

INTRODUCTION

John Millington Synge is one of the most important and most influential playwrights in modern theatre. Born in 1871 in Dublin, Ireland, Synge's professional career as a playwright lasted just seven years before his untimely death at the age of 37. However, his direct influence on subsequent generations of playwrights is quite outstanding: Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Federico García Lorca, Eugene O'Neill, Samuel Beckett, Brian Friel and Marina Carr have all publicly stated how much they are indebted to Synge. The pinnacle of his career as playwright came on 26 January 1907 when he premiered his satirical comedy, *The Playboy of the Western World* at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin.¹ On that infamous evening the audience were absolutely appalled by what they saw and heard, so much so that they began causing disturbances that lasted for an almost an entire week.

This book explores how and why Synge wrote *The Playboy of the Western World*. The play is first placed in context of the Ireland of Synge's time. The next two chapters offer a textual and thematic analysis of the play and an analysis of the performance history of the play. A key aspect of this book is to explore Synge's and his Abbey Theatre colleagues' diaries, notebooks and letters so that we can understand their private thoughts on the play and the performance. It is hoped that by consulting the archive a richer, and maybe even an alternative, understanding of the play can be ascertained.

The Playboy of the Western World is a play about the problems of believing in illusions. The play is set in a small rural community in north County Mayo, on Ireland's west coast. In to this community arrives the play's protagonist, Christopher "Christy" Mahon. Christy is the shy, underachieving son of Old Mahon. Christy has arrived in Mayo from County Kerry, approximately 270 KM south from Mayo along the Irish west coast. Frightened and exhausted, he stumbles into a shebeen (an illicit pub) claiming that he has fled his native Kerry because he has just committed patricide: the murder of his father. Instead of running for the police and the priest (which was what the first audiences expected) the community is fascinated by Christy's bravery. He is promptly offered a job working as a pot-boy (waiter) in the shebeen by its owner, Michael James Flaherty. Christy accepts and, with a now ever-growing confidence, he woos Michael James's fearless daughter, Margaret "Peegen Mike" Flaherty with some wonderfully poetic, deeply romantic lines: 'isn't there the light of seven heavens in your heart alone, the way you'll be an angel's lamp to me.'² Peegen Mike may be engaged to the timid, God-fearing, Shawn Keogh, but she is happy to entertain thoughts of marrying Christy because she finds Shawn weak-willed in comparison. Having won Peegen Mike's heart, Christy is totally transformed into the playboy of the western world (the western world

being an index for the west of Ireland). Christy can do no wrong. However, when Old Mahon quite surprisingly arrives in the shebeen searching for his son both the community and Christy suddenly realise that everyone has been living an illusory life. Desperate to keep a hold of the illusion Christy attempts to kill his father a second time. Now, the illusion of patricide is coming alarmingly real, and Christy almost succeeds in killing his father. Shocked and appalled with what is happening in front of their eyes Pegeen leads the community in taking justice into their own hands. She and others proceed to torture Christy before turning him over to the police. At the height of the torturing, a badly injured Old Mahon comes back into the shebeen. Michael James apologises for torturing Christy and the Mahons promptly leave the community. As life returns to reality Christy realises that he has seen a glimpse of his real potential from living an illusory life; no longer will he be the shy, underachieving son. Pegeen Mike, however, is left devastated with the thoughts of what could have been if the illusion was never broken. She is brought crashing back down to earth, knowing that she has lost the playboy of the western world and furthermore, that she is still engaged to Shawn Keogh.

WHY IS THIS PLAY STILL RELEVANT?

In 2009 the *Irish Times* decided to look back on the first decade of theatre in the new millennium. They stated that the ‘defining play of the decade was actually written in 1907’ and concluded that *The Playboy of the Western World* is an ‘ever-contemporary masterpiece’.³ *The Playboy of the Western World* is relevant today for three main reasons. Firstly, it exposes the problems of believing in illusions. This is why one of the most quoted lines from the play is Pegeen Mike’s: ‘there’s a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed’.⁴ What she means by this is that Christy’s story of how he killed his father might be one thing, but actually going through with the reality of killing your father is quite another.

Secondly, it is a comic masterpiece of modern theatre. *The Playboy* was heavily influenced by the work of two French comic writers: Molière and François Rabelais. Synge explores the problems of believing in illusions by dramatising stereotypical characters that speak in a fast-paced, wonderfully lyrical language (Synge’s debt to Molière), and at the same time the play is ruthlessly satirical (Synge’s debt to Rabelais).

The third reason the play is relevant today is because it is a testament to the importance of artistic expression. In January 1907 the difference between illusion and reality went far beyond the Abbey Theatre and turned the streets, the newspapers and the courtrooms into a theatre with just as much drama as Synge’s play. Spectators simply couldn’t believe that Synge

would have the audacity to satirise Irish life. Turning to the diary of the architect of the Abbey Theatre, Joseph Holloway, we can see just how shocking Synge's new play was. Holloway wrote:

What did Synge mean by such filth? Was there no one to supervise the plays? Synge met with his just deserts from the audience & I hope he'll take the lesson to heart. This is not Irish life? [...] I maintain that this play of The Playboy is not a truthful or just picture of the Irish peasants, but simply the outpouring of a morbid, unhealthy mind ever seeking on the dungheap of life for the nastiness that lies concealed there, perhaps, but never suspected by the clean of mind [...] Synge is the evil genius of the Abbey [...] the theatre is forever damned in the eyes of all right thinking Irishmen⁵

What Synge encountered during the first performances is quite unlike anything that we would expect from going to the theatre today. Members of the audience stomped their feet, whistled, sang, cheered, booed, and generally made as much noise as they could in order to stop the play from being performed, and demanded that Synge make himself known. Synge attended all of the performances of *The Playboy* but the vast majority of the disturbers did not know what he looked like, and so night after night they aggressively howled, "we want the author".⁶ Just imagine sitting in a theatre with 561 other people knowing that the vast majority of them were so upset with you that they had turned violent with each other. For example, a newspaper reports how during the fourth performance of the play,

a low-sized Englishman in the stalls, who was an upholder of the play, got into an altercation with a young gentleman in the pit who entertained diametrically opposite views. At length, the former challenged the latter to fight him. The gage of battle was at once taken up. Followed by a couple of hundred persons the combatants made their ways into the vestibule. Here several blows were exchanged.⁷

Synge refused to back down. In the newspapers he claimed that 'we simply claimed the liberty of art to choose what subjects we think to fit to put on'.⁸ Both Christy in the play and Synge in real life were subject to the anger of those who took the illusion of art far too faithfully. The imaginary community in Mayo and the real-life spectators in Dublin did not see art as a subjective perspective on reality with the ability to inspire and challenge real life, but as a wicked trick that brought their whole world crashing down. Throughout this book we will see how, in defending the play, Synge continually uses the word "reality" to argue his case. 'On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy,' Synge believed.⁹ The problem was that his understanding of reality and joy was not considered to be artistic in the slightest. What the play calls into question, then, is the value of poetic license, freedom of speech, the importance of satire and ultimately, the importance of artistic expression.

These three key points 1) the problems with believing in illusions, 2) the play's comic strategies and 3) the importance of artistic expression, will be continually returned to throughout this book because not only do they link how and why Synge wrote the play and how the play was received in performance both then, and throughout history, but significantly, it also links why a play from 1907 is still relevant today. At the time of writing, the western world is still reeling after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris in January 2015, where masked gunmen attacked and killed the Editor and three cartoonists of the French satirical magazine. And while what happened in Paris can never be directly compared to the disturbances that greeted *The Playboy*, the principle remains that *The Playboy* is contemporary today because it is a play about the integrity of art. The fact that the second performance of the play was performed under police guard becomes a parable for the importance of art in the face of oppression. All art, be it Christy's poetical story about killing his father, or Synge's satirical play about an imagined community in County Mayo should always be seen as a gallous story rather than a dirty deed. Art might have sincere and often political consequences for the real world, but the act of creation should always be seen as a world of make believe before it is seen as a world of make belief. The problem, then, is with taking art too literally. And this is the problem with the most pervasive form of art there is: realism.

REALISM

Right at the heart of *The Playboy* are the problems inherent with realism. Realism falsely claims to be an objective study of 'real' life. However, realism is entirely subjective and, more often than not, it persuades the spectator into having empathy with the dominant understanding of reality, which is usually conditioned by middle-class ideology. Realism, then, is quite insidious because it just repeats back to the spectator what the common understanding of reality is.

Synge wrote his plays in a style that he liked to call "transfigured realism." He had borrowed this term from a comparative social scientist and philosopher, Herbert Spencer. Spencer's theory of transfigured realism argued that things appear never quite as they seem. What Spencer meant by this is that reality is never completely objective, but neither is entirely subjective because reality is always shifting and changing. In his notebook, Synge recorded Spencer's theory: 'transfigured realism simply asserts objective existence as separate from and independent of subjective existence. But it asserts neither that one any mode of this existence is in reality that which it seems, nor that connexions among its modes are objectively what they seem.'¹⁰ Synge's transfigured realism meant that *The Playboy* was grounded in social reality, but at the same time that reality was also enhanced and embellished for the purposes of art.

During *The Playboy* disturbances, the *Irish Times* received a letter from Ellen Duncan, the curator of Dublin's Municipal Gallery of Modern Art. Her letter hit the nail on the head: "the battle between 'The Playboy of the Western World' and the Abbey Theatre pit is the old battle between realism and the forces of reaction, with which we are already familiar in other forms of art'.¹¹ This is why *The Playboy* caused such a fuss, because those that caused disturbances knew that Synge was satirising Irish culture through his realistic depiction of Irish life. In the play Synge was making a joke out of what he understood to be the reality of life on the west coast of Ireland. But at the very same time he wasn't joking at all. He was being incredibly serious, as he himself pointed out: 'parts of it are, or are meant to be, extravagant comedy, still a great deal that is in it, and a great deal more that is behind it, is perfectly serious, when looked at in a certain light.'¹² That Synge's play was being perfectly serious was extremely problematic. Certain members of the audience had no other choice but to riot; there was no way that Synge could get away with contesting their dominant understanding of reality. Synge's uncomfortable truth was not welcome here. But what was that uncomfortable truth?

When the play was first performed Ireland was in a desperate struggle to achieve independence from the British Empire. The political struggle for national independence looked towards places such as County Mayo as the symbolic ideal of Ireland. The west of Ireland was supposedly untouched and uncorrupted by British ideology; it was certainly not envisioned as a place that celebrated patricide. But the uncomfortable truth was that large parts of the west of Ireland were in a horrible socio-economic condition after years of mismanagement. The worst affected areas were officially called the Congested Districts: areas of land that were struck by poverty and starvation because of overpopulation. Synge visited the Congested Districts two years before *The Playboy* was performed, and he wrote a series of articles about the Districts for the *Manchester Guardian* (the predecessor to today's *Guardian* newspaper). In one article about life in Mayo he comments how 'the people [are] near to pauperism!'.¹³ In his final article for the newspaper he concluded that 'with renewed life in the country [and] many changes of the methods of government' then life 'in the worst districts of Mayo'¹⁴ could be ameliorated. In private Synge was absolutely appalled by what he saw, but he wrote a letter to his close friend, Stephen MacKenna saying, 'I like not lifting the rags from my mother country for to tickle the sentiments of Manchester'.¹⁵ Synge was not going to critique the mismanagement of the Congested Districts in Mayo too much because he wanted to defend Ireland from being wrongly stereotyped by the British public as a primitive country. Two years later, however, *The Playboy* revealed the reality of life in Mayo, as Synge understood it.

The political movement for national independence drew strength from the cultural movement and vice versa. By satirising the symbolic centre of cultural nationalism Synge was damaging the political movement. As I will go on to explain in the next chapter, the people who took the illusion of art far too faithfully were members of the Gaelic League and Sinn Féin, two organisations that supported Ireland's national independence from the British Empire. For Synge, Nationalism in the theatre was pointless. All Synge really cared about was the importance of artistic expression. In order to really understand *The Playboy's* uncomfortable truths we must first place the play in context of the Ireland of Synge's time. The next chapter explores how Synge came to be a playwright, and what influenced him to write about the uncomfortable truths that *The Playboy* exposed.

¹ *The Playboy of the Western World* was first performed on 26 January, 1907 in the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, by the Irish National Theatre Society. Cast: W.G. Fay (Christopher Mahon) Ambrose Power (Old Mahon), Arthur Sinclair (Michael James), Maire O'Neill (Pegeen Mike), F.J. Fay (Shawn Keogh), J.A. O'Rourke (Philly O'Cullen), J.M. Kerrigan (Jimmy Farrell), Sara Allgood (Widow Quin), Brigit O'Dempsey (Sara Tansey), Alice O'Sullivan (Susan Brady), Mary Craig (Honor Blake) and Harry Young, Udolphus Wright (Peasants). It was first published by Maunsel (Dublin) in 1907.

² *CW*, Vol. IV: 149.

³ Peter Crawley, "A Decade Framed by Playboys", *Irish Times*, 2 December, 2009.

⁴ *CW*, Vol. IV: 169.

⁵ NLI MS: 1805, Vol. 1, 26 January, 1907, ff.63-64 and 31 January 1907, f.74.

⁶ "Police In", *Irish Independent*, 29 January, 1907.

⁷ "The Abbey Theatre", *The Freeman's Journal*, 31 January, 1907.

⁸ "Police In", *Irish Independent*, 29 January, 1907.

⁹ *CW*, Vol. IV: 53-4.

¹⁰ TCD MS: 4379, f.85r.

¹¹ Ellen Duncan, "The Playboy", *Irish Times*, 29 January, 1907.

¹² *CL*, Vol. I: 286. J.M. Synge to the Editor of *Irish Times*, 30 January, 1907.

¹³ *CW*, Vol. II: 330.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 343.

¹⁵ *CL*, Vol. I: 112. J.M. Synge to Stephen MacKenna, 30 May, 1905.