

A Tale of Four Pearses: Commemoration and Contemporary Irish Theatre

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During the build-up to the centenary of the Easter Rising in 2016, the Irish media reported upon, and helped to generate, a number of controversies about the planned commemorations. For example, in the wake of the Queen of England's visit to Ireland in 2011 – the first such by a British monarch in a century – commentators debated whether a member of the British royal family should be present at the GPO, which served as headquarters of the Rising, for the official Irish state event on Easter Sunday. Others argued about how to involve the grandchildren and relatives of the dead rebels, and disputed how to treat the revisionist opinions of figures such as the former Taoiseach John Bruton. Some criticised the launch of the government's commemorative programme at the GPO in November 2014, when the minute-and-a-half-long video that was made especially for that launch – a breezily corporate piece called 'Ireland Inspires' – featured the international rugby player Brian O'Driscoll scoring a try and other uplifting images of modern Ireland, but lacked any mention of the actual Easter Rising or any of its participants.

As Ireland prepared for its 'decade of commemoration,' Sean O'Casey's play about the 1916 Rising *The Plough and the Stars* repeatedly found itself at the heart of such controversies. For example, Senator David Norris made a significant intervention

into the long-running saga about the proposed relocation of Ireland's national theatre (the Abbey Theatre) when in 2009 he argued that the entire playhouse should be moved into the GPO by the centenary, an idea that gained traction within the government for a time. Norris wrote in the *Irish Times*: 'For me now the gloves are off. The idea is in play. Picture it! 2016 O'Connell Street. Easter Week – the Abbey Theatre reopening in the GPO with a revival of Seán O'Casey's great Dublin trilogy including *The Plough and the Stars*.'¹

In a separate brouhaha, in January 2014, the *Irish Times* made a Freedom-of-Information request to find out what had been said by a three-person panel that had been assessing the recent productions of the Abbey. The newspaper published unflattering extracts from those verdicts, accompanied by negative front-page comment. The assessors examined the Abbey's 2012 revival of *The Plough and the Stars*, and one declared: 'The acting was generally below a level I would have expected...Bluster replaced truthful emotion and the production seemed totally dislocated from the imperatives of its period...A long and wasted night...interminable.'² The Abbey director Fiach Mac Conghail justifiably labelled the leaking of these reports as 'cruel,' as a harsh view of O'Casey's 1916 play became front-page national news nearly two years after the performance.

¹ David Norris, 'Iconic Marriage of Yeats and Pearse in Abbey GPO', *Irish Times*, 15 October 2009, <<http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/iconic-marriage-of-yeats-and-pearse-in-abbey-gpo-1.757513>>.

² Fintan O'Toole, 'Abbey Confidential: Outside Experts Unimpressed by our National Theatre', *Irish Times*, 18 January 2014 <<http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/abbey-confidential-outside-experts-unimpressed-by-our-national-theatre-1.1658923>>.

Then, most famously, at the end of October 2015, the Abbey Theatre published details of the programme that would mark the centenary of the Easter Rising. In this commemorative year, the Abbey had included ten plays on the bill, but only one of them was written by a woman, and seven would be directed by men.³ The one female-authored piece was Ali White's play, *Me, Mollser*, effectively a single-hander inspired both by O'Casey and by Tim Crouch's recent dramas retelling Shakespeare's stories from the viewpoint of one particular character (*I, Peaseblossom* of 2006 and *I, Malvolio* of 2010). *Me, Mollser* therefore narrates the story of O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* from the perspective of the consumptive child Mollser, in a production that the Abbey toured to Irish schools. The fact that this show appeared to be happening well away from the main Abbey stage – although it did appear there on Easter Monday 2016 – gave the impression that women had been exiled from the national theatre at this important moment in the nation's history. Some complained that the author, Ali White, did not even appear to have been invited to the season launch.⁴ There followed an intense debate about the role of women in the arts in Ireland, about the leadership of the two best-funded Irish theatres in Ireland (Dublin's Abbey and Gate), and about the place of women in

³ By contrast, elsewhere in October 2015 the Royal Court theatre in London announced its sixtieth anniversary programme, in which eight of the thirteen plays (over 60%) were by female playwrights, and three of the five plays authored by men had female directors. 'Sixty Years New: The Royal Court Theatre Announces its 60th Year of Work, January 2016 to October 2016', 12 October 2015 <<https://royalcourttheatre.com/60-years-new-the-royal-court-theatre-announces-its-3/>>.

⁴ Chris McCormack, "'Them's the Breaks': Gender Imbalance and Irish Theatre", *Exeunt Magazine*, 4 November 2015 <<http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/thems-the-breaks-feminism-and-irish-theatre/>>.

Ireland more broadly.⁵

Such controversies reveal how the Irish theatre provides a touchstone for debates about Irish society and culture, and they also illustrate that O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars* has often provided the terrain on which public discussions have taken place. Indeed, hints of O’Casey’s legacy can be found even in performances that make no direct reference to him. For example, when the well-known broadcaster Pat Kenny presented his final episode of *The Late Late Show* in 2009, the comedian Pat Shortt joined Kenny on the special edition of the show, and performed a parodic poem called ‘Nineteen and sixteen.’ Shortt declared:

Back came the British officer, he says, ‘in the name of her royal majesty I
insist you must surrender.’

‘I like the queen, I like the queen’ says Pádraig Pearse, who we think might
have been a bender.

Then in came a Monto jezebel, she was selling her affection.

She says, ‘Ah, for two and six, I could do some tricks, that’ll give you boys
an insurrection.’

Then in through the gates swanned W.B. Yeats, he said, ‘It is my duty,

⁵ Fiach Mac Conghail, the artistic director of the Abbey, was widely criticised for his initially dismissive response to the ‘Waking the Feminists’ campaign, although he subsequently apologised for this. By the end of 2016, had stepped down from his post after twelve years, as had Michael Colgan, the artistic director of the Gate for thirty-three years. Disturbing allegations subsequently emerged in the Irish press about Colgan’s apparent bullying and sexism.

To tell you all things have utterly changed, it's a terrible fecking beauty.'

Then in came a fireman with a big hose, a little tramp came in behind him.

A man named Lee came selling tea, said Pádraig Pearse, 'Just ignore him.'

Then a circus clown jumped up and down, which I know you'll find surprising.

To see a circus clown jump up and down, in the middle of a fecking rising.⁶

Here Shortt was operating in the tradition established by O'Casey, of mocking the best-known leader of the rebellion, Patrick Pearse, and connecting the Rising with prostitution, subversive expressions of sexuality, and slapstick comedy. As with O'Casey's play, Shortt's version of 1916 includes an accretion of colourful comic detail and sidelines the political cause for which the rebels were actually fighting.

A similarly subversive take on the Rising was given in 2015 by the Limerick comedians, The Rubberbandits. Their television show, *The Rubberbandits Guide to 1916*, was first broadcast on New Years' Eve 2015, and was based on the premise that the president of Ireland asks the Rubberbandits (Mr Chrome and Blindboy Boatclub) to present an official history program about the Easter Rising. The Rubberbandits then decide to consult James Joyce about this:

⁶ *The Late Late Show*, RTÉ One, 29 May 2009, 9.30pm.

James Joyce: Okay okay, we'll teach you about Irish history if you get a big tattoo of Éamon De Valera on your back.

Mr Chrome: Oh man, I don't even like David Valera's music [...]

James Joyce: They'll never understand that the revolution was a working-class revolution. All you hear in the history books is the poet, the painter, the teacher, the lawyer, no working class men. That's a post-de-Valera narrative that's been sorted.

Blindboy Boatclub: So imagine, right, you're planning this giant rave, right, you're going to have the best warehouse, gonna have all your favorite drugs, gonna have security, loads of *beoirs* [women], lots of favourite tapes of music, Judge Jules, the lot [...] But then, the drugs don't come through, all the girls don't come through, the security doesn't come through. Nothing comes through. There's just a load of lads in a warehouse.

Mr Chrome: Man that sounds awful.

Blindboy Boatclub: That was the Rising.⁷

Here again, the Rising is deflated, associated with a kind of out-of-control intoxication. If O'Casey set part of his play in a pub, the Rubberbandits' updated reference describes music, drugs, and a rave. Once more, for comic purposes, the Rising is being connected with sexuality, just as O'Casey connected the participants of the Rising with the prostitute Rosie Redmond; and both O'Casey and the

⁷ *The Rubberbandits Guide to 1916*, 31 December 2015, RTÉ 2, 11pm.

Rubberbandits seek to place a working-class narrative at the heart of the historical events. Just as with O'Casey and Pat Shortt, the comic riff here contains problematic ideas about gender, tending to overlook the important female contribution to the Rising itself, and instead reducing certain women to erotic objects. Furthermore, just as O'Casey's play had kept the Abbey profitable during the late 1920s, so did *The Rubberbandits Guide to 1916* prove to be extremely popular: the television show was rebroadcast at midnight on Easter Monday 1916 on RTE 2, in the midst of the televised anniversary commemorations, and quickly became the second most-viewed programme on the online RTÉ player (only bested by the reverent 'Centenary' commemorative concert that was broadcast from the Bord Gais Theatre), revealing the Irish appetite for renderings of national history that might contain certain subversive elements. Thus, in a country that has continued to contest the meaning of the 1916 Rising, Irish drama has continued to play a significant part in provoking revised thinking about the event.

Since its original performance, O'Casey's *Plough* has proved to be a remarkably persistent fixture in the Irish cultural debate. As we have noted, although O'Casey's play first appeared onstage in 1926, the work has continued to resonate in recent debates. This chapter will therefore focus on four key Abbey-Theatre productions of the script: the Garry Hynes version of 1991, Ben Barnes's production of 2002, Wayne Jordan's staging in 2010, and the Sean Holmes' interpretation of 2016. I will examine the onstage realisation of the text, showing how these four versions of

O'Casey's work show Irish theatre-makers navigating a set of contemporary concerns, from historical revisionism, through the Celtic-Tiger boom, to the economic crash, and into the era when various kinds of abuse have been revealed. Shifts in performance style also reveal changes in thinking about theatrical form in Ireland, and help illuminate the role of the Irish national theatre during a period when other nearby national theatres have come to operate in profoundly different ways.

When O'Casey's *Plough* first appeared at the Abbey Theatre, the piece quickly achieved fame for causing a riot, as those associated with the dead men of 1916 entered the venue to protest that O'Casey's depiction of the Easter Rising looked unfair. The play remained consistently popular during the ensuing years, being revived by the Abbey for more than one hundred performances in each decade from the 1930s to the 1970s.⁸ Alan Brien feared that O'Casey was in danger of being 'relegated to the attic as an antique' at the start of the 1960s, but this prediction never came true, as the violence of the Troubles made O'Casey's play appear freshly pertinent.⁹ In 1966, shortly after the rebuilt Abbey Theatre opened its doors, the company performed *The Plough* for seven weeks, and in 1976 the Abbey staged a lavish golden-jubilee production of the play directed by the theatre's artistic director Tomás Mac Anna. He perceived that *The Plough* might speak to the contemporary situation in the North and gave Ulster accents to the Dublin Protestant characters,

⁸ I am grateful to Mairead Delaney for her assistance with navigating the Abbey Theatre Archives.

⁹ Brien, 'O'Casey for Today,' *Sunday Telegraph*, 7 October 1962, p.10.

which quickly became the theatrical norm despite well-reasoned objections from figures including Seamus Deane.¹⁰ There followed major revivals by the British National Theatre in 1977 and the Abbey in 1984.

Then, in 1991, the Abbey staged a new version of *The Plough* that Desmond Rushe, the drama critic for the *Irish Independent*, acclaimed as ‘the most revolutionary and controversial presentation ever seen of the theatre’s most performed masterpiece.’¹¹ This production was directed by a 38-year-old female director from the West of Ireland, Garry Hynes. Hynes had recently become artistic director of the theatre, and chose to begin her tenure with a version of O’Casey’s play that did away with much of what Abbey audiences had come to expect. Spectators saw no comfortably familiar Georgian tenements, no jolly music-hall turns. Instead, Hynes presented a stark, monochrome set; female actors with shaven heads; and, in the wheezing and jerking character of Mollser, a particularly disturbing vision of illness and impoverishment.

One of the best-known moments of the play comes in act two, when the words of Patrick Pearse are delivered offstage whilst the characters of the play listen from a

¹⁰ Deane argued that O’Casey offered an entirely false distinction between political engagement and domestic contentment, and so ‘it would be wrong, especially in present conditions, to take him as our paradigm of a dramatist who made political preoccupation central to his work.’ Deane, ‘Irish Politics and O’Casey’s Theatre’, *Threshold*, 24 (1973), 5-16 (pp.11-12).

¹¹ Rushe, ‘A Mould Breaking Debut of Courage’, *Irish Independent*, 8 May 1991, located in the Abbey Theatre Archives, Box 64, Reviews of *The Plough* 1991.

bar. O'Casey's original script specifies that '*Through the window is silhouetted the figure of a tall man who is speaking to the crowd.*'¹² This figure, although nameless in the play, delivers quotations that were drawn verbatim from three separate parts of the 1922 volume of Pearse's writings.¹³ In real life, Pearse had only delivered one of these sections of writing verbally, on 1 August 1915 at the grave of O'Donovan Rossa in Dublin's Glasnevin Cemetery, in front of thousands of uniformed nationalists and members of the Irish Citizen Army. Pearse wrote the other two pieces as newspaper articles rather than speeches.¹⁴ But O'Casey included these decontextualized extracts in his play, which were amongst the most bloodthirsty comments that Pearse ever set down. For instance, the first time that the orator in O'Casey's play speaks, the figure speaks the following lines from 'The Coming Revolution':

It is a glorious thing to see arms in the hands of Irishmen. We must accustom ourselves to the thought of arms, we must accustom ourselves to the sight of arms, we must accustom ourselves to the use of arms....Bloodshed is a cleansing and sanctifying thing, and the nation that regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood....There are many things more horrible than bloodshed, and slavery is one of them!¹⁵

¹² O'Casey, *The Complete Plays of Sean O'Casey*, 5 vols (London: Macmillan, 1984), I, 193.

¹³ Pearse, *Collected Works of Padraic H. Pearse: Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin: Maunsel, 1922), pp.133-38, 89-100, 213-18.

¹⁴ Pearse, 'The Coming Revolution', *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 8 November 1913, p.6 and [Pearse] 'Peace and the Gael', *The Spark*, December 1915, pp.1-2.

¹⁵ O'Casey, *The Complete Plays*, I, 193-94.

O'Casey himself felt deeply uneasy about recycling Pearse's words so selectively, and their inclusion did indeed anger spectators when the drama first appeared onstage in 1926.¹⁶ As we shall see, this moment retained its potential to continue arousing audience hostility six and a half decades after that premiere.

When the Abbey produced Hynes's version of the play in 1991, the Troubles in the North were well into their second decade, and had resulted in more than 3,000 deaths.¹⁷ Accordingly, in that same year, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Rising was celebrated mutedly with a low-budget ceremony at the GPO. After all, during the previous two decades revisionist historians had promoted the idea that the Rising, although often remembered as a brave battle against the oppression which underpinned the British empire, had actually served to undermine the work of constitutional nationalists who wanted to liberate Ireland, with the rebels promoting a lamentable set of ideas about bloodshed and slaughter.¹⁸ At the Abbey, then, Hynes opted to abandon O'Casey's stage directions at this point of the play in order to provoke a Brechtian moment of alienation. In Hynes's version of *The Plough*, the Pearse figure rose from a seated position amongst the audience members. Audience members could see themselves and the orator reflected back in an enormous onstage mirror, potentially asking spectators to contemplate how they might be implicated in

¹⁶ James Moran, *The Theatre of O'Casey* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp.55-56.

¹⁷ Malcolm Sutton, *An Index of Deaths from the Conflict in Ireland*, <<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/sutton/>>.

¹⁸ See Francis Shaw, 'The Canon of Irish History – A Challenge,' *Studies*, 242 (1972), 117-53.

the ideas being outlined. How might those who felt a sense of pride in 1916 feel when confronted with Hynes's frank depictions of violence, sexuality, and death? After all, Hynes included a brutally unambiguous moment when the nationalist Jack Clitheroe was shown to be responsible for his wife's miscarriage, and when Pearse's words were spoken, Hynes, quite literally, forced the audience to engage in a period of self-reflection.

Of course, this bold style attracted criticism. The playwright Hugh Leonard, for example, only watched the first half of the show but then wrote to the newspapers asserting Hynes had neglected the 'fun and passion' of the play.¹⁹ However, the production also won many admirers, became a box-office hit, and is generally remembered as a critical milestone in twentieth-century Irish drama. Indeed, Hynes's work offers compelling evidence for Christopher Murray's thesis that Irish drama holds the 'Mirror Up to Nation.'²⁰

By the time of the next staging of *The Plough* at the Abbey Theatre, the 1998 Good Friday agreement had been secured, and Irish society had been transformed by the 'Celtic Tiger' economic phenomenon. Although Ireland had been one of the poorest European countries when it joined the Common Market in 1973, from 1994 national

¹⁹ Leonard, 'Not While I'm Eating', *Sunday Independent*, 19 May 1991, p.3L. Hynes, "'The Plough' at the Abbey', *Irish Times*, 23 May 1991, p.11.

²⁰ Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

output grew by 8.6 per year, and Irish GDP overtook that of the UK by 1996.²¹

Books appeared with titles such as *The Celtic Tiger: Ireland's Continuing Economic Miracle* and *The End of Irish History?*²² In this climate, the Abbey staged a 2002 version of *The Plough*, directed by the theatre's artistic director Ben Barnes. This was a visually and aurally opulent version of O'Casey's play, from the impressive sound recordings of traditional Irish music that underscored the action to the projected flames that enveloped the stage at the conclusion. Barnes installed a new sound system for the production, and removed the front rows of seats from the main house, replacing them with tenement flotsam and jetsam. Of course, O'Casey had written his original play in a rage about the appalling poverty of Dublin's tenements, and so there was a certain irony in the Abbey Theatre spending a great deal of money on creating the illusion of poverty onstage. Even during those boom years, the city surrounding the Abbey was evidently affected by chronic inequality, with drug addiction and homelessness remaining particular blights. In this context, the luscious optics and exquisitely delivered sound-effects sat uneasily with O'Casey's playtext, as noted in the *Irish Times* by Fintan O'Toole, who had acted as literary adviser to Hynes eleven years earlier, and who commented, 'the play demands the texture of real poverty: hunger, disease, dirt. Here, everyone looks well-fed and well-dressed. Even the dwindling spectre of the consumptive Mollser (Laura Murphy) looks far

²¹ Dermot McAleese, 'The Celtic Tiger: Origins and Prospects,' *Policy Options Politiques* (2000), 46-47.

²² Paul Sweeney, *The Celtic Tiger: Ireland's Continuing Economic Miracle* (Dublin: Oak Tree, 1999). Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman, eds, *The End of Irish History? Critical Approaches to the Celtic Tiger* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

healthier than most supermodels.’²³ When the show travelled to London, the *Guardian* reviewer, Michael Billington, felt similarly bewildered by the fact that Bessie Burgess ‘is supposedly “hardened by toil and a little coarsened by drink,” [but] is inexplicably played by the beautiful Catherine Byrne.’²⁴ In a telling critique, Patrick Lonergan argued that the production actually had less to do with addressing the problems of contemporary Ireland, and more to do with aligning the theatre with a neoliberal economic agenda: ‘The use in *The Plough and the Stars* of a range of authenticating markers allowed the production to be branded as Irish, a status that made it recognizable to audiences throughout the world, facilitated international touring and enhancing access to the theatre for tourist visitors to Ireland.’²⁵

However, Barnes did recognise the expressionism of O’Casey’s play. Since the 1920s, the Abbey has struggled to reconcile the apparently realist O’Casey of the Dublin trilogy (which includes *The Plough*) with the later, more experimental work he produced from *The Silver Tassie* onwards. By contrast, Barnes (like Garry Hynes) realised that O’Casey’s early plays do not necessarily present a photographically accurate vision of Dublin, and so Barnes incorporated a series of non-realistic and abstract effects. Barnes opted to produce the famous pub scene of *The Plough* with the Pearsean orator not appearing on a human scale, but as a giant silhouette in the

²³ Fintan O’Toole, ‘Review: A Bit Too Well-Fed for this Rare Fare,’ *Irish Times*, 23 November 2002, <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/review-a-bit-too-well-fed-for-this-rare-fare-1.1127502>>.

²⁴ Michael Billington, ‘The Plough and the Stars,’ *Guardian*, 21 January 2005 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/jan/21/theatre1>>.

²⁵ Patrick Lonergan, *Theatre and Globalization: Irish Drama in the Celtic Tiger Era* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.71.

bar window, literally overshadowing the far smaller actors below, with a strident voice pre-recorded by actor Mark Lambert and then amplified in playback.

O’Casey’s script is scarcely generous to Pearse in any event, but in this version of the play, the giant image of the orator had an effect similar to that of fascist architecture, reminding spectators of the everyday individual’s smallness and powerlessness.

The Abbey revived Barnes’s version of *The Plough* in 2003, and brought it to London in 2005 as part of the theatre’s centenary programme. Despite the lavishness of the production, however, in the early 2000s the Abbey was, like O’Casey’s Boyle family, living beyond its means. Barnes’s production of *The Plough* has since been eclipsed by this legacy: he left the artistic directorship of the Abbey Theatre in 2005, with the theatre almost €4 million in debt, and requiring a three-year bailout of €26 million from the government.²⁶ The Abbey, in this regard, offered a premonition of what was about to happen to the entire country. In 2008, there occurred a nationwide financial crash resulting in:

one of the most dramatic and largest reversals in economic fortune ever experienced by an industrial country. Real GDP would fall by 3 per cent in 2008 and by an unprecedented 7 per cent in 2009. Unemployment would

²⁶ Michael Quinn, ‘Fiach MacConghail: “I’m More Interested in Long-Term Achievement than Short-Term Goals’’, *The Stage*, 22 September 2016
 <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/features/interviews/2016/fiach-mac-conghail-im-more-interested-in-long-term-achievement-than-short-term-goals/>>.

triple to almost 14 percent end-2010 and net emigration – thought to have been banished – would restart on a very sizable scale. The Irish banking system would undergo a near collapse, necessitating a bailout, first via a comprehensive government guarantee in 2008, and later, by way of massive capital injections to be paid for by tax payers.²⁷

The next production of *The Plough* at the Abbey therefore opened in more straightened circumstances during 2010 (and was revived for a UK and Irish tour in 2012). This version was directed by the young Dublin-born director Wayne Jordan, and, in its first iteration, contained a stand-out performance from Denise Gough as Nora. But now O’Casey’s play looked very different from the slick and glossy version of 2003. At the start of Jordan’s interpretation, the audience was confronted with a stage of broken and rusted metal girders: the set looked something like a half-abandoned construction site, a reminder of many aspirations that had disappeared with the recent property collapse. The rest of the ghost-estate-style scenery was provided by crumpled and faded curtains, on which were printed images of the poverty-stricken Dublin tenements as well as the ruined headquarters of the Easter Rising. If the audience had missed the contemporary resonances, the theatre’s artistic director Fiach Mac Conghail made sure to underscore the point, writing in the playhouse’s brochure that O’Casey’s work ‘allows Irish theatre artists to comment on

²⁷ Donal Donovan and Antoin E. Murphy, *The Fall of the Celtic Tiger* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.2.

society,’ and the production appeared as part of the same season that saw the celebrity economist David McWilliams diagnosing the country’s flaws in a one-man show.²⁸ Jordan’s direction of *The Plough* thus formed part of a wider attempt to show that the national theatre stage might remain an appropriate platform from which to address widespread public anxieties.

When the orator appeared in act two of *The Plough* in 2010, Jordan changed the stage directions so that the actor strode onto the stage itself, where the bar itself doubled as the speaker’s platform. The orator’s stance – drawing back his coat to reveal his gun – literalised the words being spoken and gave a vivid reminder of the bloodshed involved in the Irish revolution. And in Jordan’s version, as this orator spoke, a massive Irish tricolour hung over his head in a faded and tattered condition. Whatever Pearse’s hopes for a free Ireland, the flag indicated that such dreams might result in disappointment: Jordan potentially encouraged the audience to consider what exactly Ireland had done with the freedom gained through the revolutionary period. After all, shortly after this production opened, the *Irish Times* famously posed the Yeatsian question ‘Was it for this?’ and pondered ‘whether this is what the men of 1916 died for: a bailout from the German chancellor with a few shillings of sympathy from the British chancellor on the side.’²⁹

²⁸ Fiach Mac Conghail, *April-September 2010 Abbey Theatre Programme* (Dublin: Abbey Theatre, 2010), p.5.

²⁹ ‘Was It For This?’, *Irish Times*, 18 November 2010 < <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/was-it-for-this-1.678424>>.

Hot on the heels of Wayne Jordan's version of O'Casey's play, the Abbey Theatre staged another new version of *The Plough* during the 2016 centenary of the Easter Rising. This time the production was directed by Sean Holmes, the artistic director of the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. The production again toured, in Ireland and the US, and in 2018 appeared at London's Lyric and Dublin's Gaiety theatres. The Abbey therefore designed the set to be readily reassembled in an array of different venues, self-consciously drawing attention to the provisional nature of the setting. A stark scaffolding tower dominated the stage, giving the impression that most of the action was taking place around the bottom of a tower block, with the scaffolding collapsing – in what was perhaps an echo of the 2001 destruction of the World Trade Center in New York – onto its side for the final act.

In the build-up to this production, Ireland had been wracked by a series of reports about abuse in church and state-run institutions. In 2005, the Ferns report revealed one hundred allegations of abuse of children by an assortment of priests during the previous four decades. The Ryan report of 2009 showed that rape and sexual abuse were 'endemic' in industrial schools attended by 30,000 children between the 1930s and 1990s. Similar horrors emerged from the Dublin Archdiocese report in November 2009 and the Cloyne report of 2011. Soon after, allegations came to prominence in 2014 about the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home at Tuam, a maternity 'home' for single mothers and their children. The institution had been in operation between the 1920s and 1960s, and it was now reported that up to 800

children had been buried in a mass grave on the site. The Easter Rising may have been launched with the professed aim of ‘cherishing all the children of the nation equally,’ but the independent Irish state that the rebellion had helped usher into existence had manifestly failed in its basic duty of care for some of its most vulnerable citizens.

In this context, the Abbey Theatre’s 2016 production of *The Plough* made Mollser central to the drama, a character who ‘*is about fifteen, but looks to be only about ten, for the ravages of consumption have shrivelled her up.*’³⁰ This child only speaks fourteen sentences in O’Casey’s original playtext, and is usually seen onstage for a very small proportion of the play. But in Sean Holmes’s version, there was only a very brief interlude when either the actor playing Mollser, or the coffin containing her remains and adorned with her clothing, was *not* present on the stage. Mollser began the entire drama by standing alone, dressed in red sneakers and a red Manchester United shirt, singing the national anthem. During the run, many spectators stood and joined in with the anthem at this point. But the singing ended with an explosion of coughing from Mollser, who appeared to retch blood from her mouth into her handkerchief.

The actor playing Mollser then stayed onstage for the entire first half of the play, remaining visible during the second-act bar-room scene during which the Pearsean

³⁰ O’Casey, *Complete Plays*, I, 190.

orator appears. Usually Mollser is absent at the time when Pearse's words are spoken: O'Casey's original script does not situate her in this part of the play. But in the Abbey's 2016 version of the play she remained observable throughout that scene, playing a computer game, seated on the sofa bed upon which Jack and Nora had recently been intimate. The Pearse-style orator then intruded into this domestic space, as well as into the part of the stage demarcated as the bar, but this time his words and image were shown on a television screen rather than delivered directly by an actor. Here then, the theatre illustrated something of Guy Debord's idea of representation replacing authentic social life: as Debord puts it, 'Spectators are linked only by a one-way relationship to the very center that maintains their isolation from each other [...] The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life.'³¹ In Holmes's production, the consumptive Mollser was dying, yet had been abandoned alone to her computer games, with human contact for the child reduced to the flickering image of the television screen. Meanwhile, also visible in the pub was Mrs. Gogan, who had brought her baby into the bar, started a fight, and then left without the infant, provoking panic among the men who were left with it. In O'Casey's script, the barman declares, 'Take it up, man, an' run out afther her with it, before she's gone too far. You're not goin' to leave th' bloody thing here, are you?.'³² But Sean Holmes's production of the play reminded spectators of the other 'bloody' child who

³¹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson Smith (New York: Zone, 1995), p.22, p.29.

³² Sean O'Casey, *Complete Plays*, I, 206-207.

had been abandoned, Mrs Gogan's older child Mollser, who was left at home after having spewed blood over herself at the start of the performance. And these two 'bloody' children offered an ironic counterpoint to the television orator who claimed, in the words of Patrick Pearse, that 'Bloodshed is a cleansing and sanctifying thing.'

Of course, these different versions of *The Plough* have scarcely been happening in a vacuum, and audiences as well as reviewers have been able to compare the Abbey's versions with productions of O'Casey's work that have been staged at different playhouses by other high-profile directors. In 1991, for example, the Abbey's production of the play was onstage during the same year as a production by Sam Mendes at London's Old Vic Theatre. In summer 2010, audiences in Dublin were able to compare Wayne Jordan's Abbey production with a touring production of Garry Hynes's Druid version of O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie*, which arrived at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin for five nights at the same time as the Abbey show. And in 2016, whilst the Abbey produced Sean Holmes's version of *The Plough*, at the other end of O'Connell Street the Gate Theatre staged Mark O'Rowe's version of O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*. Later that year the National Theatre in London staged another version of *The Plough*, directed by Howard Davies and Jeremy Herrin. Some spectators may even have recognized that certain aspects of the Abbey's 2016 production – including the video-screen version of the orator and the English soldiers dressed in modern military uniform – echoed Stephen Rea's 2000 version of the play at Dublin's Gaiety.

Furthermore, by 2016 it was possible to compare O'Casey's drama at the Abbey with theatrical ideas about O'Casey that were being staged away from formal playhouse venues. During the Dublin Theatre Festival in 2016, one tale of the Easter Rising was given by CoisCéim Dance Theatre in collaboration with the experimental company ANU, at a building on the site where O'Casey was born (84-86 Dorset Street). This show, *These Rooms*, allowed audiences in small groups to move through a range of different rooms (and between the settings of 1966 and 1916) in order to explore a fractured storyline that included dance, survivor testimony, and archival film. Also in 2016, the Dublin Theatre Festival included a four-and-a-half hour immersive play about the Troubles by THEATREclub, *It's Not Over*, which included a range of music, dramatic tableaux, and a fragmented set of lines and ideas from O'Casey's *The Plough*. Subsequently, the Abbey Theatre co-produced a site-specific work with ANU at the 2018 Dublin Theatre Festival. This work, *The Lost O'Casey*, took inspiration from O'Casey's relatively unknown script *Nanny's Night Out*, but did so very loosely, leading audience members through north inner-city Dublin in order to point to contemporary problems of alcoholism and homelessness.

The Abbey Theatre's versions of O'Casey which had been performed from 1991 to 2016 had remained consistently reverent about reproducing the spoken words (if not the stage directions) of O'Casey's script. But by 2016 a theatrical philosophy could be discerned in Dublin that had been primarily associated with German theatre,

which sees the literary text as ripe for multiple adaptations. For example, when Thomas Ostermeier directed *Richard III* in 2016, he observed that, ‘it has become possible to tell the play’s full narrative even without all the business of the battle that makes up the play’s final 20 or so pages.’³³ ANU and THEATREclub therefore worked on O’Casey in the way that theatre directors in mainland Europe had grown accustomed to, making increasingly creative decisions derived from the playwright’s original concepts but departing significantly from his original text.

Thus, although the Abbey maintains its status as national theatre, it has recently been moving beyond a fixed Irish literary canon, towards European theatre styles, and into unfamiliar theatre spaces. In the past few years, the national theatres of Wales (established 2009) and Scotland (established 2006) have been operating without a permanent playhouse space of their own, instead touring to different venues and site-specific locations, and the National Theatre in London has embarked on an extensive program of broadcasting its shows to cinemas (from 2009), as well as staging site-specific work in collaboration with Shunt (2004) and Punchdrunk (2013-14).³⁴ All of this activity potentially made a national theatre that was primarily staging literary drama in one capital-city playhouse look somewhat conservative and old-fashioned. Accordingly, in July 2016, Neil Murray and Graham McLaren, respectively the executive producer and associate director of National Theatre Scotland, were

³³ Thomas Ostermeier, ‘Embodying Dark Desires,’ *Richard III, Schaubühne Berlin, Lyric Theatre Programme* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh International Festival, 2016), p.22.

³⁴ National Theatre Scotland did establish a permanent headquarters at Rockavilla in north Glasgow in 2017, even as it continued to commit to being a ‘theatre without walls.’

appointed as the new co-directors of the Abbey, and each indicated a willingness to change conceptions of the Irish national theatre. Earlier artistic directors of the Abbey such as Mac Anna, Hynes, and Barnes felt compelled to direct their own versions of *The Plough*, but the new co-directors pointedly responded to questioning about whether they would produce that particular play by declaring, ‘probably not on the stage of the Abbey, for a while. A small moratorium. No new productions planned.’³⁵ McLaren stated that O’Casey’s well-known work had ‘simply been done too often.’³⁶ Instead, as McLaren declared, ‘when we were going up for the job and we were asking what were the things we could do? And we said: It’s Ireland, we should do a show in pubs [...] The important thing is that it’s out there in tiny village pubs where your mum and dad go and say: “I saw that in my boozer and they did it here first. They did it for us. That’s our national theatre”.’³⁷ Hence a new set of theatrical ideas has repositioned the Abbey, with these co-directors launching a season that celebrated the best work of the independent sector in 2017, and drawing closer to the ideas that motivated companies such as ANU and National Theatre Scotland.

³⁵ McLaren quoted by Michael Smith, ‘McLaren and Murray, Fresh New Faces in Control of the Abbey,’ *Village Voice*, 24 May 2017 <<https://villagemagazine.ie/index.php/2017/05/mclaren-and-murray-fresh-new-faces-in-control-of-the-abbey/>>.

³⁶ McLaren quoted by Joseph Farrell, ‘SRB at the Theatre: In Dublin,’ *Scottish Review of Books*, 2 June 2018 <<https://www.scottishreviewofbooks.org/2018/06/srb-at-the-theatre-in-dublin/>>.

³⁷ McLaren quoted by Michael McDermott, ‘First Act: Neil Murray and Graham McLaren Directors Abbey Theatre,’ *TotallyDublin*, 3 April 2017 <<http://www.totallydublin.ie/more/first-act-neil-murray-graham-mclaren-directors-abbey-theatre/>>.

If Abbey-Theatre directors have long taken pride in staging innovative versions of act two of *The Plough* by bringing the Irish pub onto the playhouse stage, a kind of reversal now appears to have taken place, and, by working with creatives from ANU, the Abbey has moved the audience into real-life locations that have not conventionally been the working environment of the actor and the dramaturg.

O'Casey's drama has been a regular fixture on the national theatre stage since the 1920s, and has consistently helped citizens to help understand their changing society during the past three decades. If his work is now adapted for new immersive and site-specific modes of performance, O'Casey's writing has the potential to help the Abbey demonstrate its continuing relevance during ongoing national debates. After all, as the recent referendums to legalise same-sex marriage (2015) and abortion (2018) have shown, vital public argument in Ireland is occurring in a wide range of real and virtual spaces, and some of the key shifts in Irish politics can be discerned, as in 1916 itself, when campaigners arrive at the GPO, at Dublin Castle, and on the streets of the capital.