

Irish-language theatre: underground but still alive

The golden age of theatre in Irish may have been from 1950 to 1980 but the tradition is still vibrant if neglected, argues the author of a new history

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A scene from *Giolla an tSolais* by Máiréad Ní Ghráda. Photograph: James Hardiman Library, NUIG

Irish-language theatre has at times been on the fringes of Ireland's cultural landscape – invisible and underground. In 1903, the editors of *Banba* awarded their prize for a new play to *Muinntear Chillmhuire nó Bó i bPoll* (The people of Cillmhuire, or a cow in a hole) by Séamus Ó Dubhghaill (Beirt Fhear). They were not, however, sanguine about the prospects of ever seeing the work on stage, writing: “We will present the first volume of *Banba* again to anyone who will tell us how a wave can be set in motion on stage, how seven men can gather around a bog-hole there and pull a cow out of it with ropes and sacks, how the cow can be kept on the stage with water and mud flowing from her sides, how she can be driven from there to the byre, – how, – how, how will the play be put on the stage, that is what we want to know.”

With no real significant tradition of theatre in Irish to provide native models, those in the movement at the turn of the 20th century were often forced to put embarrassingly inept works on stage. One can, then, imagine how they welcomed the odd well-constructed piece by Douglas Hyde or Patrick Pearse.

Yet despite this unpromising start, there were soon Gaelic theatre companies like Na hAisteoirí and Na Cluicheoirí (both founded in 1913) at work, with the former eventually comprising the nucleus of An Comhar Drámaíochta, a group that brought full seasons of plays in Irish to Dublin audiences for two decades beginning in 1923.

Five years later the creation of Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe brought theatre in Irish to Galway on a regular basis. The existence of these two groups also fostered the emergence of new playwrights in Irish like Piaras Béaslaí, Gearóid Ó Lochlainn, and Séamus de Bhilmot. While none of these figures, nor any of their immediate contemporaries, were in any sense major playwrights, they were key transitional figures, clearing the way for successors with far greater claims on our interest.

The period from approximately 1950 to 1980 was arguably the golden age of theatre in Irish, not least because of the role played by Dublin's Damer Theatre and Cork's Compántas Chorcaí in sponsoring and providing audiences with adventurous new plays by talented and sophisticated playwrights.



A scene from Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's *Lá Fhéile Mhichil* (1963), a powerful historical play set during the Civil War. Photograph: DCC)

While Máiréad Ní Ghráda had her first little play produced as early as 1931, she did not really hit her stride until Tomás Mac Anna directed a series of her superb one-act plays as part of the regular evening fare at the Abbey. And it was at the Damer in 1964 that her *An Triail* electrified the Irish theatre world with its stark depiction of the hypocritical mistreatment of an unmarried mother who eventually kills her baby and then herself. The play is still regularly and successfully produced today.

Nor was she the only playwright whose work remains worthy of comparison with contemporary Irish plays written in English. Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's *Lá Fhéile Mhichil* (1963) is a powerful historical play set during the Civil War, while his *Fornocht do Chonac* (1979) challenges its audiences to come to grips with the violence that is part of the legacy of Pearse.

Seán Ó Tuama could write both superb history plays like *Moloney* and particularly *Gunna Cam agus Slabhra Óir* as well as realistic plays of contemporary Irish urban life, and comic extravaganzas influenced by the theatre of the absurd.

The prolific Críostóir Ó Floinn, whose *Cóta Bán Chríost* proved to be controversial in both its Irish and English versions in 1969 and 1967 respectively, has also made creative metatheatrical use of the Deirdre in a play like *Cad d'Imigh ar Fheidhlimidh?* and tried his own hand at the absurd in *Homo Sapiens* (1975).

The decline and eventual closing of the Damer in the late '70s, the absorption of Compántas Chorcaí by the Everyman Theatre, and the fluctuating fortunes of An Taibhdhearc have created real challenges for theatre in Irish. Nevertheless new companies have come into (and gone out of) existence, inspiring new work and, though less often, keeping plays from the repertoire alive on stage.

Perhaps the most notable of these companies have been Dublin's Amharclann de hÍde (1992-2001), Aisteoirí Bulfin (1967-), Galway's Fíbín Teo (2003-) and Belfast's Aisling Ghéar (1997-). Alas, the National Theatre has not lived up to its commitments to the language, despite the occasional fine production at the Peacock.

Even in this challenging atmosphere, playwrights have soldiered on, producing some of the very finest work ever seen on the Gaelic stage. One thinks here of Antoine Ó Flatharta, who has written incisively of life in the Gaeltacht in a demotic Irish that has raised more than a few hackles; of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, who draws on her training in folklore to enrich her plays; of Alan Titley whose riotously original imagination is better known from his novels; of the prolific Aodh Ó Domhnaill's work with Aisteoirí Bulfin; of the native speakers Micheál Ó Conghaile's and Joe Steve Ó Neachtain's bravely honest depictions of life in the Gaeltacht as it is actually lived today; of Darach Scolaí's pointed and hilarious comedies; of Celia de Fréine's challenging plays about Irish and world politics; or of Bidy Jenkinson's sharp and idiosyncratic take on the absurdities and injustices of contemporary life. And the list could go on.

All those mentioned above, living and dead, are fine and engaging writers – and dedicated ones as well, committed to keeping Irish alive on stage anywhere they can. Their plays deserve to be seen – not out of any sense of duty to the language and not just for a few performances (much less a single one) when first produced. Too many of them, however, will struggle to find an audience and some will sink into the oblivion that has always been the all too likely destination for the work of Gaelic playwrights.

Opening the 1967 Oireachtas Drama Festival in the new Peacock Theatre, Críostóir Ó Floinn made joking reference to the location of the Peacock beneath the Abbey Theatre, declaring: “It is fitting that the place we are gathering for this Festival is this underground catacomb.” A half-century later, that theatre is still very much a subterranean movement, but still the playwrights, directors, actors, and their allies soldier on. It is such dedication, as well as their sheer talent, that should ensure drama in Irish will survive, however precariously, into the new millennium.

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Irish Interior: Keeping Faith with the Past in Gaelic Prose, 1940-1951 (2010); and Writing Beyond the Revival: Facing the Future in Gaelic Prose, 1940-1951 (2011). This article is based on an extract from An Underground Theatre: Major Playwrights in the Irish Language 1930-80 by Philip O'Leary, published by UCD Press and available from www.ucdpress.ie