisian side of the Irish temperament is so wild it cannot be dealt with in book or periodical that is intended for Irish readers. I have come across a great deal of this side of the life in the months and months that I have spent in living among the people or wandering about the roads of Ireland.⁴⁷

The source of this balanced view of the Irish peasant is no mystery, but only two important critics have remarked upon it. Early in her study of Synge, Donna L. Gerstenberger explains that the influence of Europe is, in Synge's life and work, a source of "balance and perspective."⁴⁹ Synge's biography gives details about that influence. In addition to his music studies at Trinity and in Germany, Synge, at the Sorbonne, studied Modern French Literature. Medieval studies and general and comparative phonetics were fields of interest as well. Taine, France, Huysmans, and Loti received substantial attention, if we judge by quotations from his notebooks. Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Zola, and Maeterlinck are also represented there. Professor Greene writes that too much emphasis has been given to the influence of Racine on Synge's work. But it is hard to believe that he was unfamiliar with the playwright's work or that of Corneille and Molière. He made translations into Anglo-Irish of Villon, Marot, and Colin Musset, all of which Greene classifies as "merely exercises." He also made translations of Leopardi and Walter von der Vogelweide; his translations of Petrarch have been highly praised. Some of these writers Synge rejected--Zola, Huysmans, and Mallarmé, for example--for their "joyless and pallid words" or their separation from the "profound and common interests of life."⁵⁰

Gerstenberger also notes the influence of Wordsworth, a favorite of Synge's from childhood. Of special interest are the persistent emphasis in Wordsworth's poetry on nature and the treatment of the symbolic

values of the solitary figure.⁵¹ Alan Price extends the scope of this part of Synge's background by linking him, especially through Yeats, not only to Wordsworth but to Blake, Coleridge, Mill, and Arnold. All these writers, says Price, recognized the benefits of the "systematic application of the scientific method" but believed that it "enfeebles human personality, the instinctive or spiritual life, stifling feeling and the sense of wonder and fixing abstractions or stereotypes between an individual and reality."⁵²

Gerstenberger, I believe, would not disagree with Price on this point. His analysis supports her contention that by the time of his first Aran trip in 1898, he had had most of his "formative experiences": "it is doubtful, therefore, that the journeys to Aran gave Synge either his attitudes toward life or his major themes."⁵³ They did provide a "setting and an idiom" for "attitudes already formulated." These experiences and attitudes produced the balanced view of peasant life Synge expressed in the passages on pages 83 and 84. Miss Gerstenberger also finds this view in the Aran and Wicklow essays. To her, they emphasize the

ceaseless fading of Beauty and a sorrowful mood. This is here; but why am I so struck by Synge's perception of the vigor and hardiness--the health of the people--underneath the sorrow and trouble--a glowing spirit; no sense of defeat.

This background had another effect on Synge. It caused him to adopt a method of composition which is the antithesis of "identification." An appreciation of this method presupposes an acquaintance with English and continental literature. We can assume, therefore, that in his audience Synge desired a high level of literary competence. He wished to write for an audience which would appreciate the literary value of his plays and essays. According to Gerstenberger, the central

procedure of Synge's method is to efface himself in order to bring together audience and subject. Herein lies a major difference between The Aran Islands and a work like Thoreau's Walden. Thoreau keeps bringing the reader back to an awareness of Thoreau. Synge, on the other hand, is a "character nearly anonymous."⁵⁵ He is like a cameraman: "invisible, perceiving, objective and amoral." David Green states that "a study of the notebooks and diaries upon which the Aran book is based shows how he excluded anything which tended to make revelations about himself."⁵⁶

There is evidence from a letter of Synge's that this method extended at least to the writing of The Playboy. On February 19, 1907, he wrote to one J. Nolan, thanking him for an essay about Synge's disturbing play.

With a great deal of what you say I am most heartily in agreement as where you say that I wrote the P.B. directly as a piece of life without thinking, or caring to think, whether it was a comedy, a tragedy, or extravaganza, or whether it would be held to have or not to have, a purpose--also where you speak very accurately about Shakespeare's "mirror". In the same way you see, what it seems so impossible to get our Dublin people to see, obvious as it is--that the wildness and, if you will, vices of the Irish peasantry are due, like their extraordinary good points of all kinds to the richness of their nature--a thing that is priceless beyond words. . . . Whether or not I agree with your final interpretation of the whole play is my secret--I follow Goethe's rule to tell no one what one means in one's writings. I am sure that you will agree that the rule is a good one.⁵⁷

I believe that this stance is a product of Synge's background and his own deliberate efforts to revive drama from a coma induced by the joyless naturalism of the late nineteenth century. The effect of these efforts was nowhere greater than in Synge's language which is his greatest claim to artistic distinction. He worked hard to make it rich, vigorous, and joyful. He desired a large audience to enjoy his work and

it is, therefore, not strictly accidental that he wrote in English. He believed that "with the present generation the linguistic atmosphere of Ireland has become definitely English enough, for the first time, to allow work to be done in English that is perfectly Irish in its essence, yet has sureness and purity of form."⁵⁸ English was the window to a larger world, the closing of which would only suffocate both Ireland and the blossoming Irish Renaissance.

No small island placed between two countries which speak the same language, like England and America, can hope to keep up a different tongue. English is likely to remain the language of Ireland, and no one, I think, need regret the likelihood. If Gaelic came back strongly from the West the feeling for English which the present generation has attained would be lost again, and in the best circumstances it is probable that Leinster and Ulster would take several centuries to assimilate Irish perfectly enough to make it a fit mode of expression for the finer emotions which now occupy literature. In the meantime, the opening culture of Ireland would be thrown back indefinitely, and there would, perhaps, be little gain to make up for this certain loss. Modern peasant Gaelic is full of rareness and beauty, but if it was sophisticated by journalists and translators--as it would certainly be sophisticated in the centuries I have spoken of--it would lose all its freshness, and then the limits, which now make its charm, would tend to prevent all further development.⁵⁹

As Irish literature flowered, Synge hoped Dublin would become a center for creative work and perceptive audiences as important as London. The Abbey plays suffered from London's inability to appreciate the finer points of their Irishness and from the inability of Dublin to appreciate their literary merit. For the moment, Synge reluctantly preferred London. After a tour, Synge wrote to W. G. Fay:

Many thanks for your letter. We have indeed had a great success with our show, and a good deal of our criticism has been most interesting, although I still believe--as I once said to you--that our real critics must come from Dublin. It [is] only where an art is native I think, that all its distinctions, all its slight gradations, are fully understood. For instance, most of our recent London critics have spoken well of the two plays we gave them that were perfectly obvious--I mean "Riders to the Sea", and the "Pot of Broth", but most of them failed to grasp "Seanchean", and the

"Shadow of Glen" [sic], both of which demand an intellectual effort to make them comprehensible, or at least a repeated hearing. However that may be we have so far no critics in Dublin so we have to make the best of London.⁶⁰ (Emphasis Synge's.)

This letter implies that there was not much to choose between the audiences of London and Dublin. Synge knew the gap was wide. In 1908 Synge wrote an article revealing most fully the kind of audience he wished Dublin to produce. The article is not about the theatre or literature, but, rather, the opening of the new Municipal Gallery in Dublin. The effect Synge wished the Gallery to have on Dublin's public expresses clearly the kind of background Synge wished his audience to have:

Until recently the political affairs of Ireland were directed, to a large extent, by leaders, like Parnell, from the Protestant and landlord classes, but now after the experience of a century the more native portion of the people have reached a stage in which they have little trouble in finding political leaders among themselves. In the arts, however, it is different. Although the Irish popular classes have sympathy with what is expressed in the arts they are necessarily unfamiliar with artistic matters, so that for many years to come artistic movements in Ireland will be the work of individuals whose enthusiasm or skill can be felt by the less-trained instincts of the people. These individuals, a few here and there like the political leaders of the nineteenth century, will be drawn from the classes that have still some trace or tradition of the older culture and yet for various reasons have lost all hold on direct political life. . . .

This gallery will impress everyone who visits it, but for those who live in Dublin it is peculiarly valuable. Perhaps no one but Dublin men who have lived abroad also can quite realise the strange thrill it gave me to turn in from Harcourt-street--where I passed by to school long ago--and to find myself among Monets, and Manets and Renoirs, things I connect so directly with the life of Paris. The morning of my first visit was brilliantly sunny, and this magnificent house, with the clear light in the windows, brought back, I do not know how, the whole feeling I have had so often in the Louvre and a few other galleries abroad, but which does not come to one in the rather stiff picture galleries one is used to in England and Ireland. This Dublin gallery, one is tempted to hope, will have a living atmosphere, and become, like the Louvre and the Luxembourg, a sort of home for one's mind. . . . When one thinks that this collection will now be open to all Dublin people, and that the young men of talent, the writers as well as the painters, will be able to make themselves familiar with all these independent and vigorous works, it is hard to say how much is owed to Mr. Hugh Lane, Alderman Kelly, the Corporation of Dublin, and the artists and others who have carried through this undertaking with such complete success.⁶¹

Synge did not write for Nationalists or Orangemen, Catholics or Protestants, the peasants, the middle class, or the aristocracy. He wrote for no parochial Irish audience. He wrote for Irishmen who were acquainted with the life of the mind and heart in Ireland but also beyond it. He wished a vigorous and healthy life for Irish literature rooted in Irish culture. Even more, he wished for Irish literature to take its place as an equal among the literatures of Europe and the world. His audience was not only Irish, it was European; it was not only the football crowd at Thurles, the fisherman of Aran, or the Lords temporal and spiritual. His audience was anyone with an eager, vigorous intellect, by sensitivity and training capable of perceiving the currents between his work and the mainstream of English and European literature.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹Daniel Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature (Dublin, 1931).
- ²Greene and Stephens
- ³Synge, Collected Works.
- ⁴From the original leaflet as quoted in Ellis-Fermor, p. 37.
- ⁵Lady Gregory, p. 9.
- ⁶Yeats, pp. 447-448.
- ⁷Ibid., p. 446.
- ⁸Ibid., pp. 482-483.
- ⁹Ibid., p. 512.
- ¹⁰Ibid., p. 495.
- ¹¹W. B. Yeats, Autobiographies (London, 1944), p. 562.
- ¹²Holloway, p. 34.
- ¹³Ibid., p. 35.
- ¹⁴Ibid., p. 25.
- ¹⁵Ibid., p. 27.
- ¹⁶Greene and Stephens, p. 152.
- ¹⁷Holloway, p. 28.
- ¹⁸Greene and Stephens, pp. 149-159.
- ¹⁹Shuibhlaigh, p. 42.
- ²⁰Ibid., p. 44.
- ²¹Greene and Stephens, p. 155.
- ²²Shuibhlaigh, p. 45.
- ²³Holloway, p. 41.
- ²⁴Ibid.

- ²⁵W. G. Fay, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre, pp. 167-168.
- ²⁶Ibid., pp. 168-169.
- ²⁷Holloway, pp. 52-53.
- ²⁸W. A. Henderson Papers, MS 1730.
- ²⁹Robin Skelton, The Writings of J. M. Synge (London, 1971), p. 66.
- ³⁰Synge, Works, II, 283.
- ³¹Malone, pp. 93-94.
- ³²W. B. Yeats, "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time," Essays and Introductions (New York, 1961), p. 311.
- ³³Saddlemyer, p. 591.
- ³⁴Synge, Works, III, 283.
- ³⁵Saddlemyer, p. 587.
- ³⁶Masefield, p. 10.
- ³⁷Corkery, p. 56.
- ³⁸Ibid., p. 78.
- ³⁹Ibid., pp. 84-85.
- ⁴⁰Sean O'Tuama, "Synge and the Idea of a National Literature," J. M. Synge Centenary Papers: 1971, ed. by Maurice Harmon (Dublin, 1972), p. 5.
- ⁴¹Ibid., p. 15.
- ⁴²W. G. Fay Papers, MS 5975.
- ⁴³Holloway, pp. 53-54.
- ⁴⁴Ibid., p. 57.
- ⁴⁵Ibid.
- ⁴⁶Synge, Works, II, 140.
- ⁴⁷Ibid., IV, xxiv-xxv.

⁴⁸I have not used the word "influence" in a literary sense. The question before us is one of audience; it is: for whom did Synge write, not, whom did he write like. My purpose in including the "catalog" which follows is to show that Synge's formative intellectual experiences were European, rather than Irish, cosmopolitan, rather than provincial, and that it is probable, therefore, that Synge desired an audience with a similar background. A study of literary influences on Synge's work would be valuable. It probably can be done satisfactorily only by an adequately trained student of comparative literature. Sadly, I am not such a person and I have had to rely heavily upon the work of other scholars at this point.

⁴⁹Donna Gerstenberger, John Millington Synge (New York, 1964), p. 18.

⁵⁰Greene and Stephens, p. 132.

⁵¹Gerstenberger, p. 19.

⁵²Alan Price, Synge and the Anglo-Irish Drama (London, 1961), p. 51.

⁵³Gerstenberger, p. 16.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 17.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 23.

⁵⁶David H. Greene, "J. M. Synge--A Centenary Appraisal," in J. M. Synge Centenary Papers: 1971, p. 187.

⁵⁷Synge Papers, MS 4425, #305.

⁵⁸Synge, Works, II, 384.

⁵⁹Ibid., pp. 385-386.

⁶⁰W. G. Fay Papers, MS 13,617.

⁶¹Synge, Works, II, 390-391.

CHAPTER V

THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN

A short episode toward the beginning of The Shadow of the Glen illustrates the difficulties a playwright risks if he does not mind the limits of the stage and the abilities of the actors. The Oxford edition of the works shows Synge learning these limits; more importantly it shows Synge's new knowledge enhancing the emotional impact of a character's language. The Shadow of the Glen tells the story of Dan Burke who pretends death in order to test the fidelity of his wife, Nora. Michael Dara, a shepherd, is the suspected lover. The play's title suggests the conditions of Nora's life in the glens of Co. Wicklow: isolation, loneliness, monotony, and restlessness overshadow her days. As she and Michael Dara begin counting the money they will live on now that Dan Burke is dead, Nora reveals the effect of these conditions on her view of life.

It's a bad night, and a wild night, Michael Dara, and isn't it a great while I am at the foot of the back hills, sitting up here boiling food for himself, and food for the brood sow, and baking a cake when the night falls? . . . Isn't it a long while I am sitting here in the winter, and the summer, and the fine spring with the young growing behind me and the old passing, saying to myself one time, to look on Mary Brien who wasn't that height . . . and I a fine girl growing up, and there she is now with two children, and another coming on her in three months or four . . . and saying to myself another time, to look on Peggy Cavanagh, who had the lightest hand at milking a cow that wouldn't be easy, or turning a cake, and there she is now walking round on the roads, or sitting in a dirty

old house, with no teeth in her mouth, and no sense, and no more hair than you'd see on a bit of a hill and they after burning the furze from it. (III, 49, 51)

Soon after this speech, Dan rises from his "deathbed" and, amid general recriminations, drives Nora and Michael from his house. Nora's acceptance of this fate, her refusal to beg forgiveness, is especially poignant because she knows her future will be lived on the roads and that her fate will probably be the same as Peggy Cavanagh's. (For this reason, the play was a center of controversy. Synge's nationalist opponents called it un-Irish¹ while Yeats' father called it a much needed exposure of "our Irish institution, the loveless marriage."²) Into this emotional maelstrom wanders an authentic creature of the roads, a type Synge knew very well, the tramp. His arrival opens the play. Seeing the apparently dead Dan Burke laid out for his wake, he is at once curious, cautious, and uneasy. In the episode referred to at the beginning of this chapter, the tramp's uneasiness changes to fear when Nora asks him to

. . . Lay your hand on him now, and tell me if it's cold he is surely.

TRAMP. Is it getting the curse on me you'd be, woman of the house? I wouldn't lay my hand on him for the Lough Nahanagan and it filled with gold.

NORA [looking uneasily at the body]. Maybe cold would be no sign of death with the like of him, for he was always cold, every day since I knew him,--and every night, stranger--[she covers up his face and comes away from the bed]; but I'm thinking it's dead he is surely, for he's complaining a while back of a pain in his heart, and this morning, the time he was going off to Brittas for three days or four, he was taken with a sharp turn. Then he went into his bed and he was saying it was destroyed he was, the time the shadow was going up through the glen, and when the sun set on the bog beyond he made a great leap, and let a great cry out of him, and stiffened himself out the like of a dead sheep.

TRAMP [crosses himself]. God rest his soul.

NORA [pouring him out a glass of whiskey]. Maybe that would do you better than the milk of the sweetest cow in County Wicklow.

TRAMP. The Almighty God reward you, and may it be to your good health. [He drinks.]

NORA [giving him a pipe and tobacco from the table]. I've no pipes saving his own, stranger, but they're sweet pipes to smoke.

TRAMP. Thank you kindly, lady of the house.

NORA. Sit down stranger, and be taking your rest.

TRAMP [filling a pipe and looking about the room]. I've walked a great way through the world, lady of the house, and seen great wonders, but I never seen a wake till this day with fine spirits, and good tobacco, and the best of pipes, and no one to taste them but a woman only.

NORA. Didn't you hear me say it was only after dying on me he was when the sun went down, and how would I go out into the glen and tell the neighbours and I a lone woman with no house near me?

TRAMP [drinking]. There's no offence, lady of the house?

NORA. No offence in life, stranger. How would the like of you passing in the dark night know the lonesome way I was with no house near me at all?

TRAMP [sitting down]. I knew rightly. [He lights his pipe so that there is a sharp light beneath his haggard face.] And I was thinking, and I coming in through the door, that it's many a lone woman would be afraid of the like of me in the dark night, in a place wouldn't be as lonesome as this place, where there aren't two living souls would see the little light you have shining from the glass. (III, 35, 37)

A careful reading of the stage directions and a little imagination reveal that the exact direction of the tramp's movements on stage is not clear. Certainly the tramp steps back from the bed, placed stage right near the hearth, after Nora asks him to lay his hand on the body. The action is implied in the language, if not explicitly stated in a stage direction. In which direction does he step--backwards, toward the door, stage left, or down right, toward the fire and the audience? The last stage direction tells the actor to sit. The instructions at the opening of the play indicate that the chairs, or stools, are stage left, next to the table. Presumably the actor backs away from the bed toward

the table and chairs. The cottage door is in that direction, too, a likely spot for a frightened person to head.

Synge requires the actor playing the tramp, between backing away from the bed and sitting, to accept and drink from a glass of whisky, accept a pipe and tobacco, fill the pipe, take another drink, sit and light the pipe. Performing these seemingly simple actions gracefully and naturally can be difficult for an amateur actor. Even for an actor who smokes a pipe in private life, smoking on cue before an audience can be an awkward business. If we grant that rehearsals are held precisely to overcome and practice the solutions to such problems, we must also admit that there are uncontrollable variables in even the simplest of actions. An experienced, helpful playwright doesn't require amateur actors to master tasks with many variables, especially when correct timing is important. Yet, in 1902, in his first time out as a playwright, Synge made such a requirement.

Consider for a moment some of the variables connected with smoking a pipe and drinking whisky at the same time on stage. The tobacco might not pour smoothly. There is danger of pouring too little or too much. When lighting the match, the actor might set down the pipe clumsily, spilling the tobacco. The match might not light at all. If the match doesn't light, ought the actor to be free to light it some other way (on the seat of his pants, for example) even though he risks distracting the audience's attention from the words with unintentionally comic gesture? The manner of lighting a pipe expresses much about a man and a situation. Synge requires an actor to wrestle in rehearsal with a range of important, because expressive, details. Should the pipe be held by the bowl or the stem when it is being filled? Should the

pipe be held in the corner of the mouth or between the incisors when it is being lit? Should the actor hold the bowl with one hand or clamp hard with the teeth to free a hand for the whisky which he may be two lines late in drinking because he took too long to light the pipe? Does a tramp light a pipe differently than a farmer? Does a frightened man light a pipe differently than a composed one? Does a man at a wake light a pipe differently than a man at work or a man at a pub?

Once the actor solves the pipe problem, he must decide how to handle the pipe and whisky simultaneously. What should the actor do with the glass of whisky which the actress playing Nora hands him just before she hands him the pipe and tobacco. Unquestionably he sets it down, but where? If he moves away from the bed toward the door, stage left, he could end his cross in the vicinity of the table and upon that he could set the glass. But if he moves toward the fire, that table will appear miles away and he will stand awkwardly in front of five hundred people, a glass of whisky in one hand, pipe, matches, and tobacco in the other, looking not a little awkward.

In one version of SG, Synge faced exactly this problem. Here is the action:

NORA [getting a pipe and tobacco from the table]. I've no pipes saving his own, stranger, but they're sweet pipes to smoke, and let you sit down now and be taking your rest.

TRAMP. And thanking you kindly, lady of the house. [He sits down on a stool at the fire, filling a pipe.] (III, 34; emphasis mine.)

Certain difficulties result from this action. First, the match-pipe-tobacco-whisky problem becomes even more complex. To light the pipe, the actor will have to set the glass on the floor, an awkward reach, unless a second stool were used as a table. Second, the tramp's location unbalances the stage picture. Synge's direction puts all the characters stage

right. In the small Abbey acting area, the effect would be cluttered. Worse, the tramp blocks part of the audience's view of the corpse. Third, the idea of the tramp sitting at this point is dramatically ineffective. The speech he makes emphasizes his wonder and uneasiness, if not his fear, the lack of which he protests too much:

NORA. . . . It's other things than the like of you stranger, would make a person afeard.

TRAMP [looking around with a half-shudder]. It is surely, God help us all!

NORA [looking at him for a moment with curiosity]. You're saying that stranger, as if you were easy afeard.

TRAMP [speaking mournfully]. Is it myself, lady of the house, that does be walking round in the long nights, and crossing the hills when the fog is on them, the time a little stick would seem as big as your arm, and a rabbit as big as a bay horse, and a stack of turf as big as a towering church in the city of Dublin? If myself was easily afeard, I'm telling you, it's long ago I'd have been locked into the Richmond asylum, or maybe have run up into the black hills with nothing on me but an old shirt, and been eaten with crows the like of Patch Darcy--the Lord have mercy on him--in the year that's gone.

Consider the effect of these speeches delivered from a semi-crouching position downstage right, a weak area, as compared with a sitting position from nearly stage center (the tramp's position in Synge's final version). Nora's implied reproach creates a different impression, too, in each instance. In the draft, she appears to dominate; in the final version, the tramp's dramatic strength is at least equal to Nora's and the scene is more pleasing.

I do not propose that Synge indulged in a long deliberate analysis of a character's every move, though the number and extent of his revisions could support such an argument. My long, deliberate analysis shows that however intuitively a playwright chooses actions and words, those choices have practical implications for the actors. An experienced

playwright is intuitive about these limitations. His skills tend to produce a technically faultless play which frees the actor to develop his character. No actor wants to worry about how he will handle a pipe and a glass simultaneously. It is an inexperienced writer who worries actors in this way. He acquires intuition by listening to the actor and director in rehearsal. Synge watched rehearsals all the time. The exchange on page 7 appears in a version of the play known as the Texas typescript which Synge composed during 1904. The first performance of SG occurred on 8 October 1903. Synge tried this staging after the play went through rehearsals. Nevertheless, he rejected it and it is possible that the final version of this action resulted from changes made in rehearsal. We cannot say with certainty because the prompt books are lost.³ But we know that the Fays were eminently practical, realistic men about a stage. In 1903, the actors were still amateurs. Some easier way of handling the pipe and glass and strengthening the effect of the stage picture and the language had to be found. The solution, I believe, is the final version as we have it. If that surmise is accurate, we have a record of Synge in rehearsal. We have seen him learning to become an intuitive playwright, accounting for the limitations of the stage, the actors, and the audience.

There is another episode in The Shadow of the Glen which shows Synge struggling to co-ordinate movement and speech. Nora returns to the cottage with Michael Dara and makes tea for him and the tramp. The Texas typescript and the version which appeared in Samhain in December, 1904, require the actress to make and serve the tea in less time than is required by the final version of the play. In the final version below I have included, at the appropriate places, the earlier stage directions.

They appear in parentheses and are marked with a "T" for the Texas type-script directions and an "S" for the Samhain directions:

[He (Michael) sits down on a stool next (sic) the table facing THE TRAMP. NORA puts the kettle on a lower hook of the pot-hooks, and piles turf under it.]

NORA [turning to TRAMP]. Will you drink a sup of tea with myself and the young man, stranger, or [speaking more persuasively] will you go into the little room and stretch yourself a short while on the bed. I'm thinking it's destroyed you are walking the length of that way in the great rain.

TRAMP. Is it go away and leave you, and you having a wake, lady of the house? I will not surely. [He takes a drink from his glass which he has beside him.] And it's none of your tea I'm asking either. [He goes on stitching.]

[NORA makes the tea.] (S&T: NORA goes to the table and puts tea in tea-pot.)

MICHAEL [after looking at the tramp rather scornfully for a moment]. That's a poor coat you have, God help you, and I'm thinking it's a poor tailor you are with it.

TRAMP [looks up at him for a moment]. If it's a poor tailor I am, I'm thinking it's a poor herd does be running back and forward after a little handful of ewes the way I seen yourself running this day, young fellow, and you coming from the fair.

NORA [comes back to the table. To MICHAEL in a low voice]. Let you not mind him at all, Michael Dara. He has a drop taken, and it's soon he'll be falling asleep.

MICHAEL. It's no lie he's telling. I was destroyed surely. . . . They were that wilful they were running off into one man's bit of oats, and another man's bit of hay, and tumbling into the red bogs till it's more like a pack of old goats than sheep they were. . . . Mountain ewes is a queer breed, Nora Burke, and I'm not used to them at all.

NORA [settling the tea things]. (T: pouring the tea; S: making the tea.) There's no one can drive a mountain ewe but the men do be reared in the Glen Malure, I've heard them say, and above by Rathvanna, and the Glen Imaal, men the like of Patch Darcy, God spare his soul, who would walk through five hundred sheep and miss one of them, and he not reckoning them at all.

MICHAEL [uneasily]. Is it the man went queer in his head the year that's gone?

NORA. It is surely. (T: cuts bread for Michael; S: She comes to the table with tea-pot. MICHAEL turns round on the stool with his back to the fire.)

TRAMP [plaintively]. That was a great man, young fellow, a great man I'm telling you. There was never a lamb from his own ewes he wouldn't know before it was marked, and he'd run from this to the city of Dublin, and never catch for his breath.

NORA [turning round quickly]. He was a great man surely, stranger, and isn't it a grand thing when you hear a living man saying a good word of a dead man, and he mad dying?

TRAMP. It's the truth I'm saying, God Spare his soul.

[He puts the needle under the collar of his coat, and settles himself to sleep in the chimney-corner. NORA sits down at the table: (S: and pours out tea) their backs are turned to the bed.]

MICHAEL [looking at her with a queer look (T: as he takes the tea and bread she gives him)]. I heard tell this day, Nora Burke, that it was on the path below Patch Darcy would be passing up and passing down, and I heard them say he'd never pass it night or morning without speaking with yourself.

NORA [in a low voice]. It was no lie you heard, Michael Dara.

MICHAEL [as before]. I'm thinking it's a power of men you're after knowing if it's in a lonesome place you live itself.

NORA [slowly, giving him his tea]. It's in a lonesome place you do have to be talking with someone, and looking for someone, in the evening of the day, and if it's a power of men I'm after knowing they were fine men, for I was a hard child to please, and a hard girl to please [she looks at him a little sternly], and it's a hard woman I am to please this day, Michael Dara, and it's no lie, I'm telling you. (III, 45-49)

Before we ask why these changes were made, we should determine exactly what Synge is asking of his actors. In the earliest version of the three discussed here, that is, the Texas typescript, composed in 1904, the actress playing Nora must assemble the tea things, make the tea, and serve it in about half the time required by the final version. These movements must be co-ordinated with a carefully timed cross from stage right to stage center without distracting from the conversation of the tramp and Michael Dara. Synge has also overestimated the amount of time it takes to pour a cup of tea. Nora waits six speeches between the time she pours the tea and the time she hands the cup to Michael. This seems unnatural.

The Samhain version requires even more complex movements. Nora

must come to the table merely to get the teapot. This demands a cross from stage right to stage center. But when the Samhain directions instruct her to be "making the tea," apparently she is no longer at the table, for, a little further on, she comes to the table with the tea pot and she then serves her guests. This means that Nora, after once crossing from stage right to stage center, recrosses from center to right and then crosses again from right to center. Possibly the Fay brothers suggested to Synge that the action could be simplified. Such excessive movement only burdened an amateur actor with unnecessary concerns about timing and maneuvering. It also smacked strongly of the busy-ness of the English stage and distracted from the speech. The Fays, we know, scorned English theatricality and labored to enhance the power of the spoken word.

The final version, as we have it in the Oxford edition, allows the actress more time to make and serve the tea. The directions are less specific, too, giving the actress freedom to adjust her movements to the pace of the performance. There is no direction to serve bread at a particular moment, though we would be surprised to see tea served in an Irish cottage without bread. The whole episode is much less predicted by Synge in the final version. Again, we have seen Synge learning about the representation on stage of human action and about the limitations of his actors. An action in the mind's eye and on stage can be two different phenomena: the first, simple and clear, and the second, complex and muddled.

I do not think loosening the reins reflects confidence in the actors. On the contrary, it shows an awareness of the actor's inexperience. It may seem paradoxical to give an amateur more freedom. Remember, though, that making an action appear natural is one of the

hardest tasks for an amateur actor to accomplish. If the directions emphasize action, the amateur's movements can become self-conscious, even mechanical, and detract from the words. If the actors are not skilled, making tea, like smoking a pipe, can become a little drama all by itself.

In this episode, the words are important. If our attention were distracted by extra business or self-conscious settling of the tea things and serving of the tea, we would miss parts of the conversation about men "the like of Patch Darcy," who could run from Wicklow to Dublin and never "catch for his breath"; Patch Darcy who would know if one sheep in five hundred was missing "without reckoning them at all"; Patch Darcy who never passed Nora's cottage morning or night without speaking to her; Patch Darcy who "went queer in the head in the year that's gone." Patch Darcy bestrode Nora's imagination like a colossus and between his huge legs Michael Dara and Dan Burke could only walk and peep about. All these ideas we must have clearly in mind in order to understand Nora.

The tea things themselves are insignificant in the light of these speeches. But Nora's position is not. In the final version she is nearly stage center and standing. She is framed by the tramp and Michael Dara, who are sitting. We see Nora and we hear about Patch Darcy. The relationship and its importance are clear and unmistakable. In an early version of the episode, Synge included a direction requiring Nora to sit next to Michael before Darcy's name is mentioned and to remain seated throughout the conversation. Wisely, he struck it out.

Knowing the importance of the words, we learn the value of limited action on stage. The Fays and Synge always knew and constantly learned. They collaborated and we can take as a record of that collaboration these episodes from The Shadow of the Glen.

FOOTNOTES

¹Greene and Stephens, p. 153.

²Ibid., p. 151.

³Letter to the author from Ronan Wilmot of the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 1 February 1972, Mr. Wilmot says in part: "I am sorry we have no original material about the Synge plays. Most of our scripts and photographs were burned in the fire of 1951."

CHAPTER VI

RIDERS TO THE SEA

We know from Maire nic Shuiblaigh that Synge's dialogue presented difficulties to the actors of the Irish national theatre society. We know this, too, from Willie Fay, who taught the actors to overcome those difficulties so well that his directions became traditional. (In the late 1930's, F. R. Higgins, then director of the Abbey Theatre, reprimanded Cyril Cusack for straying from the expected interpretations of The Playboy.¹) We know it from Synge himself. The changes he made in successive versions of Riders to the Sea show that Synge was aware of the difficulties. He tried to make the player's task easier. Well over half of the emendations recorded by Professor Saddlemyer are changes in punctuation. Nearly all of them can be taken as signals to the actor. They tell him when to pause and help him understand the meaning of a sentence. Most importantly, they emphasize the rhythms of the speeches.

In this play, Synge presents a character of universal importance. Maurya's is the grief of all who lose children in battles with nature and men. She lives on a harsh and isolated island. Only the warm strength of the family redeems her life. One by one, the sea strips away her husband, father-in-law, and sons. Her pain is insupportable, yet she endures it; her sorrow is boundless, yet she compasses it; her grief is ineffable, yet she finds release; and in the end she speaks the only words which can ever free her heart from bondage in endless lamentation. "They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me. . . . No

man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied." (III,23;27)

These lines mark the beginning and ending of Maurya's lament for her family, herself, and "for everyone is left living in the world." Through all versions of the play, these lines remained unaltered. They do not illustrate the difficulties Synge conquered in preparing this play for the stage. They do illustrate the kind of effect Synge tried to achieve as he wrestled with those difficulties. What was the effect? In Maurya's speeches, one that eased the heart while it pleased the ear. More generally, he strove for a language which could evoke any emotion while delighting the ear and the mind. His struggle separated him from both his predecessors in Europe and his contemporaries in England. From Ibsen to Shaw, plot, character, and argument dominated the stage. Synge employed the first two but shunned the latter. Argument distorted reality; debate constricted joy; controversy suffocated life. In a play, Synge valued most highly the qualities of reality and joy. In life, he found them among the fishermen of Irishman, among the "King" and his family on Great Blasket Island, among the peasants of the Wicklow Glens, among the boat builders and kelp makers of Connemara. As a student of languages, literature, and music, he was sensitive to the sounds of reality and joy. (His use of a camera, though, reveals visual sensitivity and marks him among modern literary artists. He must be nearly unique in leaving behind a photographic record of his literary subjects.) He realized that drama alone provided the medium which could represent all that he had seen and heard. In that medium, too, he believed that, more than plot or character, language would raise up before a Dublin audience the joys and realities of the life he had discovered.

It is hard for us to discern in Maurya's words any joy at all. In the sense of happiness there is none and we would be foolish to look

for it. But there is a way in which Maurya's words celebrate life and affirm it. Her life has been harsh, but it has had meaning. She has suffered, but also she has hoped and loved. She has struggled. If, in the end, she has been defeated, there have been victories over the sea in the safe return of a husband or a son. She has not despaired. Her strength in the face of ultimate loss, her acceptance of the sea's power, her solace in release from suffering are Synge's great achievements in this play. We read the play to see Maurya brought to a point at which we would be dumb with grief and incomprehension; and to feel ourselves raised by her speech to solace and understanding.

Consider, for a moment, the deaths of Maurya's men, as she, herself, describes them.

Bartley will be lost now, and let you call in Eamon and make me a good coffin out of the white boards, for I won't live after them. I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house--six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world--and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them. . . . There were Stephen, and Shawn, were lost in the great wind, and found after in the Bay of Gregory of the Golden Mouth, and carried up the two of them on one plank, and in by that door. . . . There was Sheamus and his father, and his own father again, were lost in a dark night, and not a stick or sign was seen of them when the sun went up. There was Patch after was drowned out of a curagh that turned over. I was sitting here with Bartley, and he a baby, lying on my two knees, and I seen two women, and three women, and four women coming in, and they crossing themselves, and not saying a word. I looked out then, and there were men coming after them and they holding a thing in the half of a red sail, and water dripping out of it--it was a dry day, Nora--and leaving a track to the door. (III,21)

Where else in literature do we read of deaths so free of pain, of rancor, of malice? If a man must die--and no man at all can be living forever--he could do far worse than to die like Stephen, Shawn, Sheamus, Patch, and Michael. Where else in literature do we find deaths remembered so simply, so free of anguish and resentment? Pain comes not with death but with life--"a hard birth I had with every one of them"--and with the

kind of life the islanders must live: "In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old." (III,13) It is not the sons' deaths which Synge emphasizes, but the mother's acceptance of them and, in a sense, her triumph over death. In Maurya's life death has died; the last death has occurred; there is nothing more the sea can do to her. It is not that she does not grieve, nor pray for her sons. It is not that she is calloused. It is that even though she must now live a poorer life, it will be a life free of new grief, from anxiety, from the awful subjugation to the sea. Her power to endure what the sea can do has, finally, carried her beyond the power of the sea to hurt her any more. A great rest is the only just reward life could give her.

Strength, endurance, carrying beyond the griefs of life, rising above the terror of existence--these qualities Synge wanted his audience to experience. To help them, it was necessary that he make not only Maurya's words but the rhythms of her speech express these qualities. He succeeded as we shall see. But in succeeding, he creates a problem for the amateurs who performed the play. In the play, Maurya's lament is divided into four speeches. Each part is separated from the other by action and dialogue. After she describes the death of her sons, Bartley's body is carried into the house in a fashion similar to that in which Patch's body was brought home. Between the third and fourth speeches, Maurya sprinkles Bartley with Holy Water and Cathleen asks one of the men to make Bartley's coffin. Despite these natural separations, the four speeches are really one speech, unified in subject, tone, and rhythm. The subject (the death of her family) and tone (serene acceptance of fate) have been discussed. The rhythms of the speech affect us, perhaps, more

powerfully than either the subject or tone, though we may be less aware of them on first hearing.

The first element of these rhythms are the repetitions of words, phrases, and sentence structure. Synge introduces this element early and sparingly in the speech but increases its frequency until it climaxes in Maurya's prayer for the souls of all people.

Synge begins unobtrusively:

I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house. (III, 21)

We are soon aware that we are listening to more than ordinary speech:

and some of them were found and some of them were not found.

If this was an ordinary way of speaking on Aran, it was not in Dublin.

If the audience was not aware of that by the end of the first part of the speech, they became aware of it in the second part:

There was Sheamus and his father, and his own father again.

and:

I seen two women, and three women and four women coming in.

Of these two latter examples, the first forms part of a second pattern: the repetition of sentence structure:

There were Stephen, and Shawn were lost in the great wind . . .

There was Sheamus and his father and his own father again . . .

There was Patch after was drowned out of a curagh that turned over . . .

Woven among these patterns is a third pattern of sound: alliteration.

There were Stephen and Shawn, were lost in the great wind,
and found after in the Bay of Gregory of the Golden Mouth.

There was Sheamus and his father, and his own father again,
were lost in a dark night, and not a stick or sign was seen
of them when the sun went up.

. . . and four women coming in, and they crossing themselves.

. . . and water dripping out of it--it was a dry day, Nora--and
leaving a track to the door.

(The last example is especially interesting because of the changing combinations of "d" and "r" sounds. "dr" becomes "tr" and "or" of "Nora" becomes "or" in door.)

In the third part of the speech, these patterns of repetition use different sounds, words, and phrases, but they intensify. Every sentence yields some new delight to the ear. My favorite is:

. . . and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other.

In early drafts, Synge used "echo" instead of "stir." (III, 22) If ever there was testimony to the importance of revision, of choosing the right word, this is it. Instead of saying "echo," Synge creates one--the "ir" of "stir" echoes the "ur" of "surf." "Surf," being onomatopoeic, makes the repetition even more vivid.

Later, in this part of the speech, Synge creates a new pattern with a different purpose

. . . but it's a great rest I'll have now, and it's time surely.
It's a great rest I'll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain.

After her agony, Maurya deserves this rest. The rhythms of the repetition help us feel what that rest will be like. Days free of fear, nights blessed with sleep. In this passage, the phrase, ". . . I'll have now . . ." is echoed by "Samhain," pronounced "sow-in" and echoes similar phrases earlier in this part:

They're all gone now . . .
I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying
I'll have no call now to be going down and yelling

The positive "it's" of the passage is balanced and contrasted with the negative:

It isn't that I haven't prayed for you Bartley . . .
It isn't that I haven't said prayers.

The effect on the hearer of Maurya's great petition is due, in part, to Synge's rhythmical preparation.

May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul, and on Michael's soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn . . . and may He have Mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul of everyone is left living in the world.

Synge has accustomed us, in a variety of ways to Maurya's language. We have been carried forward by the rhythms to this beautiful conclusion, the accents of which fall like the blessings they invoke.

In addition to repetition, Synge employs another element of rhythm: the long sentence, or if we prefer, the long thought. On first reading, we are likely to be even less aware of this element's effect than we are of repetition's. But like a bass accompaniment to a melody, Maurya's long sentences contrast with the brilliant timbre of Synge's words and phrases, lending them richness, depth, and fluency. Consider the longest sentence Maurya utters:

I've had a husband and a husband's father, and six sons in this house--six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world--and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them.

Synge could have arranged this sentence differently. He could have made three complete sentences out of it. It did not suit him to do so and, at the risk of appearing pedantic, we ought to ask why. I think we have here a very fine example of Synge's ear for speech and for what a manner of speaking reveals about a person. First, we note the internal digression, the long appositive clause, in the middle of the sentence. This is the way people talk, especially when they speak of matters close to their hearts. If they do not ramble, then, at least, they tumble onward, one notion recalling a second which brings a third to mind. What is more natural, at the moment of their death, than for a mother to

remember the births of her sons? At precisely this moment, really, Maurya is closest to despair, her soul charged with the futility of the suffering she endured at the onset of their lives. Only because we know what she had and what she endured can we respond to the loss expressed by "and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them."

But it was not accuracy alone which Synge desired, though the literalness of Synge's language became a major issue with audiences of all kinds. More important is the second noticeable feature of this sentence: flow. "Flow" seems vague but I use it here to refer to certain distinct qualities, namely: Relatedness: though the sentence can be analyzed into three distinct parts, our understanding of each depends upon our understanding of the other parts; Movement: our understanding is increased, deepened, enriched the closer we come to the end of the sentence. The sentence has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and we arrive at a place different from that at which we started. Flow helps us perceive the sentence as a unit of meaning. Flow is important because, though rooted in grammar and syntax, it has emotional implications. If the sentence did not flow, its emotional impact would be diminished. We respond to

and some of them were found
and some of them were not found
but they're gone now the lot of them

not only because of what we know before we reach these phrases, but because of the order in which we have come to know it. A simple rearrangement illustrates the point. Suppose the sentence were altered thus:

I've had six fine sons, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world. I've had a husband and a husband's father. Some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them.

Synge's arrangement is the best one. Certainly it stirs our emotions better than this one does.

There is a loss of emotional impact, too, for another reason. In my proposed rearrangement, the tempo of the thought has been changed. Maurya's sentences should be delivered at an appropriate rate with stresses falling in appropriate places. In Synge's arrangement, the tempo is uniform throughout and he signals this in subtle ways, viz: the echo of "six sons in this house" in "six fine men"; the use of "and" to link the second and third parts of the sentence and the echo of "coming" in "some." There are echoes of stress, too, in these places. "Six sons," a spondee is extended into three stresses in "six fine men"; "coming to the world" is echoed by "some of them were found." Tempo and stress flow, too, in Synge's arrangement. A true full stop does not occur save where Synge has placed it. Flow keeps alive the meaning and the emotion of the passage.

Tempo and stress fall in the actor's domain as well as the playwright's. Knowing how to read a line well means, in part, knowing how fast or slow to speak and where to put stress and where not. The analysis of this one sentence exposes, at length, I fear, the delicate balances of meaning, flow, tempo, and stress which Synge sought not only in Maurya's lines but in the speeches of all his characters. Maurya's speeches happen to be especially difficult because the actress must maintain these balances over long periods of time. Half the sentences in Maurya's final speeches are longer than thirty words. We should not be surprised, therefore, that Maire nic Shuibhlaigh and her fellow actors found Synge's lines difficult. Not only must questions of interpretation have arisen but, like singers, they must have asked also, "Where do I take a breath?"

Synge tried to answer this question for the actor by using punctuation in a way which appears highly idiosyncratic unless one knows its purpose. He used dashes and commas less for grammatical purposes than for rhythmical ones. Therefore, his punctuation should be taken not as semantic directions, first, but as stage directions. Professor Saddlemyer has written of certain speeches in The Well of the Saints:

He even went so far as to indicate the exact rhythm of his lines by means of internal punctuation, which is rhetorical rather than grammatical, and would, along with the odd syntax, assure proper delivery. If "breaks" are allowed only where his frequently oddly-placed commas occur, and the lines are read in the long sweeps applied to blank verse, the shape of the line and rhythm immediately become clear.²

In a footnote to this passage, Professor Saddlemyer reports that in an interview on 6 September 1957 the eminent Irish actress, Siobhan McKenna, verified the above interpretations.

The various drafts of Riders to the Sea bear witness to Synge's struggle to find the right cadences and rhythms. Of all the changes recorded in the Oxford edition, over half are changes in punctuation.³ Synge may have cursed the actors from time to time, but he spared no pains to help them find the best interpretation of his work.

FOOTNOTES

¹Cyril Cusack. "A Player's Reflections on Playboy," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Playboy of the Western World, ed. by Thomas R. Whitaker (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1969), pp. 51-52.

²Saddlemyer, p. 449.

³54% by actual count. I am aware that I have, quite literally, laid myself open to that ignominious epithet: comma-counter. My only excuse is that, after I saw the importance of punctuation to the speaking of Synge's lines, I was unable to resist the perverse temptation.

CHAPTER VII

THE TINKER'S WEDDING

The Tinker's Wedding was never produced during Synge's life. Its first performance occurred not at the Abbey but at His Majesty's Theatre, London, in November, 1909.¹ Synge had been writing the play since 1902. His notebooks do not quite support the conclusion of Maurice Bourgeois that The Tinker's Wedding was "the very first play ever conceived by him."² But they do allow us to say that, of the finished plays, it was one of the earliest. Dialogue for Riders to the Sea and The Shadow of the Glen appears in the same notebook as dialogue for Tinker's. Five years elapsed between inception and printing. During these years Synge finished RS, SG, began and completed WS and PW. In other words, the major portion of his work was completed while he tinkered with TW.

By the time the play was completed near the end of 1907, Synge had already caused two uproars. In October, 1903, The Shadow of the Glen had caused a walk-out by Abbey actors who were shocked by the behavior of Nora Burke, the play's heroine. The nationalist press had condemned the play as un-Irish. In January of 1907, the Playboy riots occurred. The major changes in TW were made between these two dates, that is, by Spring, 1906. There is ample evidence that the Abbey directors considered TW too dangerous for presentation to an Irish audience.³ Synge knew the play contained strong material and agreed to

postpone production. On November 28, 1907, he wrote to Molly that he had "corrected the final first proofs of The Tinker's Wedding, yesterday and this morning I have finished the preface to it. The play is good I think, but it looks mighty shocking in print."⁴

The "shocking" parts of the play, in Synge's time, were the treatment of the priest, who is not only tied up but gagged and bundled into the sack; the frank attack by Mary Byrne upon the institution of marriage; the presentation of Irish men and women living together without benefit of the sacrament of marriage; and the colorful, extravagant language of the tinkers, especially Mary Byrne. All these aspects prevented the Abbey theatre from presenting the play and caused its first performance to be postponed until after the author's death. Even then, it was first played by English actors in England. If Synge thought the final version was shocking, we can only wonder what adjective he applied to earlier versions. The play began as a dramatization of a single incident and grew into two acts. As the revisions proceeded, the emphasis on incident as a dramatic element decreased and the importance of character increased. Several scenic requirements were eliminated. Several characters were also eliminated and the language, generally, was made less harsh. These revisions reveal Synge's increasing knowledge of his theatre, his actors, and his audience.

The Tinker's Wedding is a misnomer because no wedding occurs. An earlier title, Movements of May, is more suggestive of the theme of the play, the desire of a young tinker woman, Sarah Casey, to be married. Sarah never relinquishes that desire, though she becomes exasperated by the priest's refusal to perform the ceremony and by his bullying attitude toward her and tinkers. Her lover is a fellow tinker named Michael Byrne. They have shared life together for some time. (In earlier

versions they have children.) In the spring of the year, the hard life on the roads of Co. Wicklow causes Sarah to long for a gentler, more respectable kind of life. Marriage stands high in Sarah's estimation of respectability. Triumphantly, she tells Mary Byrne, Michael's mother, "I'll be married now in a short while; and from this day there will no one have a right to call me a dirty name and I selling cans in Wicklow or Wexford or the city of Dublin itself." (IV, 35)

Mary Byrne is the strongest opponent of the marriage. There is nothing Freudian in her opposition. She simply can't understand the need for it. "Is it at marriage you're fooling again?" she asks Sarah Casey. Mary and all the other tinkers have prospered without it and the pomp and circumstance, to her, represents the height of nonsense and impracticality. When the priest threatens to set the police after them, the three tie him up and Mary soothes his ruffled dignity with a short homily on lifestyle:

It's sick and sorry we are to tease you; but what did you want meddling with the like of us, when it's a long time we are going our own ways--father and son, and his son after him, or mother and daughter, and her own daughter again--and it's little need we ever had of going up into a church and swearing--I'm told there's swearing with it--a word no man would believe, or with drawing rings on our fingers, would be cutting our skins maybe when we'd be taking the ass from the shafts, and pulling the straps the time they'd be slippy with going around beneath the heavens in rains falling. (IV, 47)

The cause of the altercation is the priest's refusal to marry Sarah and Michael, after he had promised to do so for a "bit of gold" and a new tin can, ". . . a pitiful small sum." That the priest never gets his can is not the fault of Sarah and Michael. When the priest opens the large sack supposed to hold the can, three empty bottles tumble out instead. Unbeknownst to Sarah and Michael, Mary Byrne swapped the bottles for the can, which she sold for the drink it would buy.

The setting of TW becomes simpler as the play develops from early drafts to final version. In the earliest typescript, Synge fills the stage with details appropriate to a tinker camp on a "roadside at the end of a village."

. . . chapel door to the right, with low railings to it, and gate; Cottages on the other side of the stage with blinds down and the doors shut. There is a spring well coming out of the ditch near the middle of the scene with an unyoked donkey cart near it and a fire. Micheal Byrne is finishing a tin-can. Nora Casey is washing her face eagerly in an old bucket and arranging her hair. Mary Byrne is asleep under the ditch. Two children are playing about. The priest is seen for a moment at the chapel door, then he goes in again. (IV, 277)

This version of the opening setting dates from Autumn, 1903. By the Spring of 1904, after Synge had seen SG in production at Molesworth Hall, he reduced the number of cottages to one and eliminated the well. In the fall of 1905, nine months after the small Abbey stage opened, seven months after WS was produced on that stage, Synge eliminated the last cottage and merely suggests the presence of a chapel:

After nightfall. A fire of sticks is burning near the ditch a little to the right. Michael is working beside it. In the background, on the left, a sort of tent and ragged clothes drying on the hedge. On the right a chapelgate. (IV, 7)

Other effects, too, disappeared in the process of revision. Between 1904 and 1907, he eliminated the sound of a chapel clock striking, a lighting effect representing a ray of moonlight, (IV, 20) and a hawthorn tree in full flower. (IV, 28)

All of these changes reflect, in part, the limitations of the Abbey and the artistic and financial resources of the company. If the original cottages, well, chapel doors, and railings were presented on the Abbey stage in a realistic fashion, the area remaining for the actors would have been reduced considerably. No doubt the theatre coffers would have been reduced, too, by the expense. Synge's original

design requires a large amount of material. Storage, too, was a problem. The only places for scenery were the wings which were very small. Even if the scene were painted on the back wall, it would still be impractical. The Abbey was a repertory company. It gave different plays on different nights. Painting the back wall would mean a great sacrifice in versatility, especially for TW, a two-act play which would have to share an evening's bill with another piece. Finally, an overly elaborate set clashed with Yeats' and Frank Fay's philosophy of scenic design which required simplicity. The word, i.e. the poet and playwright, was more important than the actor or the scenery.

Scenic details were not the only elements revised away by Synge. Characters disappeared, too. The most important were four children: two tinkers, a boy and a girl, and two little village girls. The tinker children were included from the earliest drafts and disappeared in Spring of 1906. They were named Micky and Nanny and were the offspring of Sarah Casey (Nora in early versions), presumably by Michael Byrne. The village girls, "dressed in white for their confirmation" (IV, 271) appeared in a typescript in Spring, 1904, and disappeared along with the tinker children.

Robin Skelton cites a passage in an early draft in which the children talk about dressing up like "the green man we seen in the fair" (IV, 281) to get money for sweets. Skelton believes the green man "represents some aspect of pre-Christian beliefs" and that Synge introduced the passage to show that pre-Christian beliefs are a part of the children's inheritance.⁵ Skelton believes that, by contrasting the village children with the tinker children, Synge intended to contrast pagan and Christian, tribal and village attitudes. The decision to eliminate them, Skelton argues, resulted from Synge's judgment that the children "intrude

arbitrarily upon the play and the effect is clumsy."6 Syngé cut them, therefore, for reasons of dramatic economy. I agree with Skelton's theory, insofar as it concerns contrasts in attitudes. The following passage from a draft finished in the Spring of 1904 illustrates the point.

__ [Nora and Micheal go to the cart and begin arranging their clothes, putting coloured handkerchiefs round their necks etc. A little girl in white comes down the road and stops at the cottage door, talking to the people inside. Nanny and Micky are left on the road, they take up the old can the woman has left behind her.]__

MICKY. We'll make a drum now from this bit of a can, and then we'll be like the green man we seen below the fair.

NANNY. We won't be like the green man, and not a green rag on us at all.

MICKY. We'll put a bit of rushes round our heads and then we'll be like the green man surely, and it's a power of money for sweets we'll get beating that thing through the fair. __ [He begins tying a string round the old can to make it hang like a drum. Two more little girls come down the road in white; they are joined by the girl who was at the door of the cottage and they pass together.]__

1ST GIRL. Did you hear what the pig did last night, the pig Biddy's father was taking to the fair?

2ND GIRL. I did not.

1ST GIRL. It's after tearing the front out of her frock, and there she is now getting her death fretting, and she with nothing to put on her at all.

2ND GIRL. They bought that pig from the old minister and I'm thinking the devil was in it. Didn't you ever hear tell of the devils going down into the swine?

2ND GIRL. An old daddy goat is the devil, Barbara Neill, with the long beard on him, and the horns above. Didn't you ever hear tell of the goats and the sheep?

1ST GIRL. Let you not be talking bad talk this day, Kitty Brien. Haven't you every day to do that?

__ [They go into the chapel gate. The Priest comes down from the Chapel. He takes out his watch and speaks with them fussily.]
(IV, 288-89)

Nor is there any question that the presence of the children fails to harmonize with the rest of the play. But Skelton has not told the larger

story. Only the didactic element of the children's presence is really obtrusive. The children themselves, especially the tinker children, seem delightfully natural. Consider the following exchange from the first act of the Spring, 1904, version.

__ [The two children, Micky & Nanny, come in.] __

NORA [to the children]. Is his reverence above in the house?

MICKY. There wasn't a light at all in the big window & we were there a long while looking around, and we afraid to go in on the grass fearing there'd be a dog in it the like of the dog in Killacree.

NORA. Did you not see a person at all?

MICKY. A kind of a girl came of [sic] the gate the time we were standing round, and "Is his reverence in it?" says I. "He is not," says she, "but what at all is that to the like of you?" __ [He sits down by the fire.] __ Give us a bit to eat now, for we're destroyed with the hunger.

NORA [giving them food out of the pot]. When you have that down it's away off you'll go again to find out what place he is surely.

NANNY. I'm not going off again this night for I've a thorn in my foot.

NORA. [looking at her foot]. Where, God help you?

NANNY. Below by my big toe . . . a long cruel thorn with no butt on it at all.

NORA [trying to take out the thorn]. How was it you got the like of that thorn, Nanny? Didn't you ever hear me saying to you, you don't be minding at all the place where you'd be laying your feet?

MICKY. She got that thorn running up the field and we after making a fine job for himself in the morning.

MICHEAL. Is it a job for myself?

MICKY. A fine job and it's no lie. __ [He stops suddenly.] Whisht whisht now till herself will be gone . . .

__ [A woman comes down the road and goes into the cottage where the light was seen. She shuts the door after her.] __

MICKY [whispering]. We were going across the field to his reverence and herself from that house beyond was above feeding her calf. Then she went down to be speaking with someone--with a man I'm thinking--in the dark lane, and Nanny took the can.

NANNY. It's not lies he's telling this time. . . . There isn't a lie in it at all.

MICKY. There was the bottom on the old can, and it after being by someone wasn't half a tinker I'm thinking, and what did I do but put down my stick into it, and "Now Nanny," says I, "let you hit a little soft crack on my stick and the bottom will be sprung."

NANNY. Then I hit a little weechy crack, and we heard herself coming and we run and we run. . . . It was that time I got the thorn.

NORA [to Micheal, in a friendly voice]. They're a great pair, God bless them, Micheal Byrne, a great pair surely. [To Nanny.] There's the thorn out of you now Nanny. It was a bad thorn and it's no lie.

MICHEAL [to the children]. Did you set your eye, [sic] on a hen or a chicken, or a thing at all a man could eat?

MICKY. We seen two fine hens of Tim O'Flaherty's out roosting in the ash tree above the well, and they bending down the branch with the fat on them as if it was myself was climbing. (IV, 285)

The children are full of zest, adventure, and mischief. They seem half wild, as we would expect tinker children to be. Skelton says that, though Synge eliminated the children, he "retained their themes, and presented them in a more subtle manner."⁷ But if he were capable of creating lively, interesting child-characters, can we explain Synge's decision solely in terms of their thematic obtrusiveness? I think not.

One wonders, first, if child actors would have been capable of handling the roles to the satisfaction of W. G. and Frank Fay. The language of the tinker children is not less complex than that of the adults. We have already noted Maire nic Shuibhlaigh's comments on the difficulties of learning Synge's lines. It would have been much more difficult for children to master the material. The high standards of the Fay brothers in elocutionary and theatrical matters contributed, no doubt, to the absence of child actors from the lists of the Abbey company. That absence is a second reason for Synge's decision to eliminate the child actors. A third reason concerns the audience. Suppose the

Abbey company included child actors and that they were capable of performing Synge's parts to the satisfaction of the Fay brothers. What would have been the reaction of other company members, audience, and critics to the presence of children in the roles of Micky and Nanny? Several actors left the company in 1905 because they could not countenance Nora Burke's abandoning her husband in SG. The press furiously attacked that play as un-Irish. We can safely assume, I believe, that a violent reaction would have occurred had a theatrical institution, purporting to raise the standards of Irish drama, presented to the public two innocent Irish children performing the roles of what were, unmistakably, bastards; and ill-behaved, heathen bastards, to boot. Synge's decision to revise the children out of the play may have been motivated, in part, by thematic circumstances in which Synge found himself. More compelling reasons existed in the theatrical circumstances in which Synge found himself.

Synge's awareness of the audience's possible reactions is evident in other decisions he made. One of them concerned language. The early versions of the play had the characters speaking more harshly than they do in the final version. The harshness is apparent both in the subject and style of the language. Synge seemed especially sensitive to the potential for a violent reaction to language used by Sarah and Mary in expressing themselves about marriage. Consider, again, Sarah's words: "I'll be married now in a short while; and from this day there will no one have a right to call me a dirty name and I selling cans in Wicklow or Wexford or the city of Dublin itself." In the earliest draft of TW, that speech, slightly altered, forms part of a longer speech:

Would you have them calling me bad name(s) below in the fair and I selling the cans to the young men do be walking round in it. Why wouldn't a woman does be sleeping under a cart have as good [or] the same right to a decent marriage as a woman does be sleeping in a bit of a sty the like of the house beyond? (IV, 273)

By Spring, 1906, the word "sty" had been changed to "hovel" but the loss of bite was hardly noticeable. Synge put the line in a sharp verbal battle between Sarah and Mary:

SARAH [angrily]. Let you not be destroying us with your talk when I've as good a right as another to make myself safe from the Almighty God.

MARY [sitting down and leaning back against the ditch]. Safe from the Almighty God is it! What is it he'd care for the like of you. You wouldn't see the Almighty God going up into the sky after the larks and swallows and the swift birds, or after the hares do be racing above on a fine Spring, and what would he want following us and we not troubling him at all.

SARAH. If he doesn't itself I'll wed this day, I'm telling you, for I've as good a right to a decent marriage as any speckled female bastard does be sleeping in the black hovels above would choke a rat. (IV, 34)

By the final version in 1907, Synge omitted Mary's speech and Sarah's outburst was reduced to:

Let you not be destroying us with your talk when I've as good a right to a decent marriage as any speckled female does be sleeping in the black hovels above, [sic] would choke a mule. (IV, 35)

Given the probable reaction of his audience, the reasons for Synge's final revision are obvious. But the growth of the speeches illustrates Synge's method of composition. He would begin with a word, phrase, or idea he heard from the lips of the tinkers and play with it. Slight alterations would suggest possible responses from a second character and a third, maybe. A simple speech would be split in two, each part suggesting its own responses. Eventually, the two parts would be separated by speeches of other characters. Just as some chromosomes govern the development of limbs and organs, and others the senses and vital systems, so the words and phrases of Anglo-Irish governed the development of Synge's dialogue.

This vegetable-like generation produced characters and themes as well as speeches. In early drafts, the play focused on an incident of

which Synge had heard and reported in "At a Wicklow Fair."⁸ The incident was an attempt by some tinkers to con a priest into marrying them without paying with the tin can they'd promised. In the original anecdote, they tell the priest that an ass kicked the can into uselessness. In the earliest draft of the play, they make the can and sell it to a woman for drinking money. As in the anecdote, the priest sees through the trick but instead of just shouting them off, Synge has the priest threaten to sic the peelers on the tinker couple. To this threat Mary Byrne responds:

You and your marriage! Isn't generations and generasions we are walking round under the Heavens and what is it we ever wanted with [your like]? Let you not be talking. We have the hot suns and the cold night and our bits to eat and sups to drink and a power of children and what more is it we want. Is it rings we want when the frost does catch on our fingers. Let you listen to this. When a man parts with copper to put rings in a pig's nose and you'd like us to pay you with the time you'd put an old ring on ourselves. You would surely. Herself is a young woman and the young never know the things they want. I've had one husband and another husband and a power of children God help them and it's little they or myself, even with your old rings to help us on in the world. Good day now your reverence and let you be putting rings on your own pigs and not minding ourselves [sic] it's ten generations I was saying we've been walking round on the roads and never a marriage in the family. (IV, 276-77)

In the final version, the conflict between tinker and priest which constitutes the entire playlet of the first notebook draft, is still important to the play. However, our deeper sympathies are focused on Sarah Casey's desire to be married. For Synge, the incident, as he heard it at the Wicklow Fair, automatically suggests character. The priest's refusal to marry the tinkers, the trick they try to play on the priest, are ultimately of secondary interest. What really fascinates him is the desire of the tinkers to get married at all. It certainly must have fascinated him privately. He knew perfectly well that real tinkers had no need for the institution of marriage.⁹ It

certainly fascinated him as a dramatist because Sarah's urge to marry gives weight to the play. Though the finished play contains elements of farce--notably the tying-up of the priest in a sack--Sarah's frustration prevents our laughter from being too carefree and hearty.

In the end, Sarah turns her anger from Mary to the priest only because his behavior is more immediately threatening. Tinkers and police are enemies. The real threat to Sarah's happiness is Mary Byrne, whose views on marriage we have just read. Eventually Synge toned down Mary's language. (The final version of the speech above is printed on page 118.) No Irish audience would have listened peacefully to an actress on a public stage referring to good Catholics as pigs, and to the symbols of marriage as emblems of porcine domestication. But even as he toned down her language, Synge increased Mary's importance in a way which altered the action of the play. In drafts made before the winter of 1905-1906, Sarah and Michael sold the tin can to a woman and lied to the priest about its whereabouts. In all versions of the play after the Spring of 1906, Mary Byrne steals the can and substitutes three empty bottles for it. The theft occurs at the very end of the first act while Sarah and Michael are sleeping. This decision had at least three effects related to Synge's dramatic purpose and his understanding of his audience.

First, Mary Byrne becomes at least as important as the Priest to the action of the play. Instead of merely speaking as a tinker she acts as one, too. Her behavior expresses her love of drink and her opposition to a restrictive institution in a manner more likely to captivate and delight an audience. By this ploy Synge compensates for the loss of colorfulness resulting from toning down Mary Byrne's language.

Synge wanted to present a view of the tinker's life that was "rich, general, and humorous."¹⁰ But he also wanted to present the tinker's life as truthfully as he could, with all the roguery and unconventionalities he had found. Letting Mary steal the can allows him to have truth, humor, and suspense. The audience knows of the switch, Michael and Sarah do not. The audience waits in delight for the moment of truth.

As a second result of the theft Michael and Sarah become less the rogues and more the innocents. In early versions, they had few qualms about tricking the Priest. In the final version, they approach the Priest sincerely and are, therefore, the more outraged at his refusal. The sympathies of the audience are more with Sarah in the later versions, less with the Priest. The Priest is not caricatured in the play. In the first act we know him to be a man of sensitivity who does, after persuasion, agree to perform the wedding. But in the end, he cannot find his way round the general reputation of tinkers as a "wicked, thieving, lying, scheming lot." (IV, 41) His threat to send the peelers after Michael and Sarah is too much for them to bear and they retaliate by tying him up in the sack. Synge hoped to gain the audience's acceptance of this farcical outrage by making Sarah, at least, more innocent than a tinker woman would probably be in real life. Making Mary the true culprit allowed Sarah's desire for marriage and respectability to remain untainted.

Finally, Mary's theft of the can shifts the emphasis of the play away from the tricking of the Priest toward the values that separate tinker life from conventional life. The issue of marriage was suggested by the original incident but Synge's interest was fired, no doubt, by his desire to marry Molly Allgood. Their love was deepening quickly

during 1905 and 1906 when these revisions were being made. Still, he was less concerned in giving his audience a treatise on comparative Irish social values, then he was in nourishing the imagination of his audience.¹¹ To him, Sarah's desire for marriage was more imaginatively nourishing than the mere tricking of the priest. He wanted his audience to respond joyfully to a picture of Irish life with which few of them were acquainted. He wanted them to enjoy the boisterous full-floodedness of the tinkers as they rubbed against conventions closer to the audience's own. Sarah's guilelessness is important to this purpose. As a result of Mary's theft, the action of the play is more interesting to an audience. As characters, Mary is livelier and Sarah is more sympathetic and attractive, and, as a result, the audience would be more likely to be imaginatively nourished by what they experienced in the theatre. Synge strove for laughter without malice. It was a misfortune that he could not find it in his lifetime.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹Synge, Collected Works, IV, 292.
- ²Bourgeois, p. 177. The emphasis is mine.
- ³Greene and Stephens, pp. 198-284.
- ⁴Synge, Letters to Molly, p. 222.
- ⁵Skelton, p. 70.
- ⁶Ibid.
- ⁷Ibid.
- ⁸Synge, Collected Works, II, 228-29
- ⁹Ibid., p. 204.
- ¹⁰Ibid., IV, 3.
- ¹¹Ibid.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WELL OF THE SAINTS

Though The Well of the Saints was Synge's first full length play, he composed it with a sure hand. The drafts reveal no shifting of major themes or images¹ as do the drafts of The Tinker's Wedding. Synge heard the tale of a miraculous cure of blindness by water from a holy well on the Aran Islands.² The characters in the Aran story, a woman and her son, do not appear in The Well of the Saints. The characters of Mary and Martin Doul and their attitudes toward their cure appear to have their roots in medieval morality plays about which Synge read in Histoire du Theatre en France au Moyen-age by Professor Petit de Julleville.³

Martin and Mary are an old, wizened, crotchety pair of blind beggars who believe themselves to be gloriously handsome and beautiful. Their neighbors, Timmy the Smith, Molly Byrne, and others, encourage this belief for the sport it provides. The old couple's desire to see the splendors of their beauty makes them submit to the healing powers of a wandering saint's holy water. They are harshly disillusioned by reality. Martin compounds his plight by mistaking Molly Byrne, young and pretty, for his wife. Amid the jeers and laughter of the people, they threaten each other with their walking sticks, making futile gestures of frustration and anger.

In the second act, Martin and Mary, separated, sweat for their living; Martin cuts wood for Timmy the Smith and Molly gathers nettles for the Widow O'Flinn. Working for a living does not suit Martin at all. He tries to recapture the easier, more splendid life of his blind days by urging Molly, in language that foreshadows that of Christy Mahon, to come with him

to the lands of Iveragh, and the Reeks of Cork, where you won't set down the width of your two feet and not be crushing fine flowers, and making sweet smells in the air. . . . (III, 117)

Appalled, Molly suspects that Martin has taken leave of his senses.

Martin, utterly rejected, returns to the beggar's life, praying for the time he will see Molly and Timmy, "on a high bed, and they screeching in hell." (III, 123)

The third act begins with a reconciliation of the two beggars, again blind, after Mary overhears Martin longing for her company to fend off loneliness. They reflect on the realities of their situation. Just as they decide there are still pleasures in the warmth of the sun, the sweetness of the air and "smelling the things growing up, and budding from the earth," (III, 131) they hear the bell of the priest. He is coming with the people to marry Molly and Timmy. Mary and Martin try to hide but Timmy finds them both easily. Before they can utter three sentences, the priest prepares to cure them a second time. Gently, at first, they resist the idea and the entreaties of the people, wanting only to go their own way. But when the saint tries to separate Mary and Martin, Martin pushes him away defiantly. The Saint persists. Martin strikes the can of holy water and sends it flying:

. . . It's a good right ourselves have to be sitting blind, hearing a soft wind turning round the little leaves of the spring and feeling the sun and we not tormenting our souls with the sight of grey days and the holy men, and the dirty feet is trampling the world. (III, 149)

With a warning to "keep off now the yelping lot of you or it's more than one maybe will get a bloody head from the welt of my stick," Mary and Martin leave as the rest go into the church for the wedding.

The Abbey Company performed The Well of the Saints for the first time on February 4, 1905. An unidentified newspaper review among the W. A. Henderson papers praises W. G. Fay and Frank Fay in the roles of Martin Doull and the Saint. W. G. Fay, "made the most of the part, frequently evoking laughter by his well pitched humor." Frank Fay played "with marked dignity. This actor's delivery was always clear and forcible, and he commands a perfect stage ease." The article praises the rest of the cast, generally, and observes that the audience "appeared to appreciate the play, and the author was called before the curtain for an ovation at the close of the last act."⁴ On the whole the newspapers themselves gave the play itself a chilly reception⁵ which was echoed by Joseph Holloway.

W. G. Fay also had reservations. He thought the characters were a bad tempered lot and that they would infect the audience with a similar malady. Moreover, the many lengthy speeches put a heavy burden on the actors:

They took a cruel lot of practice before we could get them spoken at a reasonably good pace and without at the same time losing the lovely lilt of the idiom.⁶

Fay was wrong about the audience but right about the speeches. They are both long and lovely. As such, they tell us two things about Synge's attitude toward the theatre for which he was writing. First, they indicate a growing, though cautious, confidence in the abilities of the Abbey actors, especially the Fay brothers and Sara Allgood, who took three of the five major parts in this play. (Sara played Molly Byrne.)

Second, they indicate a growing confidence in himself. We must not forget that Synge wrote The Well of the Saints and The Tinker's Wedding nearly simultaneously. Skelton has observed parallels and polarities between the two plays. In both plays, vagrants challenge and conquer, as it were, the Christian viewpoint. In each play, the representative of Christianity fails to understand the situation. One play has a young heroine (Sara Casey); the other an old one (Mary Doul). The Tinker's Wedding ends in a farce but not until after much savagery and wildness. The Well of the Saints ends in a manner approaching the "tragic and stoic."⁷ A stronger link between the two plays exists in their language. As he toned down the language of Mary Byrne, in The Tinker's Wedding, he was refining it. There is no doubt that the drafts of Mary's speeches are less pleasing to the ear than the final versions. As we read a draft we are less likely to smile than we are to wince. The flavor of the speech is strong but it is also bitter. As Synge revised, he removed the bitterness while keeping the strength. By the time he wrote Martin Doul's speeches, he did not have to work so hard. Revising less often, less extensively, he could put into Martin's mouth speeches which, contradicting W. G. Fay, were not bad tempered at all but which foreshadowed those of Christy Mahon. Compare these two speeches by Martin making love to Molly Byrne with two by Christy making love to Pegeen.

It is not, Molly, but with the good looks of yourself for if it's old I am maybe I've heard tell there are lands beyond in Cahir Iveraghig and the Reeks of Cork with warm sun in them, and fine light in the sky. And light's a grand thing for a man ever was blind, or a woman with a fine neck, and a skin on her the like of you, the way we'd have a right to go off this day till we'd have a fine life passing abroad through them towns of the south, and we telling stories, maybe, or singing songs at the fairs. . . . It'd be little wonder if a man near the like of you would be losing his mind. Put down your can now, and come along with myself, for I'm seeing you this day, seeing you maybe, the way no man has seen you

in the world. Let you come on now, I'm saying, to the lands of Iveragh and the Reeks of Cork, where you won't set down the width of your two feet and not be crushing fine flowers, and making sweet smells in the air. (III, 115, 117)

and

Starting from you, is it! I will not then, and when the airs is warming in four months or five, it's then yourself and me should be pacing Neifin in the dews of night, the times sweet smells do be rising, and you'd see a little shiny new moon maybe sinking on the hills. . . . Let you wait to hear me talking till we're astray in Erris when Good Friday's by, drinking a sup from a well, and making mighty kisses with our wetted mouths, or gaming in a gap of sunshine with yourself stretched back unto your necklace in the flowers of the earth. (IV, 147, 149)

These passages indicate the influence of Synge's desires for his audience. He wanted the audience to delight in the reality made wild by people like those he had known in Ireland. He wanted the audience to hear the language, strong and beautiful, spoken by Irishmen. He wanted this language to have humor, but not a malicious kind. He wanted it to delight not because it was dialect expressing stereotyped foibles, as stage Irish had done prior to Synge's time, but because it was warm, suggestive language expressing, better than the audience ever could, emotions common to every person.

As the struggle with his audience continued, Synge was mastering other limitations. The Abbey stage, for example, again exerted its simplifying influence. The directions call for two sets but each set is simple and easily convertible. The props required are few in number and easily moved. A comparison of the diagram with the opening directions of Act I reveals how little effort was required of the stage hands. The papier maché boulders and stones of the first act could easily be rearranged to suggest the intersecting path and roadway of the second act. The church doorway and forge doorway occupy the upper left hand corner of the stage so that merely reversing the flats changed the locale. The

bushes mentioned at the beginning of Act I and shifted to the gap in the wall in Act III could have conveniently found places around the well or door of the forge. W. G. Fay was a master of "fit ups"--as scenery was called in that day--and his hand, no doubt, is present in these simple settings. As with other settings, the center of the stage is left for the actors, displaying them with maximum effectiveness. On a stage as small as the Abbey's it would have entailed a great sacrifice of freedom of movement to stage plays in any other way. The Well of the Saints, too, had a larger cast than any of Synge's plays to this time, with seven speaking parts. All seven of these characters, plus supernumeraries, are frequently on stage simultaneously. The burden on the set designer could be relieved only by extremely simple "fit ups."

From The Tinker's Wedding, Synge also continued the method of composition which could be described as "panning for gold." Beginning a scene in one form, he expands it, adding dialog, action, and trying speeches in the mouths of different characters. From the accumulated ore, he culls the "nuggets," the words, phrases, and speeches which sound exactly right. Then he eliminates the dross, concentrating the nuggets in proportions harmonious with the matter and tone of the scene. A good example of this process can be found in an episode of Act I. Martin has just been led by the saint into the church to be cured of his blindness. Mary, still blind, "gropes halfway towards the door and kneels near the path." (III, 91) The rest of the characters form a group, stage right. This arrangement makes Mary the center of the audience's attention. Her posture, her condition, her hopes are presented strongly to the audience. The people, somewhat on the edge of our attention, begin to wonder about the consequences of this miracle.

TIMMY. God help him. . . . What will he be doing when he sees his wife this day? I'm thinking it was bad work we did when we let on she was fine-looking, and not a wrinkled wizened hag the way she is.

MAT SIMON. Why would he be vexed, and we after giving him great joy and pride, the time he was dark.

MOLLY BYRNE [sitting down in Mary Doul's seat and tidying her hair]. If it's vexed he is itself, he'll have other things now to think on as well as his wife, and what does any man care for a wife, when it's two weeks, or three, he is looking on her face?

MAT SIMON. That's the truth, now, Molly, and it's more joy dark Martin got from the lies we told of that hag is kneeling by the path, then your own man will get from you, day or night, and he living at your side.

MOLLY BYRNE [defiantly]. Let you not be talking, Mat Simon, for it's not yourself will be my man though you'd be crowing and singing fine songs if you'd that hope in you at all.

TIMMY [shocked, to Molly Byrne]. Let you not be raising your voice when the saint's above at his prayers. (III, 91-92)

These lines chorus what each person in the audience is wondering. They have intrinsic interest, too, however, because they emphasize Molly's desirability and self-possessed wilfulness. This latter trait makes her start a tiff. Synge lets worldly affairs intrude upon religious ones but not at the expense of what is dramatically and theatrically significant, namely, the impending miracle. This balance, though, was achieved only by expansion and reduction of the dialogue. In the first draft, Molly responded directly to Timmy's question as follows: "He'll have other things now to look at along with his wife." The following draft gives that line to Bride and expands it. A still later draft includes Mat Simon in repartee which produces a jibe from Molly: "It's not yourself will be my man, Mat Simon, though you'd sell heaven and earth, I'm thinking, in spite of the talk you have if you'd get me for the two." Mat replies and another draft brings in Timmy on top of Mat.

TIMMY. Hold your tongue, Mat Simon, Don't you know well when the saint comes out I'm going to ask him would he wed Molly with myself.

MOLLY. He'll be passing back I heard him say at the spring of the year and that would be a better time when you'll have a house thatched for me, and good bars on the door.

TIMMY. The spring would do surely, and that way you won't be eating your head off the whole of the winter when it's little there is to do and there's a great price on the meal. (III, 92)

Near the final version, Synge has Timmy separate Mat and Molly: "Let you not be raising your voice, Molly, while the saint's standing above, he'd not think it a seemly sounding thing maybe in a woman of your age."

Had Synge let all this material stand in the final version, the important dramatic effect could have been distorted, if not destroyed, namely, the anticipation of the cure and its consequences. In the drafts, the contest for Molly's hand becomes too important. When we remember that Sara Allgood played Molly, we can understand the danger of Synge's upstaging himself. But we notice, too, that even as Synge reduces Molly's disturbance to its proper proportion, he sifts out the best words and phrases. Speeches from early drafts unite with those from later ones. Synge refines and polishes them, attends to pace and rhythm. ("Some of the cuts are very unimportant," he wrote to his translator, Max Meyerfield, "and I merely made them because I thought the speeches spoke more lightly without the words I cut out."⁸) The scene acquires the "fully-flavored" quality for which Synge always strove. Of course, Synge never intended including all the draft material. But he learned, while composing The Tinker's Wedding, if not earlier, to provide enough raw material for a thorough sifting. This he conducted meticulously and in isolation from the hurly-burly of theatrical affairs. Professor Saddlemyer has said that Synge's plays were formed on the typewriter and not in the workshop of the theatre.⁹ This

makes Synge sound like a drudge and that impression is supported by observations of Joseph Holloway:

Mr. D. J. O'Donoghue . . . said he did not think [Synge] had much initiative or invention, and wrote very slowly and laboriously, going over and over his work again and again until he could recite it all. I noticed this trait when he conducts a rehearsal, that he has his lines off by heart and can give the cue when the actors require a word, without the aid of a prompt book.¹⁰

But neither of these writers seem to realize that the theatricality of Synge's language, the quality which makes it exciting and delightful to hear, could not be achieved in the midst of a hectic theatre, nor by committee decision. Synge knew it could not and so he escaped to Kingstown, to Wicklow, to the Great Blasket Island where, amid the sights, sounds, and smells of which his characters speak so wonderfully, he provided his audiences with words to capture and stimulate their imagination.

Even as Synge reined in Sara Allgood, he gave leeway to the comic talents of W. G. Fay. In a first act episode, Molly Byrne mocks and teases the wizened, grizzly Martin by giving him the Saint's can of holy water, his bell and dressing him in the Saint's old cloak.

MOLLY BYRNE [unfolding Saint's cloak]. Let you stand up now, Martin Doul, till I put his big cloak on you, the way we'd see how you'd look, and you a saint of the Almighty God.

MARTIN DOUL [rises, comes forward centre, a little diffidently]. I've heard the priests a power of times making great talk and praises of the beauty of the saints.

[Molly Byrne slips cloak round him.]

TIMMY [uneasily]. You'd have a right to be leaving him alone, Molly. What would the saint say if he seen you making game with his cloak?

MOLLY BYRNE [recklessly]. How would he see us, and he saying prayers in the wood? [She turns Martin Doul round.] Isn't that a fine holy looking saint, Timmy the smith? [Laughing foolishly.] There's a grand handsome fellow, Mary Doul, and if you seen him now, you'd be as proud, I'm thinking, as the archangels below, fell out with the Almighty God.

MARY DOUL [with quiet confidence going to Martin DouL and feeling his cloak]. It's proud we'll be this day, surely.

[Martin DouL is still ringing bell.]

MOLLY BYRNE [to Martin DouL]. Would you think well to be all your life walking round the like of that Martin DouL, and you bell ringing with the saints of God?

MARY DOUL [turning on her, fiercely]. How would he be bell-ringing with the saints of God and he wedded with myself?

MARTIN DOUL. It's the truth she's saying, and if bell-ringing is a fine life, yet I'm thinking, maybe, it's better I am wedded with the beautiful dark woman of Ballinatone.

MOLLY BYRNE [scornfully]. You're thinking that, God help you, but it's a little you know of her at all.

MARTIN DOUL. It's little surely, and I'm destroyed this day waiting to look upon her face.

TIMMY [awkwardly]. It's well you know the way she is, for the like of you do have great knowledge in the feeling of your hands.

MARTIN DOUL [still feeling the cloak]. We do maybe. Yet it's little I know of faces, or of fine beautiful cloaks, for it's few cloaks I've had my hand to, and few faces [plaintively], for the young girls is mighty shy, Timmy the smith, and it isn't much they heed me, though they do be saying I'm a handsome man.

MARY DOUL [mockingly, with good-humor]. Isn't it a queer thing the voice he puts on him, when you hear him talking of the skinny young-looking girls, and he married with a woman he's heard called the wonder of the western world?

TIMMY [pityingly]. The two of you will see a great wonder this day, and it's no lie. (III, 85-86)

Willie Fay must have done wonderful things with this scene. Even while his brother Frank, advocated restraint in acting, Willie was often in trouble for his "gagging," ad libbing for laughs. His slight body swathed in the cloak, dumbly ringing the bell, his face alternately expressing bewilderment, pride, suspicion, and excitement, he must have been truly a comic-pathetic figure, and a parody of every occupant of every niche in every Cathedral that ever was. Fay really wouldn't have had to do anything but his reputation leads us to believe that he added

a stroke or two of his own invention. Synge must have known that he would and perhaps even have planned for it because, in early drafts of the play, he put the cloak on Molly:

MOLLY [putting the cloak about her]. Stand up now Martin till I put his old cloak about you and we see what way you'd look you a holy saint.

MARTIN. Let you not be troubling me, when I'm waiting and puzzling for my sight.

MOLLY [putting it on herself, takes bell]. I'd make a fine saint Timmy, and isn't that the truth?

TIMMY. Oh, God help us, there'd be queer doings if the like of you went in among the holy men of God. . . . Oh, you're a right one, Molly, and it's no lie.

BRIDE [looking out R.]. There's the saint coming now on the selvage of the hill. (III, 84)

Synge might have changed the scene to avoid the unsavory connotations of Timmy's lines. Theatrically, that was not so great a sin as leaving dormant W. G. Fay's comic talents in a scene that cried out for their use. Sara Allgood, dressed in a cloak, was certainly not humorous; was, perhaps, slightly too suggestive of Cathleen ni Houlihan. But Willie Fay dressed up as a saint? That would be good for a few laughs. Synge knew it and he let W. G. Fay play "dress up" again as the playboy, Christy Mahon.

Finally, Synge did not neglect the talents of the other brother, Frank Fay, who played the wandering friar. The friar concludes the first act with a long blessing. In early drafts, this speech read, in part:

May the Lord who has given you sight send a little sense into your heads. You'll be strange maybe, a short while, and queer in your thoughts, and you looking on the world, and then you'll get used to seeing, and begin doing your work, and thanking God, and being happy in the light, and the hope of the day when your inner eyes will be opened as these eyes were opened to see the great glory of the Lord. What are we at all but blind men going forward to wake

up--the way I do be waking men with the holy water--when the time comes in the end? [He frees Martin and Mary.] (III, 100)

By opening night, Synge had given Fay a new speech. It was long; it contained a pleasing mixture of nature imagery and homiletics; it allowed Frank Fay, by reputation the best speaker of verse in Ireland, to have a long moment in the limelight with the "lovely lilt of Synge's idiom." Ensemble playing typified the Abbey acting style. The star system didn't afflict the company too strongly until after the Fays left and Sara Allgood was billed ahead of other actors. In 1905, the actors were still learning their crafts. What better way to learn than to listen to their only teacher deliver with beauty and facility, the language that had taken the rest of them such a cruel lot of practice to get right.

May the Lord who has given you sight send a little sense into your heads, the way it won't be on your two selves you'll be looking-- on two pitiful sinners of the earth--but on the splendour of the Spirit of God; you'll see an odd time shining out through the big hills, and steep streams falling to the sea. For if it's on the like of that you do be thinking, you'll not be minding the faces of men, but you'll be saying prayers and great praises, till you'll be living the way the great saints do be living with little but old sacks, and skin covering their bones. [To Timmy.] Leave him go now, you're seeing he's quiet again. [Timmy free Martin DouL.] And let you [Saint turns to Mary DouL] not be raising your voice, a bad thing in a woman, but let the lot of you, who have seen the power of the Lord, be thinking on it in the dark night, and be saying to yourselves it's great pity, and love he has, for the poor, starving people of Ireland. [He gathers his cloak about him.] And now the Lord send blessing to you all, for I am going on to Annagolan, where there is a deaf woman, and to Laragh where there are two men without sense, and to Glenassil where there are children, blind from their birth, and then I'm going to sleep this night in the bed of the holy Kevin, and to be praising God, and asking great blessing on you all. [He bends his head.]

• CURTAIN (III, 101)

FOOTNOTES

¹Skelton, p. 92.

²Synge, Collected Works, II, 56-57.

³Ibid., III, 265. Synge also attended the Professor's lectures at the Sorbonne in the Spring of 1895 and the Winter of 1896-1897.

⁴Henderson Papers, MS 1730. The reviewer and the newspaper are not identified.

⁵Green and Stephens, pp. 184-185.

⁶Ibid., p. 186.

⁷Skelton, p. 87.

⁸Letter to Meyerfield dated November 19, 1905, reprinted by Meyerfield in The Yale Review, XIII, No. 4 (July 1924), 702.

⁹Ann Saddlemyer in her introduction to the third volume of Synge's Collected Works, pp. xii-xiii.

¹⁰Holloway, pp. 71-72.

CHAPTER IX

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

Probably more words have been written about the Playboy than about all of Synge's other plays combined. I hope to keep the increase to a minimum.

The play received its first production at the Abbey Theatre on January 26, 1907, nearly two and a half years after Synge began sketches for it in an old notebook. Its reception is notorious. The Dublin audience would not swallow a tale of an Irish girl falling in love with a man who crowed about killing his father. They would not stomach the picture of an Irish community treating a confessed patricide as a celebrity. For several nights running, they spewed out upon the actors their revulsion at the language Synge required his actors to speak.

The biggest and most famous outburst came in the third act when a dejected Christy Mahon says to the Widow Quin, "It's Pegeen I'm seeking only, and what'd I care if you brought me a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself maybe, from this place to the eastern world." (IV, 167) Lady Gregory sent a wire to W. B. Yeats reporting the audience's reaction to this speech: "Audience broke up in disorder at the word shift."¹ This wire is the occasion for a small puzzle which introduces two of Synge's most vexing problems: the acceptability of his language to the audience and the tendency of the actors, especially W. G. Fay, to take liberties with a script.

The puzzle is this: was "shift" the actual word which caused the audience to break up in disorder? If it was, why is there no record of the audience breaking up in the second act when the Widow Quin uses the word "shift"? (" . . . for I'm above many's the day, odd times in great spirits, abroad in the sunshine, darning a stocking or stitching a shift . . ." (IV, 127) Perhaps there was a reaction from the audience but not a noteworthy one. Perhaps the noteworthy reaction can be accounted for by the change in context and the change in the gender of the speaker. Perhaps the word "shift" was not used at all in the third act. There are reasons for favoring the latter alternative. The final typescript of the play originally did not read ". . . standing in their shifts itself . . ."; it read ". . . standing stripped itself . . ." (IV, 166) and it is possible that a lively W. G. Fay, playing Christy, reverted to the typescript version. It may even be more than possible, in spite of Fay's story that he protested Synge's language in rehearsal. The actors and others tried to get Synge to make cuts but "that was his play, he said, and, barring one or two jots and tittles of bad language that he grudgingly consented to excise, it was the play with a great screwing up of courage we produced."²

"Jots and tittles" and "grudgingly" are not quite accurate. About fifty cuts of various lengths were probably made during rehearsal. (If they were made at other times, our estimation of Synge's sensitivity to his audience's state of mind must rise.) Fay has exaggerated and that causes doubt about what he actually said--"stripped" or "shifts." Three other incidents may give weight to the speculation that he said "stripped."

First, there was confusion about the use of bad language by another actor, Ambrose Power, who played old Mahon, Christy's father. On Tuesday night, January 29th, Arthur Griffiths, Synge's staunchest enemy among the journalists, accused old Mahon of referring to Christy as a

"scuttering lout." The phrase, in Dublin slang, had an indecent meaning. Power insisted in a letter to the papers that he used the word required by the text: "stuttering." (IV, 121) Second, Fay himself made at least one ad lib substitution in the speech in question. Instead of "drifts of chosen females," he said "Mayo Girls."³ Third, there is evidence that, earlier in the play, Fay had taken liberties with a piece of stage business. In the second act, Christy, wishing not to reveal his vanity to the girls who have come to admire him, hides a mirror behind his back. One of the girls, Sara Tansey, who was played by Fay's wife, Bridget O'Dempsey, discovers the glass and remarks "Well, I never seen to this day, a man with a looking glass held to his back. Them that kill their fathers is a vain lot, surely." (IV, 99) Synge's stage directions require no more than that Christy merely hide the mirror behind his back. Maurice Bourgeois reports that in performance there were objections to "Christy's coarse gesture when he places a looking glass behind his back."⁴

Years after, does it profit anyone to speculate about W. G. Fay's actual utterance on that historic night? The sources of these speculations, in two cases, are unfriendly to Synge and the point surely has little to do with the beauties of the play. However, the speculation is helpful if it reminds us of the limitations within which a playwright must work. Two of the severest confinements upon Synge's theatrical art derived from the language his audience would abide and the actors for whom he wrote that language.

Synge excised some phrases because of their political, social, or religious content. At least one cut he made for personal reasons. He was sensitive to Protestant, loyalist opinion as well as Catholic, nationalist. In two places, he cut references to Protestant institutions

and heroes. In act one, Jimmy, Philly, and Michael eagerly question the timid Christy about the nature of his crime. Jimmy raises bigamy as a possibility: "Did you marry three wives maybe? I'm told there's a sprinkling have done that among the holy Luthers of the preaching North." (IV, 71) In early drafts, Jimmy referred not to the "Luthers" but to "the Orange of the North." (IV, 70) As far as I have been able to discern, Orangemen are not, nor have they ever been, polygamous. The phrase, most likely, was not intended as a barb at Orangemen but as an example of the kind of myth a Catholic peasant carried about with him. Its sting arises, too, out of the truth that the Protestant dogma on marriage (if all Protestants may be lumped together) is more liberal than Catholic dogma. Whatever a man like Jimmy might think, the phrase refers to attitudes of Catholics and Protestants toward each other. Rather than intrude old passions into the play, Synge altered the line referring to a denomination little represented in Ireland.

In act three, Synge eliminated another reference liable to upset Protestants. Old Mahon cannot believe that the fellow being cheered toward the shebeen from the races is his son Christy. The Widow Quin, protecting Christy, encourages the old man to believe he's losing his mind. Mahon suspects that she is right: "It's maybe out of reason that man's himself. [Cheering again] There's none will go cheering him. Oh, I'm raving with a madness that would fright the world." (IV, 143) In the final typescript, the sentence did not stop here. Synge added: "and the curse of Cromwell and Judas on my crown today." (IV, 142) The words would not be unusual for a distressed Catholic peasant to utter. In Catholic Ireland, Oliver Cromwell's reputation is invidious. He dispossessed of their land the greater portion of Catholics. For this deed he is regarded admiringly to this day by Protestant lads and

lasses. The loyalists notwithstanding (who, by and large, ignored the Irish literary movement⁵) there may have been stronger objection to the mention of Judas' name on stage,

Religious taste is a parlous phenomenon for an artist to toy with in the best of times and lands. 1907 and Ireland were not the best. Synge's cutting of two brief references to religious matters increases the suspicion that the mention of Judas' name was as much a breach of decorum as the mention of Cromwell's. In act one, Pegeen hustles Shawn Keogh out the door rejecting his offer to stay the night at the shebeen.

You wouldn't stay when there was need for you, and let you step off nimble this time when there's none.

SHAWN. Didn't I say it was Father Reilly . . .

PEGEEN. Go on then to Father Reilly [in a jeering tone], and let him put you in the holy brotherhoods and leave that lad to me.

SHAWN. If I meet the Widow Quin . . .

PEGEEN. Go on, I'm saying, and don't be waking this place with your noise. [She hustles him out and bolts door.] That lad would wear the spirits from the saints of peace. (IV, 79)

In an early draft, around May, 1905, in reply to Shawn's interrupted "if I meet the Widow Quin," Pegeen does not reply as she does above. Rather, Synge had her say, scornfully: "Will you send me Satan's Ma." (IV, 73) The reference would have been shocking in any context. In this context it is contemptuous in the extreme when used against a weakling who earlier refused on religious grounds to keep company with Pegeen overnight. But there may have been more esthetic reasons for eliminating the reference. The delineation of Widow Quin's character was especially troublesome to Synge and he may have cut Pegeen's reference in order to avoid prejudicing the audience when she makes her first entrance shortly after this episode.

In the second act, another religious reference was altered because of the questionable taste of the context. Sara Tansey, one of the girls come to admire Christy, makes a toast to him and the Widow Quin: "There now. Drink a health to the wonders of the western world, the pirates, preachers, poteenmakers, with the jobbing jockies, parching peelers, and the juries fill their stomachs selling judgments of the English law."

(IV, 105) Until the first production, Synge required Sara to say "priests" for "preachers."¹⁴ The principle applied again in the third act when, in a late draft, Pegeen put "holy brotherhoods" in bad company. Fearing that Christy will leave her, she says: "It's a poor place we have only Christy Mahon for the like of you, a place of famine and of idiots and of holy brotherhoods, won't drink at all, the way it's another townland you'll be likely seeing maybe when the spring will come." Synge thought this reference unacceptable and revised the speech to a milder: ". . . for this would be a poor thatched place for the like of you." (IV, 149-150)

It wasn't only their neighbors whom Synge's Mayo people considered an odd lot. Dubliners received no greater respect. At the beginning of Act III, Jimmy and Philly discuss the consequences of the discovery of old Mahon's skull.

PHILLY. Supposing a man's digging spuds in that field with a long spade, and supposing he flings up the two halves of that skull, what'll be said then in the papers and the courts of law?

JIMMY. They'd say it was an old Dane, maybe, was drowned in the flood. [OLD MAHON comes in and sits down near door listening.] Did you never hear tell of the skulls they have in the city of Dublin, ranged out like blue jugs in a cabin of Connaught?

PHILLY. And you believe that? (IV, 133)

Until the middle of 1906, Philly spoke of the skulls in Dublin and Jimmy replied: "If that's the truth the Dublin people should be a low mad lot and its no lie. [Contemptuously] Looking on skulls." (IV, 132)

One other minor revision reflects Synge's sensitivity to political matters and to the personal lives of his collaborators. In an early version of the interrogation of Christy about the nature of his crime, Philly asks: "Maybe he went fighting for the Boers the like of Major MacBride, God shield him, who's afeard to put the tip of his nose into Ireland fearing he'd be hanged drawn, and quartered." (IV, 70) If the reference is to Sean McBride, the soldier who married Maud Gonne, Synge may have revised it to spare the feelings of W. B. Yeats. The poet was in love with Miss Gonne and was deeply distressed by her marriage to MacBride.⁶

All of the preceding revisions are minor. A writer risks losing his reader's attention by mentioning them. However, some of these cuts were probably made at or near the time of rehearsal and it is helpful to have them grouped for convenient access. Almost every writer on PW refers to the alterations made in obeisance to Dublin standards of taste and morality but their nature has remained a mystery to most scholars until Prof. Saddlemyer's edition of the plays. In that edition, they are buried amongst many other more strategic revisions. I have grouped a small number of these minor revisions to illustrate that practical matters such as religion, politics, Synge's relationship to the Dublin audience and to his fellow directors influenced his writing in detail. Perhaps, now, future students of Synge can learn more easily what kinds of references were considered liable to arouse the ire of a Dublin audience in the first decade of the century.

Among the strategic decisions made by Synge were some concerning the setting of the play. It has been noted frequently that in its earliest form, the Playboy opened in a garden and showed the fight between Old Mahon and Christy. It has not been noted, outside the Oxford

edition, that in later versions, the final act originally was set outside a chapel and then on a fair green. The direction for this latter opening reads: "Afternoon on sporting green; sports in progress; people in groups. Roulette man passes." (IV, 339) It is a sparse direction and a competent stage manager would do his best to recreate the excitement of a fair by the cunning use of scenery, light, sound, and movement of the actors. A large stage seems necessary to give the setting its proper proportions. The Abbey's stage was not ideal for this purpose. Especially disconcerting to a stage manager would be the requirement for "people in groups." On the Abbey stage, "people in groups" would have looked like one big group. Having too many people on stage reduces the director's power to emphasize character and action by blocking and arrangement of actors. For the achievement of some variety, such a setting requires an elaborate lighting scheme; the Abbey's lighting facilities were elementary. In short, the setting on the Abbey stage would diminish the director's ability to present a pleasing picture to the audience.

Synge composed these elaborate plans in the Fall of 1904 and the Spring and Summer of 1905. During that period, RS, SG, and WS were performed for the first times on the small new stage of the Abbey. Post hoc, ergo propter hoc is never an inherently valid argument. We can say only, then, that Synge probably changed PW into a one-set play because he learned the limitations of the Abbey stage. It would not support the Playboy on the scale he originally planned.

The audiences knew nothing of this ante facto theatrical adaptation. They witnessed the final scenic effect and judged it on its own merits; not on whether it was better or worse relative to others the playwright had tried. The audience's judgment of the actors was a different matter. By 1907, Dublin audiences knew very well what the Abbey

actors could do. They knew W. G. Fay was a comedian; that Frank Fay was, generally speaking, best in tragic, or at least, solemn roles; roles in which his beautiful speaking voice could be used well. They were also growing increasingly knowledgeable about an actress named Sara Allgood. She had supplanted Maire nic Shuibhlaigh as the company's leading actress because Willie and Frank Fay saw her as a versatile dramatic and vocal talent. Under their coaching, she developed facility in prose and poetry, comedy and tragedy. Prior to the Playboy she had played all of Synge's major women's roles, including Nora Burke (SG), Cathleen and Maurya (RS) and Mary Doul (WS). She was equally at home in Lady Gregory's farces, and Yeats' poetic dramas. In other words, a Dublin audience had a clear idea of the alternatives available to Synge so far as actors were concerned. They would know quickly whether an actor's proven talents were being displayed successfully; whether, to be blunt, they were receiving value for money.

A "wise" playwright, then, would court the audience's favor by giving them value for money, especially if the theatre for which he wrote fought an endless battle against small profits and high overhead. J. M. Synge was a "wise" playwright. If he did not stoop to give his audience merely what they wanted, he, at least, allowed the actors opportunities to display the talents which pleased the audience. In all the furor over the Playboy, much was overlooked which Abbey audiences had come to enjoy: Willie Fay's comedy, Frank Fay's voice; Sara Allgood's presence and range. In the Playboy, Synge gave these actors good opportunities to present their best side.

Willie Fay played Christy Mahon. It is not to be wondered at that nearly all the play's laughter is evoked by Christy. His story

comprises a rising action, not dissimilar to Tom Jones, for example, and stories like it. A young man, bereft of any background, fortune, or means of advancement, taking as reality a false situation, discovers, by his charm and the love of a fair lady, his true situation and rises to a position of power and influence. (A chief difference, of course, between Christy and Tom is that Tom gets the girl while Christy does not. Christy doesn't want her, either.) That kind of rising action is fraught with comic possibilities. Synge gave Fay several types of comic situation within which to display his inventiveness. There is the timid, gentle comedy of the first act when Pegeen and the others try, almost in vain, to learn the nature of his crime: We smile through the entirety of Philly and Jimmy's questioning. Their delighted curiosity strikes sparks off the bashful naïveté of Christy. It was Willie Fay's task to reveal the humor, not silliness or incredulity, in a character who could feel flattered at being accused of committing a big crime while insisting that he was "all times a decent lad." (IV, 69) The humor vanishes in an instant. It changes to shock, even horror. Christy's reluctance to name his sin makes Pegeen suspect that he is a phony:

You did nothing at all. A soft lad the like of you wouldn't slit the windpipe of a screeching sow.

CHRISTY [offended]. You're not speaking the truth.

PEGEEN [in mock rage]. Not speaking the truth, is it? Would you have me knock the head of you with the butt of the broom?

CHRISTY [twisting round on her with a sharp cry of horror]. Don't strike me. . . . I killed my poor father, Tuesday was a week, for doing the like of that. (IV, 71, 73)

The effect requires exquisite timing, perfect inflection, and a fine sense for the audience's state of mind at that moment. Willie Fay had developed these talents before hundreds of audiences during the touring days of his

Ormond Brothers Dramatic Society and his comedy combination. (See Chapter II.)

He was even more comfortable with broader comedy. Synge gave him opportunities in the Playboy. Synge knew that Fay's size was a source of humor. In WS he dressed up Fay in the Saint's cloak and let Molly Byrne and the others poke fun at him. As late as January, 1906, he included in the Playboy a scene in Act I in which Pegeen tries coats on Christy. One that is too large evokes comments from Pegeen on Christy's small size. (IV, 82) Prior to this scene Pegeen notices Christy's "little small feet." (IV, 79) In early notes for the play, Synge describes Christy as small, short, and dark, a description applicable to Willie Fay. (IV, 362) He probably eliminated the scene to avoid distracting the audience's attention from the growing love interest, which a plan from November, 1906, shows he wanted to be very strong. (IV, 296) But he did allow Fay to dress up in Shawn Keogh's wedding clothes and, in the third act, a colorful jockey's jersey and cap.⁷

Finally, Synge gave Fay plenty of chances for business. Even if Fay could have avoided indiscreet gestures with the mirror at the beginning of Act II, merely hiding the mirror from Sara Tansey and her friends must have allowed Fay plenty of scope for comic postures and expressions. Further study emphasizes the physically demanding nature of Christy's part. He must vigorously illustrate his fight to Sara and the girls; in Act III, he must start a fight with Shawn and chase him with a loy; in turn, he is knocked down by old Mahon who beats him. The ensuing scene contains much shoving, pushing, and threatening culminating in a mass exit led by old Mahon and (again) the loy-swinging Christy. As if this were not sufficiently lively, Synge caps the play with the famous scene in which Christy is hog-tied and branded, so to speak, by Pegeen.

These scenes demand a physically able and competent actor.

Willie Fay was the member of the company with the most experience in executing these stage directions. Synge's imagination, though, eventually outran even Fay's talents. An early draft requires of Christy an action at once difficult and dangerous. In Act II, after threatening to kick him out for flirting with girls, Pegeen lets Christy stay. He is elated:

CHRISTY [with a shriek of delight]. Well then glory be to praises be [sic] to God and the saints and the glory of Heaven and wasn't I a foolish fellow not to kill my father in the years gone by?

[Pegeen watching him with interest. He flings turf on the fire, and then runs across right and vaults up on the counter beside her and begins polishing glasses. He flings up a glass into the air and catches it again it is not quite empty and some dregs of porter fall over him.] (IV, 112)

The action is not one a playwright can expect even an excellent actor consistently to accomplish without injury to the set, the other actors, or himself. Synge cut it.

Christy Mahon makes an impact on the audience through his exuberant activity, flamboyant speech, and rising fortunes; the Widow Quin makes her presence felt through her placidity, her guarded words, and her certainty about who she is and what she wants. At the end of the play, Christy is on the make and Pegeen is lamenting the loss of "the only Playboy of the Western World." The Widow's view of Christy's plight is more practical. After the failure of her efforts to help Christy escape the wrath of the crowd dressed as a woman, she leaves, saying to Sara Tansey: "It's in the madhouse they should put him not in jail at all. We'll go by the back door to call the doctor and will save him so." (IV, 167) A draft from the fall of 1906 reveals a more philosophical attitude:

CHRISTY. I'm not going at all. I'll leave my chances to my one choice Pegeen Mike.

WIDOW QUIN. Then I'll not stop to see you sailing with your fool's romancing to your end today but I'll be going above to ask the Lord to pity all romancers in a heartless world. [She goes out quickly. Christy subsides in a dream.] (IV, 166)

The earlier speech is certainly more interesting than the later, final one. The contrast, though one of details, underlines a problem Synge had with the character of Widow Quin. How strong a character should she be and what should be her relationship with Christy? Synge saw these questions in light of "romantic" and "Rabelaisian" elements in the Widow's character. When the romantic element dominated, as it did in some drafts of the play, the Widow's sympathies were entirely with Christy. As late as the fall of 1906 Synge planned for the Widow to go off with both Christy and old Mahon and then just with old Mahon. When the Rabelaisian element dominated, the widow's attitude toward Christy becomes less compassionate and more practical. The shift can be expressed in other terms. The Widow ceases to be a foil for Pegeen and becomes more of a foil for Christy. She represents less of an alternative to Pegeen's love and more of an alternative to Christy's romantic and naive view of life.⁸

This crisis in characterization was resolved at the end of the second act. At this point in the play, Synge made revisions ensuring that the Widow's character would not be so strong as to overpower either that of Christy or Pegeen. In a process similar to the toning down of Mary Byrne's speeches in the Tinker's Wedding Synge toned down the romantic and Rabelaisian elements in speeches of the Widow Quin. In the final version of Act II, Christy fears that his father's sudden appearance will cause Pegeen to jilt him. He wonders "what I'll be doing now, I ask you, and I a kind of wonder was jilted by the heavens when a day was by." The Widow, a wonder herself, knows this feeling and offers advice:

You'll be doing like myself, I'm thinking, when I did destroy my man, for I'm above many's the day, odd times in great spirits, abroad in the sunshine, darning a stocking or stitching a shift, and odd times again looking out on the schooners, hookers, trawlers is sailing the sea, and I thinking on the gallant hairy fellows are drifting beyond, and myself long years living alone. (IV, 127)

In the Spring of 1905, the Widow was less of a motherly character basking in the memories of pleasures long past. In 1905, Synge had given the Widow sharper, angrier eyes for the fools of the world. She was less interested in sunshine and shifts and more interested in the character of the Irish.

And I do be thinking it's well for me to be sitting out there in the sun stitching a shift maybe or darning a sock, and I looking down on the glen and I saying to myself what big fools they are crawling round like vermin in a bag--all the people reaping, thatching, courting, sporting, dying itself--the people in this place is fearful for dying--and making great sporting on a Sunday the [way] you'd think they were fiery patriots and you knowing the whole while there isn't one of them wouldn't sell the whole of Ireland for 2 shillings. (IV, 126)

The final result of this revision was a more compliant, less dominating kind of woman who could use only mild words in an attempt to woo Christy.

I've nice jobs you could be doing, gathering shells to make a white wash for our hut within, building up a little goosehouse, or stretching a new skin on an old curagh I have, and if my hut is far from all sides, it's there you'll meet the wisest old men, I tell you, at the corner of my wheel, and it's there yourself and me will have great times whispering and hugging . . . (IV, 127)

After this speech, the young girls call for Christy to come out to the sports. In the final version, the Widow obligingly places herself at Christy's command: ". . . and what is it you'll have me tell them now?" (IV, 127) Christy begs for the Widow's help in winning Pegeen and she complies in return for a promise of future material consideration. But as late as three months before performance, Synge toyed with allowing her to speak in her earlier, sharper tone.

WIDOW QUIN [bitterly]. Wait now till you hear the great laugh there'll be when I tell your story to the lot of them that's coming now. There'll be sport now I'm telling you.

CHRISTY. Will you not have pity on me and you a woman is long years waking sleeping feasting fasting with your self alone?

WIDOW QUIN [coldly]. What good's my pity when you're a man I'm thinking is born lonesome to go lonesome to the bottom of the grave. (IV, 349)

Synge also tried the following version of the latter speech: "I'm thinking it's a hard world maybe for poetry fellows is the like of you are bred to win small pleasure from any two legged bitch for all knows them is born lonesome will go lonesome to the bog-pit of the grave." (IV, 349)

In the final version, the Widow is by no means a weak character. Yet Synge, at one time, planned an even stronger, harder Widow Quin. What prompted the change? Unquestionably, literary motives predominated. The character of the Widow had to harmonize with the other characters. The tone of the play was to be predominantly comic and one character too cynical would be out of key. I believe, however, that this consideration was reinforced by a theatrical factor. The widow was to be played by the company's best actress, Sara Allgood. Not only was it necessary to harmonize the Widow with the other characters, it was necessary to harmonize Sara Allgood's talent with the other actors'. There is every likelihood that Sara would have taken away the show entirely if the character of the widow had been written any more strongly than it was. We cannot, of course, re-create Sara in the role and make an absolute judgment. But one fact is sure. Sara was a better actress than her sister, Molly, who played Pegeen. Molly, we remember, was Synge's fiancee and the part of Pegeen was not only written for her, it is based upon her.⁹ The dimensions of the widow's character and Sara Allgood's talent cannot be divorced from Pegeen's character and Molly's talent.

It is a surprising fact that Pegeen's character caused Synge hardly any trouble at all. Experiences in Kerry and on the Great Blasket islands provided the inspiration for his heroine. After he fell in love with Molly in 1905, the succeeding drafts of the Playboy reveal remarkably little experimentation with Pegeen's character. We know from letters that Synge's concern for Molly's talent was great. He had been pleased by her acting in rehearsals of Lady Gregory's The Gaol Gate in the Fall of 1906 and she was praised in the papers, too, for that performance.¹⁰ There is every reason to believe, therefore, that he would be concerned about the effect on the play and audience of the ensemble playing of Sara and Molly. He certainly would have wished Molly to appear at her very best. Of the revisions available to us in the Oxford edition, only one reveals any serious alterations of Pegeen's role. They come at the very end of the play and they were made in November of 1906. Rehearsals were postponed and the premiere of the play was moved back to January so that Synge could make them. The change, though important, is simple. The Widow Quin was removed from the play's ending altogether, leaving the stage to old Mahon, Christy, and Pegeen.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹Greene and Stephens, p. 241.
- ²W. G. Fay and Catherine Carswell, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre (London, 1935), p. 213.
- ³Greene and Stephens, p. 240.
- ⁴Bourgeois, p. 201. Emphasis mine.
- ⁵Greene and Stephens, p. 240.
- ⁶Joseph Hone, W. B. Yeats, 1865-1939 (London, 1962), pp. 198-99; 222-23.
- ⁷For Synge's delight in this touch, see the chapter on "Actors."
- ⁸Cf. Synge, Works, p. 341, Saddlemyer's comment.
- ⁹Skelton, p. 102.
- ¹⁰Greene and Stephens, pp. 217 and 221.

CHAPTER X

DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS

We can make only tenuous conclusions about theatrical influences on this play. It never acquired a finished form under Synge's hand. His earliest notes and scenarios date from November of 1907, but at his death sixteen months later he was still revising, especially the second and third acts. Some of the revisions are interesting in light of theatrical requirements, but we cannot accept as substantial any conclusions about Synge's progress as a dramatist based upon them. We will never know what final form would have satisfied Synge. With respect to PW, we can say with a fair degree of certitude that Synge intended the Widow Quin's character to be less strong than it was in early drafts because we have a final version of the play composed by him, supervised through rehearsals by him, performed and published in his lifetime. In DS, though, what shall we say of the character of Owen, who did not begin to develop until the Autumn of 1908? There is no finished form of Owen to compare with the early versions. As he appeared on the Abbey stage in January of 1910, he was an amalgamated character, mostly of Synge's creation, but brought to life by Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Molly.¹ We can, at best, determine what kind of character Owen was in the drafts and project what might have been. But we cannot say that Synge would not have thrown Owen out of the play altogether. Such a decision, had Synge lived to make it, would certainly render worthless any comments

on the development of Owen's character and, almost certainly, would change assessments of Synge's development as a dramatist. Therefore, everything that follows must be accepted with an understanding of its speculative value.

In spite of this diffident beginning, there are a few aspects of this play which can be mentioned with certainty. The subject of the play, a familiar Irish legend, represents a profound change for Synge. All his other plays grew from events he had experienced and personalities he encountered. Deirdre grows out of literary experience, a legend passed down from poet to poet. It was already familiar to Synge's audience in dramatic form. Yeats and George Russell (AE) had written plays about Deirdre within ten years of Synge. While not excellent plays, those of Yeats and AE were well received by audiences and helped to establish the Abbey Theatre.

In the two years prior to beginning work on Deirdre, Synge occasionally expressed his belief that Yeats' and Lady Gregory's plays were performed more often than his own. He was defiant of critics during and after the Playboy controversy, but it was an unpleasant ordeal which only a fool would want to experience again. It is not an implausible conclusion that Synge's choice of a new subject was motivated, in part, by these very practical considerations. He wrote to Molly that he would write a play different from the Playboy: "I want to do something quiet and stately and restrained and I want you to act in it."²

His love for Molly and his desires for their mutual success were probably even greater influences on his choice of subject.³ He wanted to make a vehicle which would display her talents and, as we would say today, make her a star. He sensed that the Abbey Company, too,

was willing to encourage her prominence in a suitable play. In a letter dated 3 December 1907, he wrote to Molly:

I told Yeats the story of my Deirdre last night. He was very much pleased with it I think. He asked me to get the hour of your birth and date, I think he believes in you a great deal--we all do--I could say more that would please you but I had better not.
[Emphasis Synge's]

With Molly in mind, Deirdre's "quiet, stately, and restrained" character developed with little difficulty, as had the character of Pegeen. Comparing her to Synge's other heroines, Prof. Skelton accurately describes her as not "possessed by rage against morality." Deirdre, unlike Nora Burke, Sarah Casey, or Molly Byrne, is resigned to the passing of beauty and to her fate, which she learns by the end of Act I. Skelton argues that this resignation "blurs and softens the savagery of the tale."⁵ He also believes that "restraint and stateliness did not come easily to Synge as a writer. In attempting these qualities he excluded much from his play that might have increased both its vitality and tension."⁶ It is true that Deirdre's language soothes and deflects the ragged emotions of every other character in the play. This was Synge's design and the early drafts emphasize this fact in small ways and large. For example, in early notes, Synge planned a four-act play with the final act occurring in Conchubor's palace and not in Deirdre's tent. The death of Naisi and his brothers, Ainnle and Ardan, and of Deirdre would occur on a stage occupied by a throne and backed by three wide doors, which would be thrown open at the appropriate moment to reveal the grave of the sons of Usna. (IV, 258) In an early version of Act I, Synge made Deirdre quite imperious in her first meeting with Naisi and gave her an expressive prop and gesture

NAISI [transfixed with amazement]. And it is you who go around in the woods, making the hares bear a grudge against the Heavens for your lightness, and the thrushes for your voice singing?

DEIRDRE. It is I surely you have met with. [She strikes the silver rod of authority. OLD WOMAN and LAVARCHAM come to her bearing themselves as servants who have found their master.] Take Ainnle and Ardan . . . (IV, 206)

At the time of his death, however, he had dispensed with external aids to stateliness and expressed Deirdre's captivating power through her words and the words and actions of other characters. His most important experiment along these lines involved Ainnle, the brother of Naisi. In 1907 and in 1908, before he entered Elpis Nursing home for an operation on his neck, Synge strove to make Ainnle a more important character than he is in later versions of the play. The available early passages in which Ainnle appears stress his adoration of Deirdre and the uncommon loyalty which she inspires. In early versions of Act II, which gave Synge the most trouble in composition, he is a reflection of Deirdre's stateliness, her queenliness; he knows this, accepts it, and opposes the return to Emain Macha because it means losing the happy kind of life assured by her presence. A Second Act opening from November, 1907, reads:

DEIRDRE. It's a bright day Ainnle. You are going to the woods?

AINNLE. Do you know [what] day we are this day?

DEIRDRE. Three weeks after Samhain.

AINNLE. And what day is that?

DEIRDRE. Tell me.

AINNLE. It is this day seven years we found you on Slieve Fuadh.

DEIRDRE [counting for a moment on her fingers]. It is, Ainnle, seven years are gone forever.

AINNLE. There have been strange things done in Alban and strange things done in Ireland, but this is the strangest, Deirdre, that myself and Ardan should be well pleased and we living bachelors and servants for yourself and Naisi.

DEIRDRE [puzzled a little]. Aren't we well pleased together, surely?

AINNLE. It's that is the great wonder. And I am often asking what is in yourself to make us satisfied and we vagrants only though we have our sway and riches.

DEIRDRE [not very pleased with the subject]. You'd have a right to go maybe and take a wife from the King of Alban.

AINNLE. Find me the match of yourself Deirdre, and I'll go surely, and if I don't find your match, it's the way I'll be a lonesome old fellow till my day is done. (IV, 376-77)

In her own speeches, Deirdre expresses a dignified resignation to her own fate while requesting the deference due her as a queen. In the final version of Act II, she says to Lavarcham, without hope, "There's little power in oaths to stop what's coming, and little power in what I'd do Lavarcham, to change the story of Conchubor and Naisi and the things old men foretold." (IV, 216) When Owen speaks insolently, she reproves him with stateliness and restraint:

DEIRDRE. I've heard news of Fergus, what brought you from Ulster?

OWEN [who has been searching, finds a loaf and sits down eating greedily]. The full moon I'm thinking and it squeezing the crack in my skill. Was there ever a man crossed nine waves after a fool's wife and he not away in his head?

DEIRDRE [absently]. It should be a long time since you left Emain, where there's civility in speech with queens. (IV, 221)

She herself sees her resignation as a submission to a natural event. This attitude allows Naisi and Deirdre to speak of themselves not as souls victimized by a malevolent fate but as creatures taking their harmonious part in the expected events of the world. It is an attitude shared by all of Synge's major characters.

NAISI. Would you have us go to Emain, though if any ask the reason we do not know it, and we journeying as the thrushes come from the north, or young birds fly out on a dark sea?

DEIRDRE. There's reason all times for an end that's come. . . . And I'm well pleased, Naisi, we're going forward in the winter the time the sun has a low place, and the moon has her mastery in a dark sky, for it's you and I are well lodged our last day, where there is a light behind the clear trees, and the berries on the thorns are a red wall. (IV, 231)

These passages should make us pause at Skelton's assertion that stateliness and restraint did not come easily for Synge. Skelton forgets that no writing ever came easily for Synge, but that long before Deirdre there was Maurya in Riders to the Sea. In fact, there are two indications that Synge harked back to RS as he composed Deirdre. One early scenario plots the third act as follows:

III. At dawn after the death of the Sons of Usnach. Grave being dug left. Deirdre alone. Conor comes. Final summing up and death of Deirdre (Rider-like). (IV, 370)

A sketch from about the same time for the ending of the play recalled RS very strongly:

(He [Naisi] tears himself free and runs out, Deirdre falls senseless on the stage which grows dark. There is a cry behind. Then in the dim light a procession bringing the three bodies of the Sons of Usnach and putting them into the grave to a sustained keen of many. Then Deirdre drags herself to the head of the grave.) (IV, 256)

After working for some months with stateliness foremost in his mind, Synge realized that he was sacrificing other dramatic values. He searched for ways to increase vitality and tension. Skelton is premature in his judgment that Synge excluded dramatic material. Had Synge lived to complete DS, it would have been a lielier show than it now is. The problem lay, in part, in Synge's subject. In a letter to his publisher, John Quinn, he wrote of his fears that "saga" people might loosen his grip on reality:

These saga people, when one comes to deal with them, seem very remote . . . one does not know what they thought or what they ate or where they went to sleep, so one is apt to fall into rhetoric.⁷

The solution to this problem was partially structural. In January, 1908, Synge wrote to Molly of the method he used to heighten and sustain tensions and vitality in Act I.

I am working at Deirdre again--I can't keep away from her, till I get her right. I have changed the first half of the first act a good deal, by making Fergus go into the inner room instead of Conchubor, and giving C. an important scene with Lav[archam]. Then D. comes in and Lav. goes out and D. & C. have an important scene together. That--when it is done--will make the whole thing drama instead of narrative, and there will be a good contrast between the scenes of Deirdre and Conchubor, and Deirdre and Naisi. It is quite useless trying to rush it, I must take my time and let them all grow by degrees.⁸

Heightening contrast was not the complete answer, however. The best answer, as Synge always knew, lay in interesting characters and the drama that results from personalities in conflict. In time, growing by degrees, helped by as much "panning for gold" as Synge used with any other character, Fergus' messenger Owen developed. In early drafts Owen was a foil for Ainnle and Ardan, Deirdre's loyal admirers.

AINNLE. You did well refusing, Naisi. We will not go with Fergus.

OWEN. There's wisdom. Now Ardan double that.

ARDAN. Why would we go when we're well off in Alban, and there's no one is the match for Deirdre for keeping spirits in a company is far away by itself.

HOUSEBOYS. We'll stay with Deirdre always.

FERGUS. I'll be going forward for the turning tide, and it'll be a poor story I'll have to tell the kings in Emain.

NAISI. It will not Fergus. We are going back when the tide turns, I and Deirdre with your self.

OWEN [triumphantly]. Didn't I say in seven years the best were weary. (IV, 382)

We cannot say what spark of life caught Synge's fancy. But soon Owen began to grow, introducing a note of Synge--an "wildness" into the restrained and stately world of Naisi and Deirdre. He knew this spark must flourish for the play to be theatrically interesting. He knew, too, that Deirdre must confront this wildness. Owen's world is different from Deirdre's in at least two respects. First, for Owen, nature is not the bountiful guardian in whose gentle company Deirdre

has been living. Owen's world is harsh and hostile. Second, Owen's language, as we have already noted, is harsh, too; he speaks readily of unpleasant and even ugly matters. In the fall of 1908, Synge called the character Ewon and he confronted Deirdre as follows:

E. I've found [you] alone is it? And I after loafing around two weeks in the wet muck of the bogs till I've ague and asthma, and water in my guts. Have you a cake?

DEIRD. [gives him cake]. What brought you from Ulster?

E. The full moon squeezing the crack I have in the crown of my brain. Was there ever a man pewked out the inside of himself crossing the sea after a woman that wasn't away in his head? Answer that when you've given me something to drink.

DEIDRE. It should be a long while since you have been in Emain where there's civility in speech with queens--

E. It is long surely--three long weeks I've been singing to water hens and bull frogs below in the bog. I'm as cross as a weazel I tell you, and when the breath's short civility goes first--a gold and good rugs when there's storm at sea.

D. What is it you wish?

E. I['11] tell you when I'm full within. You're seven years with Naisi, and after seven you're tired of him as he of you both of each other--Stop your mouth--There was a queen in Tara had to go out on the road every day till she'd meet a stranger. Before that she thought [she] was cracked the same as me for when she looked in the glass she thought she was a great wonder, but her king couldn't see it and they three weeks married. And you're seven years (whistles)! Listen! Do you know why my father's not as mad as I am?

DEIDRE [shakes her head].

EWON. Because Naisi killed him. Now I'm come to see will you run off with me now you're tired of Naisi? (IV, 386)

Most importantly, from a theatrical point of view, this harshness is aimed directly at Deirdre. Unlike Ainnle, who burdened the second act with his endless reverence for Deirdre, Ewon reminds her in the strongest terms of the bitter fate time inflicts on lovers. When Deirdre refuses to leave Naisi for him, Ewon's language spares her no pain:

EWON. That'll be great sport for the two of you, getting flatter everyday. Naisi'll be growing a body on him like Conchubor and [thirsting?] and you'll be shrivelling up to a bit of a stick. It'll be great sport to look on yourself one day with your arms and your two legs, with a hoop in your back and your nose scraping your chin, and you thinking you'd small sport only in the time for sport.

D. That's strange talking for a man's in love.

EWON. I tell the truth there's shame and pity in my heart I tell you when I see your like wasting away it's a pitiful thing when any'd let life slip and its a little short space only. I'm cracked maybe, but I've a kind pitiful mind. There's Lavarcham coming again--Would you credit my father was sitting in a bed of grass and heather kissing that one under the ear, and the twilight coming and a little bird looking downward from the top of a tree. Would you believe that I ask you and he an old skeleton and she a scarecrow with two legs in place of one. (IV, 387)

Later in 1908 Synge began looking for ways to work Owen into the first act; shortly before his death, he tried Owen's death scene in the third act. In each effort, Owen's madness, his distress, rather than his placidity, as a result of his passion for Deirdre, is developed.⁹ Synge was not content to present only the heroic aspects of Deirdre's legend. He was determined to infiltrate the world of the "saga" people with at least one character from the world of Martin Doul and Christy Mahon.

What would Deirdre of the Sorrows have been like with a fully developed Owen present from beginning to end? We will never know. Synge did not leave behind him enough material to warrant the attempt by Lady Gregory, Yeats, and Molly. One wonders if the notion even occurred to them. Synge's intention to create a stately, restrained play certainly would have been upset. Owen's language and behavior could easily have touched off another round of criticism. Synge was aware of an irony in his writing a play with a legendary heroine. In the Irish legends, poets were honored. He had tried to bring his own poetic drama to the stage and was rewarded with scorn and scandal. The legends had

proven false. In November, 1907, he drafted an exchange between Fergus and Deirdre which ended with an ironic understatement:

DEIRDRE. What is one's own country Fergus but the place where we have peace and great possessions?

FERGUS [shocked]. I know no country in the whole world but Ireland that has the sweet skies in Autumn, and lonesome mornings with birds crying and great stillness in the woods. I know no country but Ireland where the great kings are poets and players on the harp and the poets are kings and princes; and where it is women like yourself Deirdre who rule the poets and the kings with them.

DEIRDRE [rising and going up the stage]. No one is ruler in Ireland but Conchubor only. (IV, 226)

Synge knew better than most that poets and players no longer ruled in Ireland. He deferred to the new rulers and cut the passage.

FOOTNOTES

¹Synge, Collected Works, IV, 367. At his death, Synge's last play was unfinished. It was put into playable form by Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Molly Allgood, working from the manuscripts. It is through their efforts that what is now considered the final version of Deirdre has come down to us.

²Skelton, p. 132.

³See the chapter on "Actors."

⁴Synge, Letters to Molly, p. 225.

⁵Skelton, p. 139,

⁶Ibid., p. 137

⁷Ann Saddlemyer, "Deirdre of the Sorrows: Literature First . . . Drama Afterwards," in Centenary Papers, ed. by Maurice Harmon (Dublin, 1972), p. 93.

⁸Synge, Letters to Molly, p. 237.

⁹Synge, Works, IV, 390-92.

CHAPTER XI

CONCLUSIONS

-Yes, indeed, the quaker librarian said. A most instructive discussion. Mr. Mulligan, I'll be bound, has his theory too of the play and of Shakespeare. All sides of life should be represented.

He smiled on all sides equally.

Buck Mulligan thought, puzzled.

-Shakespeare? he said. I seem to know the name.

A flying sunny smile rayed in his loose features.

-To be sure, he said, remembering brightly. The chap that writes like Synge.

Ulysses, James Joyce
Penguin edition, p. 198.

When I was seventeen, I attended a course in Modern Drama at a university in my home town. During a discussion of The Playboy of the Western World, the professor asserted that, had Synge lived long enough, he would have become the greatest playwright in the English language since Shakespeare. (I learned later that professors sometimes make statements to provoke discussion which they would not defend in a paper submitted to PMLA.) The notion that Synge was, or could have been, another Shakespeare, though, was bandied about during Synge's life, as comments from at least one contemporary critic show,¹ and as Buck Mulligan's irony also shows. In Dublin, in the first decade of the century, hopes were high. Synge did not want to be a second Shakespeare. He wanted to be the first J. M. Synge. Sometime in 1898, perhaps during or after his first visit to the Aran Islands, Synge wrote the following in a notebook:

The individual mood is often trivial, perverse, fleeting, (but the) national mood (is) broad, serious, provisionally permanent. Three distinctions (are) to be sought: each work of art must have been possible to only one man at one period and in one place. Although only two suffice to give us art of the first importance such as much of the Gothic architecture, folk songs and airs, Dutch paintings, etc., the great artist, as Rembrandt or Shakespeare, adds his personal distinction to a great distinction of time and place. (I, 349)

It has been the theme of this dissertation that part of Synge's locality was the theatre for which he wrote. The illustration of that theme has produced certain contributions and conclusions.

Synge's first claim to attention as an artist came because he wrote for the Irish Literary Theatre. A theatre movement without a theatre is merely a group of writers; and a theatre without a stage is merely a hall. Miss Horniman donated a stage to the movement but certain consequences of that fact have been obscured because data about the Abbey stage are hard to find. I know of only four sources mentioning the Abbey's physical dimensions. None of those sources is complete and only one is generally available.² Inclusion of the data in this dissertation widens the availability of these data somewhat and the completeness of the data has been greatly improved. Moreover, appendices A and B are the only diagrams I know about which display the dimensions and proportions of the Abbey auditorium and stage. The knowledge of these facts can only increase our admiration for the accomplishments of all those who wrote, produced, and acted in the Abbey Theatre. They created worlds in a little space.

Synge may have cursed the actors occasionally and thought some of them overpaid. As his letters to Molly show, however, he knew that the fault lay with the actors and not in the training they received from Frank and Willie Fay. Synge delighted in the Fay's devotion to beautiful speech even if Frank Fay's zeal sometimes made him indifferent

to the beauties of County Wicklow. The success of his plays owes much to the zeal of the brothers. For these reasons it was necessary to learn, as far as possible, what probably occurred during acting lessons and rehearsals at the Abbey. Like data about the stage, information about the methods of the Fays is not easy to find. This is probably the oddest omission in the scholarship of the Irish dramatic movement. Many words have been written about the Fays and the stirring results of their teaching. But very few words have been written about what the Fays actually did with an actor once they brought him into a rehearsal hall. Of the actors, only Maire nic Shuibhlaigh has written at length about the Abbey and her memories are neither complete nor systematic.³ Frank Fay's lecture to an English amateur theatre group, which forms a large part of the second chapter, is as close as the Fays ever came to a complete exposition of their technique. A more detailed picture must be pieced together from these and other documents and Chapter II represents an attempt to do so.

Perhaps more than any other method of acting propounded in this century, the Abbey style was based upon craft. The Fays stressed the restrained and practiced use of gesture, movement, clear enunciation, well-trained voices and other technical skills more than the psychology of acting. Abbey actors probably found it less necessary than modern actors to identify with or relate to their characters or to probe the psyches of their characters to find motivations for speech and action. That this was so is due, in part, to the training of the Fays themselves, and especially Willie, in the popular theatre of the day which often trafficked in stereotyped characters and which did not challenge the imagination either of the audience or the actor.⁴ Their attention to technique was due, also, to the inexperience of their actors. Each

one began without any skills at all, in any meaningful sense of the term. It was necessary to provide the actors with skills and, through that provision, to help them learn two facts about acting: Though the stage exists to represent life, it is different from life. What looks and sounds natural in life may look and sound unnatural on the stage or, worse, may not be seen or heard at all. It would be a mistake to assert that the Fays' methods were solely a product of history and circumstance. They knew of the work of Antoine whose "naturalness" on stage was a cause célèbre in the late nineteenth century. It was a style which ignored many acting conventions taught by the Fays. They knew of it and rejected it because they believed in the primacy, on stage, of the spoken word. The Fays worked hard to imbue their actors with that belief and Synge wrote his plays with confidence in its truth.

Synge also wrote amid a network of relationships with persons whose views about the purposes of the Abbey sometimes coincided with his and sometimes opposed them. These relationships influenced his writing, his method of composition, and, in one instance, his writing influenced a relationship: His plans for Deirdre of the Sorrows moved his assent to the Fays' severance so that the Abbey could retain J. M. Kerrigan, without whom Synge felt Deirdre was impossible.

Synge isolated himself from the theatre while he composed his plays. Willie Fay complained of this custom because it made producer's revisions difficult. That complaint reinforces the view that Synge's plays were formed on the typewriter and not in the theatre. It is a truthful view only in its most literal sense. Synge had to get away from the theatre. The great range of troubles, from the petty to the profound, quickly devoured his energies. None of these "troubles" was more vexing or more profound than his relationship with Annie F. Horniman.

Synge clashed with her on the question of the Abbey's artistic purposes and the distribution of power with the Abbey. She had little interest in Irish drama and she disliked the Fays and what they stood for. Synge upheld the Samhain principles and defended the Fays. Though he loathed the struggles of will which attend co-operative enterprises, especially, it seems, artistic ones, he did not shrink from fighting for his views as best he could. Masefield's memory of the cool, detached observer of life ought not to stand as the summation of Synge's personality. When important principles were threatened, Synge was prepared to defend them vigorously.

More than any other relationship, Synge's love of Molly raises the question of what might have been had he lived longer. Two of his plays were written with Molly in mind, Deirdre and Playboy. Probably more would have followed with Molly taking the leading roles. Synge envisioned a triumphant life with Molly in the theatres of Ireland, England, and Europe. Most certainly the possibilities of his future with Molly made Synge consider severing his relationship with the Abbey theatre altogether.

The incessant struggles and his future with Molly drew his hopes from the Abbey with greater speed than the disfavor of his audience. His hasty statement in response to a reporter's question that he did not "care a rap" for the audience's opinion of the Playboy probably expressed his attitude toward Dublin audiences more accurately than any he ever wrote. Synge did not write for the Joseph Holloways of the world, as did William Boyle. He never really expected the tramp, the fisherman, or the farmer of Ireland to like his plays either, though he would have accepted their praise or blame before that of many others. Synge wanted an audience acquainted with European art and literature. The desire is

evident not only in his comments about the Municipal Museum of Dublin but in smaller asides in other places. He wrote to Yeats ". . . we have seen so plainly that except in a few centres of culture our time is thrown away." He wrote to Molly that "too much touring in little Irish towns would be a dog's life for you and it would mean doing our unintellectual work, L. Gregory's etc., only." In an unpublished attack on the Gaelic League, he hoped for a new, young leader who would "sweep over the backside of the world to the uttermost limbo this credo of mouthing gibberish [i.e., speaking Gaelic]. . . . This young man will teach Ireland again that she is part of Europe, and teach Irishmen that they have wits to think, imaginations to work miracles, and souls to possess with sanity."⁵ Most illuminating is his change of opinion about starting a municipal theatre in Dublin. He opposed it in 1906 because he feared it would stifle creativity; he hoped for it in 1907 because it would give him and Molly new life "after the Abbey was buried" and because it would play "all the good plays of the day on a wide basis . . . including the Irish ones."

Synge was interested in writing for an audience that was intellectual, cultured, artistically sophisticated. He wanted those adjectives to apply to Dublin audiences and for that reason he praised Hugh Lane and the founding of the Dublin Museum. He felt no need to leave Ireland to write. He loved Ireland but he had no illusions about it. Perhaps that was the difference between the audience Synge wanted and the one he got.

In the preface to Playboy, Synge wrote that "all art is a collaboration."⁶ It happens that the theatre requires collaboration to fulfill its purposes. The influences studied here are the influences of theatrical collaborators. But they are not central; they are not the

sine qua non of artistic creation. The essential task of the dramatist is singular, even lonely. Life flowers in the work of other collaborators only after the playwright creates his vision of life. Synge's vision led him into a slow, arduous, lonely method of composition I have called "panning for gold." It meant the careful noting, expanding, shifting, substituting, juxtaposing, combining, and distilling of speech, action, and emotion. It required no collaboration except the kind Synge meant: a collaboration with life which provides material for the artist. In the preface to Playboy Synge told of eavesdropping on servant girls through chinks in the floor of an old Wicklow house. Whether or not he actually eavesdropped is not so important as the image of the artist listening to speech, observing action, feeling emotion which he then uses to create anew joy, sadness, illusion, and reality; to show ourselves to ourselves. Synge pleaded for reality, joy, and a kind of wild beauty on the stage. His collaborators were never entirely comfortable with his vision though they worked hard to transmit it. More than a little they shied from his "clean, windswept view of things," the reverberations of which Seamus Heaney has captured in his poem, "Synge on Aran."

Salt off the sea whets
 The blades of four winds.
 They peel acres
 of locked rock, pare down
 a rind of shrivelled ground;
 bull-noses are chiselled
 on cliffs.

Islanders too
 are for sculpting. Note
 the pointed scowl, the mouth
 carved as upturned anchor
 and the polished head
 full of drownings.

There
 he comes now, a hard pen
 scraping in his head;
 the nib filed on a salt wind
 and dipped in the keening sea.⁷

Unlike William Shakespeare, John Synge blotted and re-blotted many a line. With a "hard pen" Synge created his characters, situations, and language, and they have an illusionless quality. His major characters are forced to live without illusion and their speech expresses the pain and joy of seeing reality. That illusionless quality is Synge's own and the limitations of the stage, the talents and training of the actors, the problems of management and the struggle with the audience did little to put it into Synge's writing. This study shows, therefore, that the "external requirements" of the theatre tend to impinge only on practical matters of playwriting. The size of the stage, the physical and financial resources of the theatre tend to influence the settings of plays, and the manner in which they are depicted. The talent and training of the actors can influence the rhythm of lines, types of stage business, the importance of characters in a play, and, in rare instances, the choice of a subject. Management problems can influence the length of composition time and the degree to which composition is isolated or collaborative. An audience can influence the kind of language heard on a stage, the degree of openness with which a subject can be treated, and, in rare instances, whether or not a play will be performed at all. But upon the vision of life in a play, such influences seem to have little or no effect. A vision of life, its clarity and its truth, are the products of a writer's material and his imagination.

FOOTNOTES

¹P. P. Howe, John Millington Synge: A Critical Study (London, 1912).

²The one generally available source is the New York Times report of the burning of the old Abbey Theatre on July 18, 1951, p. 31, col. 4. The other newspaper article is in the W. A. Henderson papers in the National Library of Ireland. The letter, from Mr. Wilmot of the Abbey, to me, and the dissertation by Professor Saddlemyer, are cited in the bibliography.

³Miss May Craig, the last survivor of the original cast of the *Playboy*, died in Dublin in February of 1972. My efforts to obtain permission to examine Miss Craig's reportedly large collection of theatre memorabilia for material relating to the Fays' methods have gone unanswered.

⁴Frank Fay once wrote of the Irish audience at the Theatre Royal in Dublin in 1899: ". . . the majority of them seemed to be of the intensely uncritical and ignorant type, only too common in Dublin, the class who will madly applaud a singer or an instrumentalist no matter how much out of tune the former may sing or how wretchedly the latter may play, provided they finish with the conventional bluster . . . (they are) noisy and ill-behaved . . . scream with boorish laughter, when one of the characters in the play spoke a few words of Irish . . . (there is a) terrible lack of artistic feeling and refinement that is rapidly growing up in our midst." (Towards a National Theatre, pp. 20-21.)

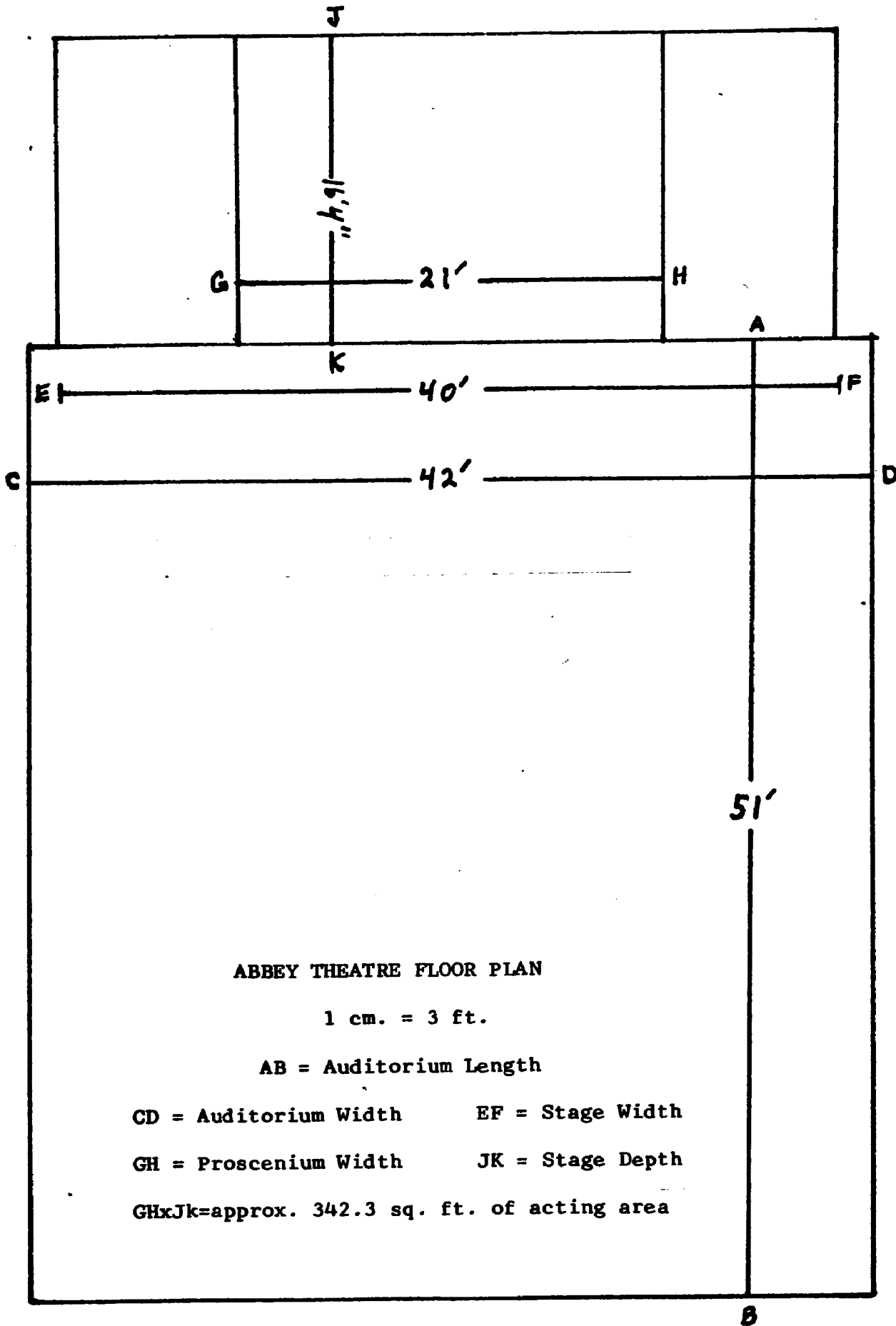
⁵Greene and Stephens, pp. 264-265. The other quotations appear in Chapter III.

⁶Synge, Collected Works, IV, 53.

⁷Seamus Heany, Death of a Naturalist (London, 1969).

APPENDIX A

A floor plan of the Abbey Theatre showing the relationship of the stage to the auditorium.



ABBAY THEATRE FLOOR PLAN

1 cm. = 3 ft.

AB = Auditorium Length

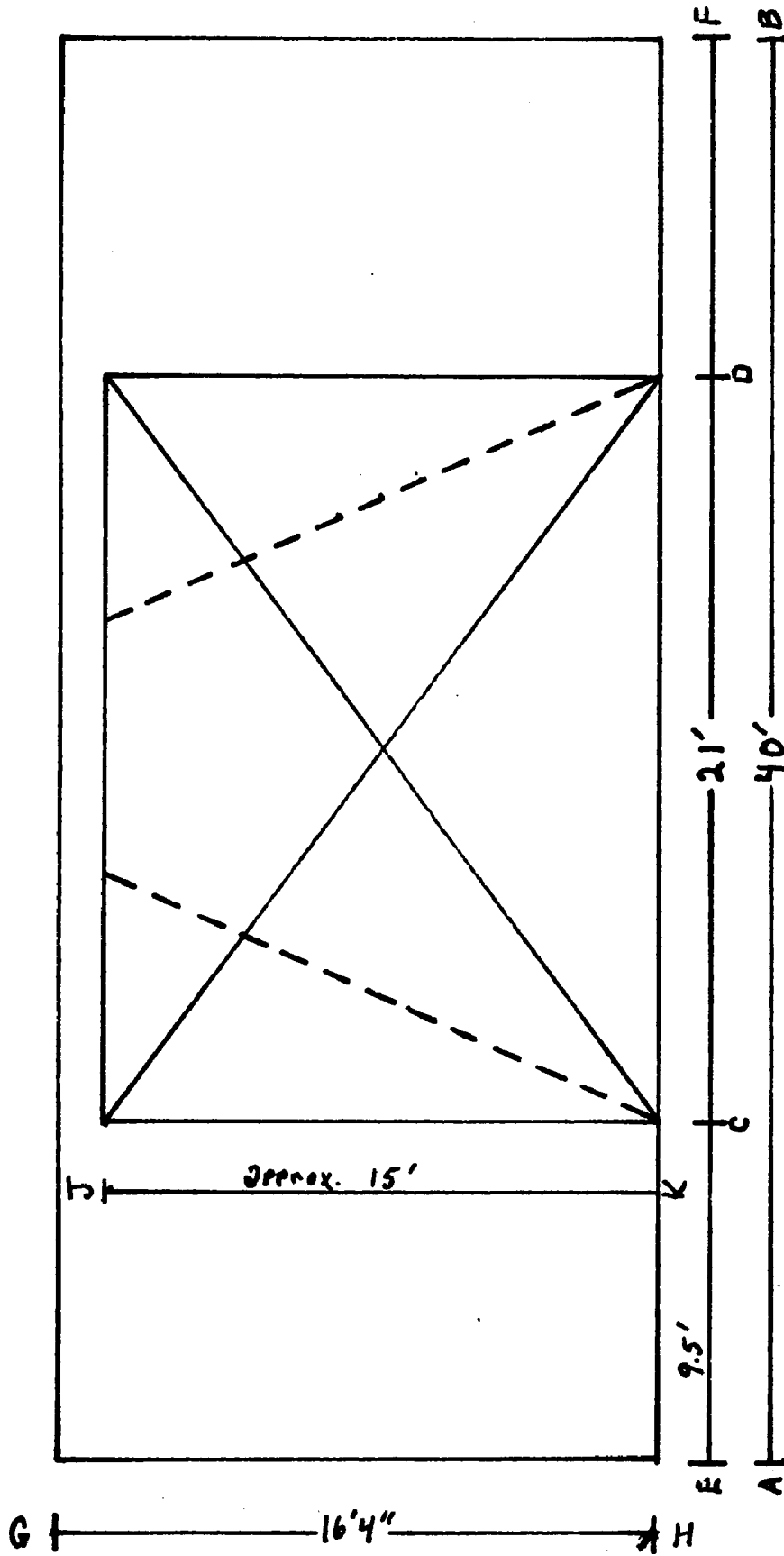
CD = Auditorium Width EF = Stage Width

GH = Proscenium Width JK = Stage Depth

GHxJk=approx. 342.3 sq. ft. of acting area

APPENDIX B

A floor plan showing the relationship of the total stage area to the effective acting area, including Sightlines.



ABBAY THEATRE STAGE PLAN

1 cm. = 2 ft.

AB = Stage Width; CD = Proscenium Width; EC and DF = Wings;
 GH = Stage Depth; JK = Effective Acting Depth as Remembered
 by W. G. Fay. Crossed Area Indicates Total Effective Acting
 Area, Including Sightlines.

APPENDIX C

**Photocopies of stageplots from promptbooks in the
W. G. Fay Papers in the National Library of Ireland.**

originally called "The Coming of Sheila"
originally "The Coming of Sheila"

THE BUILDING FUND

by

William Boyle

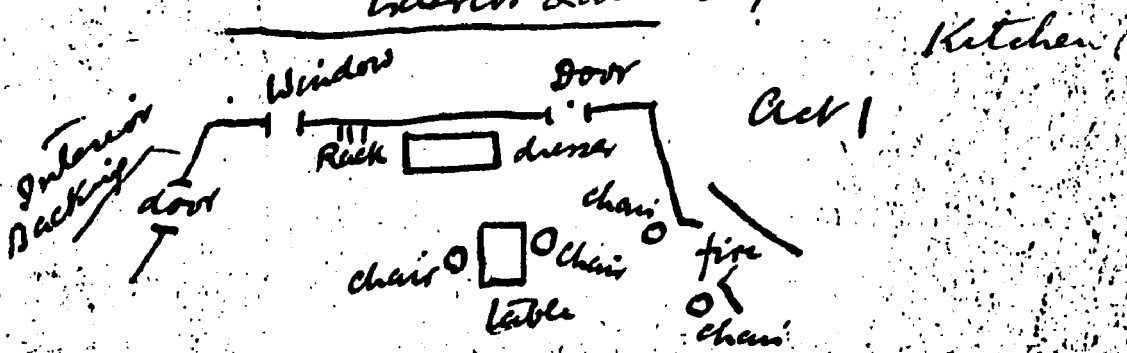
The Characters

- Mrs. Grogan (A miserly old woman)
 - Shan Grogan (Her son, another miser)
 - Sheila O'Dwyer (Her grand-daughter)
 - Michael O'Callaghan (An elderly farmer)
 - Dan MacSweeny (A young farmer)
- } Collecting for new Church Building Fund.

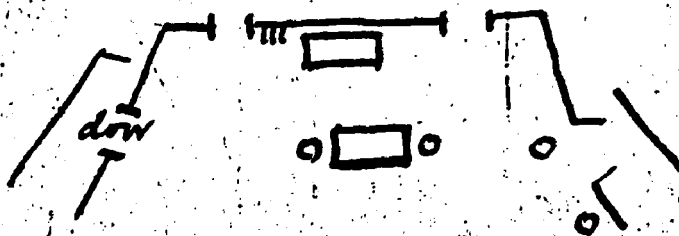
Time. The present.

Time of Representation, Minutes

Exterior Landscape



Acts 2+3. Repeat Act 1



FLAN. (To O'N.) What are we to do now, Brian ?

O'NEILL ^{↑(L)} Fight the issue at the poll; if we can find an honest man to stand against him.

FLAN. ^{↑(L.C)} We'll have no difficulty in that. (Dr. B. comes down)

DR. BUN. As a mere onlooker, anxious to avoid all violent expressions, I'm reluctantly compelled to tell you, Mr. Dempsey, you have acted like a ruffian.

DEMP. Oh, doctor ! after all I did to please you.

DR. BUN. You have made the town ridiculous.

CAPT. (Jocularly) With the eyes of the world riveted upon it.

DR. BUN. ^{↑ goes up R} McNamara come away. ^{↑ (Capt. rises)} You have his signature to the Address.

We'll present it, without minding the other thing at all. His absurdities are of no consequence whatever.

DEMP. Did you ever see such unreasonable people in your life, Catherine. They both forced me into this against my will, and after doing all I could to satisfy them, they are ten times worse on me than ever.

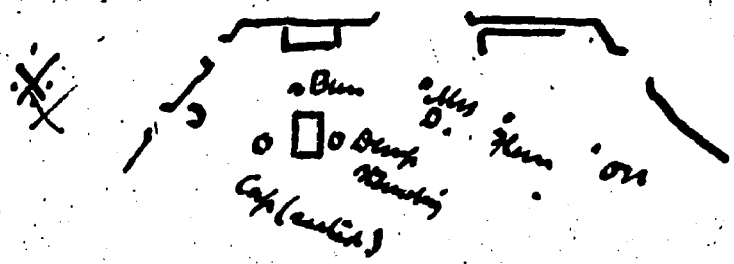
MRS. D. ^{↑ R of Flan.} (Smiling) Perhaps if you explain yourself they'll change their minds.

CAPT. By all means, Mr. Dempsey, let us have a speech. (sits R of table)

DEMP. (^{rising} ~~Standing on a chair~~) Gentlemen, Mrs. Dempsey's genius solves the difficulty.

DR. BUN. ^{↑ (Back of table)} Oh indeed ! (MRS. D. sits with arms folded, smiling)

DEMP. Yes, she is in my confidence, she understands my hidden springs and inner workings, and ventures to suggest, if I reveal them, your suspicions, doubt and hesitation will be instantly dispelled. ✕



PROPERTIES

Act 1 Easy chair

Stool

4 Chairs

Table

Sofa

Dressing gown

Cabinet

Knocker

Paper (Flanigan)

Letter in envelope (Mary K.)

Lamp

Curtains

Ink, pens, etc

Act 2

Chairs, stool, etc. as above

Lamp (lighted)

Knitting

Letter (on table)

Whiskey bottle, 2 Tumblers, 2 Bottles Lemonade

(Cabinet)

Pen, ink, blotting paper (Table)

Paper (Capt.)

Paper (Flanigan)

Spectacles (On Cabinet)

Dressing gown on sofa

Act 3

Chairs, stool, cabinet etc. as in Act 1

Pillow

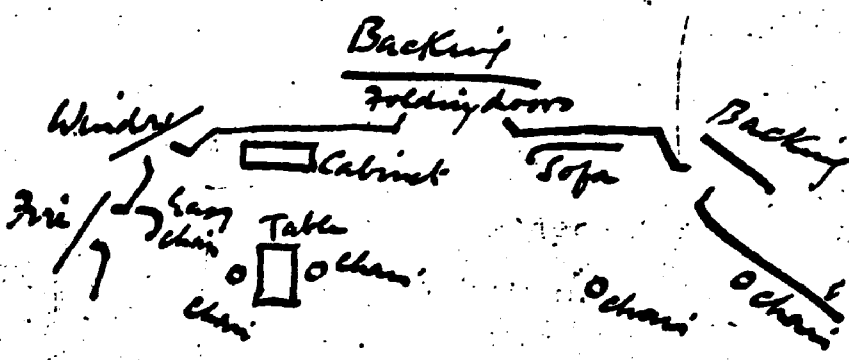
10 Letters

Dressing gown on chair L C, sleeves inside out.

Tweed coat

Paper (Bunbury)

Handkerchief



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