

## The Irish Language Theatre

BY RÓISÍN NÍ GHAIRBHÍ

**T**HIS WELL WRITTEN and meticulously researched book provides a critical study of five major Irish language playwrights, providing, *inter alia*, a critical history of Irish language theatre from 1930-1980, with a further contextualizing description of Irish language theatre before and after the period under discussion.

### Philip O'Leary.

AN UNDERGROUND THEATRE  
MAJOR PLAYWRIGHTS IN THE IRISH LANGUAGE  
1930-80.  
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN PRESS, 2017,  
€50 Hbk

The author's stated aim is to discuss the work of the five "most significant and influential Gaelic playwrights up to the year 1980." The lives and work of the chosen five dramatists: Máiréad Ní Ghráda (1896-1971); Séamus Ó Néill (1910-1981); Eoghan Ó Tuairisc (1919-1982); Seán Ó Tuama (1926-2006), and Críostóir Ó Floinn (b. 1928) provide the core of the book's focus. *An Underground Theatre* is the first major study of Gaelic Theatre with both a broad chronological remit and a sustained critical discussion. Some of the dramatists profiled (e.g. Ní Ghráda and Ó Tuairisc) have had general literary biographies written about them; others have not. Professor O'Leary's book has the dual advantage of focusing on these authors' dramatic works within the specific context of Gaelic drama and also of discussing all of the various authors in a way which shines

light on the major general issues of the era. New information is provided about all five dramatists. Some of the plays discussed will be of interest to sociologists and cultural historians as well as to those interested in the theatre or in literature. In all instances, Professor O'Leary's case studies will be essential resources for scholars wishing to engage with the various writers.

An additional aim of *An Underground Theatre* is to chart the reach and influence of Irish language theatre during the period in question. We learn of dramatic companies in Mullingar, Moycullen, Castlebar, Navan, Limerick, Tyrone, Antrim. Whatever happened to stem this creative momentum?

The author's judicious use of his own comprehensive reading of contemporary criticism helps to flesh out the story. O'Leary concludes that while Gaelic theatre may have been marginalized, the authors discussed produced works that are of considerable interest, and he draws the reader's attention to texts and contexts which he hopes will challenge contemporary audiences, dramatists and practitioners to engage with Gaelic theatre. In some cases, such as Ní Ghráda's "An Triail," the play is well known but even here there is fascinating new information. Who knew that the original production was reviewed in the Manchester *Guardian* and the British *Sunday Times*? Understandably, there are limits to the book's remit. The author did not have the opportunity to see most of the productions and this is a text-led discussion, where the impact and import of the mechanics of production (and of the

scripts' potential in production) are viewed mainly through the eyes of critics. The impact of the Northern Ireland Troubles on Irish language theatre (both North and South) also merits further sustained discussion. We have tantalizing glimpses here of what might have been when we hear (*inter alia*) of multiple companies which operated in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed "what if?" is a recurring motif of the book, and the author's great achievement is to have chronicled the unharnessed potential of a Gaelic language dramatic movement in a way which should spur practitioner readers (and those who fund and guide them) to greater ambition.

Overall, this is a ground-breaking work which addresses a major lack in Irish language literary criticism and cultural history with both scholarly rigor and some flair. The introduction and afterword provide a very useful context for the main body of the book and as annotated sketches of the state of Gaelic theatre they provide much new information on the earliest Irish language plays during the Revival period. They are rich resources in their own right, though there are some gaps. The one-line reference to Aisteoirí Bhréanainn belies the longevity and influence of this community theatre group whose productions, including translations of Molière, have made for an exemplary (and influential) regional company. Further exploration of the central role (and varying influence and importance) of the organization for amateur Irish language companies, An Comhlachas Náisiúnta Dramaíochta could have provided a comparative thread between the main body of

the book and this section. The wider social influence of such companies, including their sociolinguistic impact, would merit further consideration. Given that the aim of the afterword was to summarize and contextualize the main developments after the main period under consideration, this was always going to be a summary to whet the appetite.

Professor O'Leary is renowned for his magisterial surveys of Gaelic prose literature. As usual, this book is authoritative, nuanced and carefully annotated. The author's modest foreword understates the extent of the book's importance and of the author's achievement which extends beyond his own remit of discussing the dramatic works of the authors. Any of the case studies in the present book would be a substantial work of scholarship in its own right, and their publication together makes for a thought-provoking comparative survey. The author wears his erudition lightly, and his good humor and ability to summarize ideas in clear and often pithy statements make this work accessible for a wide range of readers. It builds on Pádraig Ó Siadhail's pioneering short history of Gaelic drama, on information provided in books such as the *Cambridge History of Irish Literature* (of which O'Leary was a co-editor), and fills out the story behind the plays cited in the recent on line database Playography na Gaeilge. *An Underground Theatre* is a major publication in what is an emerging field of critical studies in Gaelic drama.

—Roinn na Gaeilge,  
Mary Immaculate College, Limerick

## Contemporary Theatre in Cork

BY EAMONN JORDAN

**T**HE VOLUME OF SCHOLARSHIP written about Irish Studies and Irish theatre, in particular, has exploded over the past twenty or so years. Once, a small number of key playwrights received most of the attention, and as one would expect as a field of study establishes itself, critical analysis has started to move well beyond canonical figures and landmark performances, and scholarly approaches have evolved to become more and more disparate, and to have less and less in common with the foundational scholarship.

### Anne Etienne & Thierry Dubost, Editors

PERSPECTIVES ON CONTEMPORARY IRISH  
THEATRE: POPULATING THE STAGE  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2017. Hbk €103.99/  
E-BOOK €83.29

Through commissioning practices and assessments of readership/purchasing trends, an expanding list of publishers have played vital roles in how Irish theatre is interpreted, positioned and understood. In particular, Palgrave Macmillan has published an impressive catalogue of single authored work by the likes of Lisa Fitzpatrick, Miriam Haughton, Patrick Lonergan, Helen Lojek, Charlotte McIvor, Anthony Roche, Fintan Walsh, Brian Singleton, and Bernadette Sweeney to name but some. Such works offer an array of reading

strategies, from politics, sexualities, and gender to place, interculturalism and globalization. Palgrave Macmillan has also published a substantial number of landmark edited collections, ranging from Melissa Sihra's book on *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation* in the early 2000s to Donal E. Morse's more recent *Irish Theatre in Transition: From the late Nineteenth to the Early Twenty-first Century* in 2015. (I have just co-edited with Eric Weitz *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Irish Theatre* [2018].)

Anne Etienne and Thierry Dubost's new collection, covering the period from the 1980s to 2015, is not simply another addition to Palgrave's strategic commitment to Irish Theatre scholarship, but is also an innovative and distinctive publication, not least for the very Cork-centric nature of the publication.

The working practices and engagement with non-conventional, and "borrowed" performance sites by Pat Kiernan, artistic director of Corcadorca Theatre Company, Cork, is the subject of Etienne's considered and engaging essay on the off-site production of Ray Scannell's *Losing Steam* (2004). This production dramatizes the closure of the Ford manufacturing plant in Cork which was later followed by the shut-down of the Dunlop factory, large-scale closures that brought great social devastation to workforces and the broader community. Etienne's essay teases out the importance and merits of Corcadorca's site-

specific work and provides a good methodological template for those attempting to re-construct a performance with limited archival resources.

Etienne's essay is one of five in a Part III, categorized as dealing with political and societal reflection. Katarzyna Ojrzynska's strongly argued essay reflects on Blue Teapot Company's staging of Christian O'Reilly's *Sanctuary* (2012), a play about infantilization, surveillance, regulation, de-humanization, agency, activism, freedoms and rights (to intimacy and privacy) of those who have intellectual disabilities, and is a work which is performed by a troupe of actors with intellectual disabilities.

Virginie Roche-Tiengo's work points to how members of the clergy, not just priests, abused children and young adults in Industrial and Reformatory schools. This essay's main focus is the Abbey Theatre's "Darkest Corner" (2010), a response to the Ryan Report—the Report of Ireland's Commission to Inquiry into child Abuse (2009), and featured performances of Mary Raftery's *No Escape*, Mannix Flynn's *James X* and a rehearsed reading of Richard Johnson's *The Evidence I Shall Give*. Despite its analytic strengths, this essay tries to do too much in the space available. In addition, one then wonders why other work, very much along similar lines, is not considered, such as Frank McGuinness's *Innocence* or Brokentalker's *The Blue Boy*.

Patricia O'Beirne's evaluation of the importance of the formerly Dublin-based Glasshouse Productions and #WakingThe-

Feminists initiative/movement provides an analysis of data about the performance history of women's writing, how it is marginalized, discriminated against and frequently under-represented. Bernie's reflections on 1980s work by Dolores Walshe, Anne Le Marquand Hartigan, Patricia Burke-Brogan and Mary Elizabeth-Burke Kennedy is carefully argued, illustrating how such work is alert to and engaged with feminist theory and practice. Beirne effectively challenges the perception of a "limited interest" in writing by women (284). The data gathered invites only one conclusion, but for the picture to be even more comprehensive, there are multiple variables that could be gathered, such as the length of a performance run, nominations and awards garnered, subsequent production histories, whether or not work was published and/or translated into other languages, and the volume and extent of the critical reflection prompted by such plays. Work premiered outside Ireland by men and women also needs to be included, as should class-related markers. Funding provision for companies also needs more incisive attention, and in some ways, that is the elephant in the room.

The essay on queer sexualities and empowerment by Cormac O'Brien (a colleague) is impressively wide-ranging, and is written in light of and in response to the Irish Marriage Equality Referendum in 2015. O'Brien's coverage approach is far more in line with the expectations for this style of essay; work by Amy Conroy,