

Our Irish Theater - Lady Gregory

Our Irish theater ; a chapter of autobiography

Lady Gregory

1913

Letter from Mr. John Quinn.

To The Editor of a Dublin Newspaper

Dear Sir : Now that the Irish players have been to New York and their work seen and judged, the readers of your paper may be interested in the publication of one or two facts in connection with their visit. For some time before the company came to New York there had been threats of an organised attempt by a small coterie of Irishmen to prevent the performance of Synge's *Playboy*. It was difficult for many people in New York who are interested in the drama and art to take these rumours seriously. The attempt to prevent the New York public from hearing the work of these Irish players of course failed. There was an organised attempt by perhaps a hundred or a hundred and fifty Irishmen on the first night *The Playboy* was given here to prevent the performance by hissing and booing, and by throwing potatoes and other objects at the actors, and red pepper and asafœtida among the audience. The disturbers were ejected from the theatre by the police. All the great metropolitan papers, morning and evening, condemned this organised disturbance. The second night, some six or seven disturbers were put out of the theatre by the police, and that was the end of the long-threatened attempt to break up the performance of these plays. The issue was not between the plays and the players and the disturbers, but between the New York public and the disturbers. This fight over Synge was of vast importance for us as a city. One night settled that question and settled it conclusively.

I have seen in some of the daily and one of the weekly Irish papers a statement to the effect that "*The Playboy* was hooted from the stage. . . after the worst riot ever witnessed in a New York playhouse." The statement that it was "hooted from the stage" is of course utterly false. The greatest disorder occurred during the first act. A few minutes after the curtain fell at the end of the first act it was raised again and the statement was made by a member of the company that the act would be given entirely over again. This announcement was greeted with cheers and applause from the great majority of the audience, who indignantly disapproved the attempt of the disturbers to prevent the performance. The play was not "hooted from the stage."

The attempt to prevent by force the hearing of the play having so signally failed, a committee waited upon the Mayor of New York City the next day and demanded the suppression of the plays. The Mayor requested Chief Judge McAdoo of the Court of Special Sessions to attend the play as his representative and report to him. Judge McAdoo is an Irishman, born in Ireland, and has had a distinguished public career as member of Congress, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, and Police Commissioner of New York City, and he is now Chief Judge of the Court of Special Sessions. Judge McAdoo attended the play and made a report to the Mayor completely rejecting the charges that had been made against the morals and ethics of the play.

Both attempts to prevent the performance of the play, the first by force and the second by appeal to the authorities, having completely failed, the work of distorting in the Irish papers what actually took place then began.

Among other things it has been stated that the Abbey Theatre company was not a success in New York. On the contrary the success of the company has been beyond anything in my personal experience. The verdict of critical and artistic New York in favour of the work of the Irish Theatre has been emphatic.

The pick of the intellectual and artistic public crowded the theatre during the weeks of the company's performances here and admired and enjoyed their work. In fact intelligent New Yorkers are yet wondering what was the real cause of the attempt to prevent the hearing of the plays. This is one of the mysteries of this winter in New York. I am proud, as a citizen of New York, that New York's verdict of approval was so swift and decisive, and I am proud of New York's quick recognition of the excellence of the new Irish school of drama and acting. As a man of Irish blood, my chief regret is that organised prejudice and prejudgment should have prevented these players from getting that welcome from a section of their own countrymen that I feel sure they will secure in future years. This prejudice was created and the prejudgment was largely caused by the publication of detached sentences and quotations from the plays, while ignoring the art of the actors and the humour and poetry and imaginative beauty of the plays, beauties which, as Sir Philip Sidney would say, "who knoweth not to be flowers of poetry did never walk into Apollo's garden."

Not only have the New York daily papers devoted columns to the work of this company throughout their stay, giving elaborate reviews of their work and long interviews with Lady Gregory and others, but many magazines have had articles on the subject of the plays and writers and on the Irish dramatic movement generally, among others the *Yale Review*, the *Harvard Monthly*, *Collier's Weekly*, the *Nation* (two notices), the *Dramatic Mirror* (five notices), the *Metropolitan Magazine*, *Munsey's Magazine*, the *Craftsman*, *Life*, *Harper's Weekly* (containing repeated notices), the *Outlook*, the *Bookman*, and others. Lady Gregory has contributed articles to the *Yale Review*, the *World of Today* and the *Delineator*, and has lectured at many places upon the Irish dramatic movement. The universities and colleges have shown the liveliest interest in the movement. The professors have lectured upon the plays and the plays have been studied in the college classes and the students have been advised to read them and see the players.

"The Playboy" in Philadelphia — From Philadelphia "North American"

January 17, 1912 :—Determined to force their dramatic views on the public despite the arrests at Monday night's demonstration, several Irishmen last night vented their disapproval of *The Playboy of the Western World* which had its second production by Irish Players at the Adelphi Theatre.

They started by coughing, and they caused the player-folk to become slightly nervous. They next essayed hissing, and cries of "shame," and finally one of their number rose to his feet in a formal protest.

Plain-clothes men throughout the house quelled the slight disturbance, but at every opportunity another belligerent broke into unruly behaviour.

The disorder approached the dignity of serious rioting in the second and third acts of the piece, and at the last a man from Connemara rose in the body of the house, whipped a speech

from his coat pocket, and proceeded to interrupt the players with a harangue against the morality of the play.

His philippics were short-lived. Sixteen cops in plain clothes reached him at the same time, and the red man from Connemara disappeared, while the play was being brought to a close

Extra precautions were taken by the police to preserve order at last night's performance. The lights in the back of the house were not turned down at any time except the first few minutes of the one-act play *Kathleen ni Houlihan* which was the curtain-raiser to the longer piece.

Evidence that there would be trouble later in the evening was plain. Nearly the whole rear part of the house downstairs was filled with Irishmen.

As the little poetic vision of the author unrolled itself and the enthusiastic and for the most part cultured audience was steeping itself in the lyric beauty of the lines, two whole rows of the auditors were seized with a desire to cough or clear their throats. That caused a momentary lull in the play.

Up in the top gallery a thin but insistent ventriloquist piped, "This is rotten!" Cries of "Hush!" quieted the interrupter.

In the first act of *The Playboy* where the bulk of the disturbance occurred Monday night, no expression of opinion was made. But just as every one was settling down to enjoy the play, confident no more interruptions would occur, the trouble began.

One of the clan downstairs cried out his disapprobation. The lights were turned on full tilt, and policemen in plain clothes sprang up from every quarter of the house. Women left their seats in fear. A misguided youth near the orchestra threw his programme, doubled into a ball, at Miss Magee. He was promptly arrested.

The play was stopped for fully five minutes until all the men who showed signs of making trouble were evicted. A number of them laid low, however, and bobbed up now and again, whenever they wanted to. It kept the cops busy hustling them out of the doors. Superintendent Taylor and Captain of the Detectives Souder were in charge of the evictions and as each man was taken out two detectives were sent with him to City Hall where all were locked in.

The climax came when near the close of the last act the man from Connaught began his oratorical flights, drowning the speeches of the actors on the stage. All interest then centred upon the little knot of strugglers in the main aisle of the theatre and four more Irishmen were escorted, hatless and without overcoats, to the street.

As the men were arraigned at the City Hall, William A. Gray, counsel for the offenders at Monday night's riot, appeared for them. He said he had been sent by Joseph McLaughlin, a saloon-keeper and vice-president of the A. O. H., and he obtained a copy of the charges, with a view to getting the men out on bail. . . . Mr. Gray said he intended taking the matter before the courts and asking for an injunction to prohibit further productions of the play. He said his backer was Joseph McGarrity, a wholesale liquor dealer, in business at 144 South Third Street, who was one of those ejected from the theatre on Monday night.

Headed by Joseph McLaughlin, a delegation of seven prominent members of the Irish societies of the city waited on Mayor Blankenburg yesterday with a petition asking him to stop the production of John M. Synge's comedy *The Playboy of the Western World* on the ground that it is immoral.

The Mayor heard the comments of the Irishmen, but with great good humour pointed out that inasmuch as he could find nothing objectionable in the play, he could not promise to stop the production.

He informed the delegation that he had previously made inquiries of the mayors of New York, Boston, and Providence, where the play had been shown, and had received answers which plainly indicated it was not necessary to stop the play.

From Philadelphia "North American" Irish Players appear in a "Court Comedy"; No Decision Answer Charge of "Immorality" brought by a Liquor Dealer—"Playboy" Defended and attacked by Witnesses

January 20, 1912 :—Second only in point of order, not in worth, was the unadvertised comedy participated in by the Irish Players yesterday afternoon, at a matinee performance held in Judge Carr's room in the quarter sessions court.

The public flocked to see, and stayed to witness, a most complete vindication of Synge's much discussed satirisation of the Irish character. The actors arrested for appearing in *The Playboy of the Western World* kept, however, in the background, while counsel on both sides engaged in lively tilts with two members of the clergy and the judge and other witnesses, furnishing the crowd with entertainment.

Eleven of the Irish Players who were held in \$500 bail each by Magistrate Carey, at a hearing in his office earlier in the day, threw themselves upon the mercy of the quarter sessions court, to obtain a legal decision as to whether their play violated the McNichol act of 1911, which makes it a misdemeanor to present "lascivious, sacrilegious, obscene or indecent plays." The hearing before the court was brought about by a habeas corpus proceeding.

Although no decision was handed down after the argument, the attitude of the court was plainly shown, by the line of questions put to various witnesses. The testimony offered by Director of Public Safety Porter, who was called by the commonwealth, indicated that no fault could be found with the play. Judge Carr reserved decision, and adjourned court until Monday.

The defendants were represented by Charles Biddle, William Redheffer, Jr., Howard H. Yocum, and John Quinn, of New York. Directly back of them, in the courtroom, sat Lady Gregory, Mrs. Henry La Barre Jayne, and W. W. Bradford, the latter representing Liebler & Co., managers of the Irish Players.

Surprise for Prosecutor

William A. Gray represented Joseph McGarrity, the liquor dealer, who has taken principal part in the prosecution of the actors. He was aided at times by Assistant District Attorney Fox on behalf of the commonwealth, although the latter's action in calling Director Porter to give testimony caused Mr. Gray both surprise and embarrassment, inasmuch as Mr. Porter said there was nothing in the piece to offend the most devout and reverent of women. He said he

had attended the theatre with his wife and that neither of them was “ shocked ” ; on the contrary, distinctly pleased.

Mr. Gray called Joseph McGarrity to the stand. In all seriousness and sincerity the witness testified that, in his opinion, *The Playboy* was a wicked piece and that he thought he had a perfect right to show his disapproval by protesting. He was questioned by Judge Carr as to the reason why he did not leave the theatre before he was ejected, if he thought the play was bad. He could give no adequate reply.

Mr. Gray then read passages from the book, declaring that it had been expurgated to make it presentable on the American stage. Frederick O’Donovan, one of the company, who takes the part of the *Playboy*, testified that productions of the play had been made in Dublin, Belfast, Cork, London, Oxford, Cambridge, Harrowgate, Boston, New York, New Haven, and Providence without causing any public disturbance except in New York, and without any criminal prosecution being brought anywhere.

It was pointed out to the court by Mr. Gray that Pennsylvania is the only State having a statute preventing immoral or sacrilegious plays and that this was of so recent a date that neither side could argue that other plays of a much more objectionable nature than this had been permitted without hindrance.

Mr. Biddle and Mr. Quinn then summed up their arguments, in which the court concurred, openly. The New York lawyer paid a tribute to Philadelphia concerning the testimony of Director Porter. He said : “ Philadelphia ought to be proud of the manhood displayed by such a witness. He stood before this court and testified that he and his wife had witnessed the performance, and that neither was displeased by any exhibition of immorality.

“ I say that any man who takes a lascivious meaning out of any of the lines of the play, or who declares that the piece is in any way improper, must have a depraved and an abnormal mind.

“ I am ashamed that such men should come here and insult womanhood with their views. The American people are too good a judge of the Irish race to agree with them.”

The court then took the case under advisement, reserving decision, counsel agreeing, under his advice, to allow the company to renew its bail bond of \$5000.

“ The Playboy ” in Chicago — From Chicago “ Daily Tribune ”

January 30, 1913 :—Mayor Harrison last night was directed by an order passed by the city council to prohibit the presentation in Chicago of *The Playboy of the Western World*, a play which has caused riots and organised protests in New York, Philadelphia, and Washington when presented by the Irish Players.

What action the mayor will take he was not prepared to indicate at the conclusion of the council session. It was stated during the debate on the subject that the mayor holds discretionary powers, and with the backing of the council can prevent the play if he chooses. But there is nothing mandatory in the order of the council, which asked the mayor to co- operate with Chief of Police McWeeny.

The Mayor said he would investigate the legal phases and also look into the character of the play before he decided upon steps to take.

McInerney Leads Fight

Ald. Michael McInerney led the movement for the council order.

“The play is a studied sarcasm on the Irish race,” asserted Mr. McInerney, reading from a typewritten sheet; “it points no moral, and it teaches no lesson.”

“Press agent!” shouted some one.

“No, I’m not the press agent,” asserted the alderman. “This play pictures an Irishman a coward, something that never happened, and it attacks the Irishwoman. There are no Irishmen connected with the company in any way.”

In reply to a question whether Lady Gregory was Irish, McInerney replied he had not met “the lady,” and then added:

“There’s a difference in being from Ireland and being Irish. There are lots of people in Ireland that aren’t Irish. If you’re born in a stable, that doesn’t make you a horse.”

Mr. Pringle stopped unanimous passage of the resolution.

“While I am not Irish,” he said, “I believe Ald. McInerney knows what he is talking about; but I do not know enough about this subject to vote upon it at this time.”

“Like Ald. Pringle,” said Ald. Thomson, “I am not sufficiently informed, and I shall ask to be excused from voting.”

Germans Strong for Irish

“Since some leading Irish organisations have chosen Germans to lead them,” said Ald. Henry Utpatel, “I feel that that fact alone makes them a great race, and I shall vote with Ald. McInerney.”

“Would you like to hear from the Poles?” asked Ald. Frank P. Danisch.

“That’s all right,” said McInerney, “if this play is presented there will come along a play insulting the Poles or some other race. It is not right for Chicago to let any race be insulted.”

The order was then adopted. Ald. Pringle and Thomson voting in the negative.

From Chicago “Record-Herald”

February 1, 1912 :—Chicago’s City Council erred in passing an order directing the mayor and the chief of police to stop the production *The Playboy of the Western World* according to an opinion sent to Mayor Harrison yesterday by William H. Sexton, the city’s corporation counsel.

The brief was prepared by William Dillon, brother of John Dillon, the Irish nationalist leader, one of Mr. Sexton’s assistants. It held that the council order was of no legal effect, although the mayor could suppress the play if he decided that it was immoral or against public policy. Mr. Dillon further declared that the mayor would not be legally right in prohibiting the production.

“ I read three pages of the book,” declared Mayor Harrison, “ and instead of finding anything immoral I found that the whole thing was wonderfully stupid. I shall abide by the corporation’s opinion.”

Interview for New York “Evening Sun”

George Bernard Shaw on The Irish Players

“ I presume, Mr. Shaw, you have heard the latest news of your *Blanco Posnet* in America with the Irish Players ?” he was asked.

“ No. Why ? Has it failed ?” Mr. Shaw answered.

“ Quite the contrary,” he was assured.

“ Oh, in that case why should I hear about it ?” he said. “ Success is the usual thing with my plays ; it is what I write them for. I only hear about them when something goes wrong.”

“ But are you not interested in the success of the Irish Players ? Or was that a matter of course too ?”

“ By no means,” Mr. Shaw answered. “ I warned Lady Gregory that America was an extremely dangerous country to take a real Irish company to.”

“ But why ? Surely America, with its immense Irish element——”

“ Rubbish ! There are not half a dozen real Irishmen in America outside that company of actors !” he exclaimed. “ You don’t suppose that all these Murphys and Doolans and Donovans and Farrells and Caseys and O’Connells who call themselves by romantic names like the Clan-na-Gael and the like are Irishmen ! You know the sort of people I mean. They call Ireland the Old Country....”

“ Shall I tell you what they did in Dublin to the Irish Players ? There was a very great Irish dramatic poet, who died young, named John Synge—a real Irish name—just the sort of name the Clan-na-Gael never think of.

“ Well, John Synge wrote a wonderful play called *The Playboy of the Western World*, which is now a classic. This play was not about an Irish peculiarity, but about a universal weakness of mankind : the habit of admiring bold scoundrels. Most of the heroes of history are bold scoundrels, you will notice. English and American boys read stories about Charles Peace, the burglar, and Ned Kelly, the highwayman, and even about Teddy Roosevelt, the rough-rider. *The Playboy* is a young man who brags of having killed his father, and is made almost as great a hero as if he were an Italian general who had killed several thousand other people’s fathers. Synge satirises this like another Swift, but with a joyousness and a wild wealth of poetic imagery that Swift never achieved. Well, sir, if you please, this silly Dublin Clan-na-Gael, or whatever it called itself, suddenly struck out the brilliant idea that to satirise the follies of humanity is to insult the Irish nation, because the Irish nation is, in fact, the human race and has no follies, and stands there pure and beautiful and saintly to be eternally oppressed by England and collected for by the Clan. There were just enough of them to fill the Abbey Street Theatre for a night or two to the exclusion of the real Irish people, who simply get sick when they hear this sort of balderdash talked about Ireland. Instead of listening to a great play by a great Irishman they bawled and whistled and sang ‘ God Save

Ireland' (not without reason, by the way), and prevented themselves from hearing a word of the performance. . . .”

“ Do you think there will be trouble with the Clan in New York ?”

“ I think there may be trouble anywhere where there are men who have lost touch with Ireland and still keep up the old bragging and posing. You must bear in mind that Ireland is now in full reaction against them. The stage Irishman of the nineteenth century, generous, drunken, thriftless, with a joke always on his lips and a sentimental tear always in his eye, was highly successful as a borrower of money from Englishmen—both in Old and New England—who indulged and despised him because he flattered their sense of superiority. But the real Irishman of to-day is so ashamed of him and so deeply repentant for having ever stooped to countenance and ape him in the darkest days of the Captivity that the Irish Players have been unable to find a single play by a young writer in which Ireland is not lashed for its follies. We no longer brazen out the shame of our subjection by idle boasting. Even in Dublin, that city of tedious and silly derision where men can do nothing but sneer, they no longer sneer at other nations. In a modern Irish play the hero doesn't sing that ‘ Ould Ireland’ is his country and his name it is Molloy ; he pours forth all his bitterness on it like the prophets of old.

“ The last time I saw an Irish play in Dublin, the line on which the hero made his most effective exit was ‘ I hate Ireland.’ Even in the plays of Lady Gregory, penetrated as they are by that intense love of Ireland which is unintelligible to the many drunken blackguards with Irish names who make their nationality an excuse for their vices and their worthlessness, there is no flattery of the Irish ; she writes about the Irish as Molière wrote about the French, having a talent curiously like Molière.

“ In the plays of Mr. Yeats you will find many Irish heroes, but nothing like ‘ the broth of a boy.’ Now you can imagine the effect of all this on the American pseudo-Irish, who are still exploiting the old stage Ireland for all it is worth, and defiantly singing : ‘ Who fears to speak of '98 ?’ under the very nose of the police—that is, the New York police, who are mostly Fenians. Their notion of patriotism is to listen jealously for the slightest hint that Ireland is not the home of every virtue and the martyr of every oppression, and thereupon to brawl and bully or to whine and protest, according to their popularity with the bystanders. When these people hear a little real Irish sentiment from the Irish Players they will not know where they are ; they will think that the tour of the Irish company is an Orange conspiracy financed by Mr. Balfour.”

“ Have you seen what the Central Council of the Irish County Association of Greater Boston says about the Irish Players ?”

“ Yes ; but please do not say I said so ; it would make them insufferably conceited to know that their little literary effort had been read right through by me. You will observe that they begin by saying that they know their Ireland as children know their mother. Not a very happy bit of rhetoric that, because children never do know their mothers ; they may idolise them or fear them, as the case may be, but they don't know them.

“ But can you conceive a body of Englishmen or Frenchmen or Germans publishing such silly stuff about themselves or their country ? If they said such a thing in Ireland they would be laughed out of the country. They declare that they are either Irish peasants or the sons of Irish peasants. What on earth does the son of an American emigrant know about Ireland ? Fancy the emigrant himself, the man who has left Ireland to stew in its own juice, talking

about feeling toward Ireland as children feel toward their mother. Of course a good many children do leave their mothers to starve ; but I doubt if that was what they meant. No doubt they are peasants—a name, by the way, which they did not pick up in Ireland, where it is unknown—for they feel toward literature and art exactly as peasants do in all countries ; that is, they regard them as departments of vice—of what policemen call gayety. . . .

“ Good heavens !” exclaimed Bernard Shaw, waving a cutting from the *Post* in his hand, “ see how they trot out all the old rubbish. ‘ Noble and impulsive,’ ‘ generous, harum-scarum, lovable characters,’ ‘ generosity, wit, and triumphant true love’ ; these are the national characteristics they modestly claim as Irishmen who know Ireland as children know their mother. . . .”

“ May I ask one more question, Mr. Shaw ? Who is the greatest living Irishman?”

“ Well, there are such a lot of them. Mr. Yeats could give you off-hand the names of six men, not including himself or myself, who may possibly turn out to be the greatest of us all ; for Ireland since she purified her soul from the Clan-na-Gael nonsense, is producing serious men ; not merely Irishmen, you understand—for an Irishman is only a parochial man after all—but men in the fullest international as well as national sense—the wide human sense.”

“ There is an impression in America, Mr. Shaw, that you regard yourself as the greatest man that ever lived.”

“ I dare say. I sometimes think so myself when the others are doing something exceptionally foolish. But I am only one of the first attempts of the new Ireland. She will do better—probably has done better already—though the product is not yet grown up enough to be interviewed. Good morning.”

From “ The Gaelic American”

What The Irish County Associations of Boston said of Bernard Shaw

January 13, 1912 :—The writer of such fool conceptions is as blind as an eight-hour-old puppy to the operation of all spiritual agencies in the life of man. Shaw’s writings bear about the same relation to genuine literature as Bryan O’Lynn’s extemporised timepiece, a scooped out turnip with a cricket within, does to the Greenwich Observatory

Shaw stumbles along the bogs, morasses, and sand dunes of literature, without a terminal, leading the benighted and lost wayfarers still farther astray. His unhappy possession of infinite egotism and his utter lack of common sense make of him a *rara avis* indeed, a cross between a peacock and a gander. . . .

In conclusion let us say before we again notice this Barnum of literature he must produce a clean bill of sanity, superscribed by some reputable alienist.

In The Eyes of Our Enemies — From “ America”

The Plays of The “Irish” Players

November 4, 1911:—The editors, like the patriots of the Boyle O’Reilly Club who fêted him in Boston, took Mr. Yeats at his own none too modest estimation. The United Irish Societies of this city denounced *The Playboy*, and an advanced Gaelic organ exposed its

barbarities, but gave a clean bill of health to Mr. Yeats and the rest of his programme. Doubtless they also had not read the plays they approved. Well, we have read them. We found several among them more vile, more false, and far more dangerous than *The Playboy*, the ‘bestial depravity’ of which carries its own condemnation; and we deliberately pronounce them the most malignant travesty of Irish character and of all that is sacred in Catholic life that has come out of Ireland. The details, which are even more shocking than those of *The Playboy*, are too indecent for citation, but the persistent mendacity of the Yeats press agency’s clever conspiracy of puff makes it needful to give our readers some notion of their character.

Of Synge’s plays only *Riders to the Sea*, an un-Irish adaptation to Connacht fishermen of Loti’s *Pecheurs d’Islande*, is fit for a decent audience. None but the most rabidly anti-Catholic, priest-hating bigots could enjoy *The Tinkers’ Wedding*. [1] The plot, which involves an Irish priest in companionship with the most degraded pagans and hinges on his love of gain, may not be even outlined by a self-respecting pen. The open lewdness and foul suggestiveness of the language is so revolting, the picture of the Irish priesthood, drawn by this parson’s son, is so vile and insulting, and the mockery of the Mass and sacraments so blasphemous, that it is unthinkable how any man of healthy mind could father it or expect an audience to welcome it. This is the “typical Irish play” which the “Irish Players” have presented to a Boston audience.

The twain are kindred spirits; but in vileness of caricature and bitterness of anti-Catholic animus, even Synge must yield to Yeats. He also goes to tinkers for his types; and whereas Synge is content with three, and one priest, Yeats’s *Where there is Nothing*, glorifies a bevy of unbelieving tinkers and presents in contrast a dozen vulgar-spoken monks, who utter snatches of Latin in peasant brogue, while dancing frantically around the altar of God!

[1] Neither *The Tinkers’ Wedding* nor *Where there is Nothing* has ever been given by our Company. — A. G.

From “The Gaelic American” — Yeats’s Anti-Irish Campaign.

November 18, 1911 :—The anti-Irish players come to New York on Nov. 20th, and will appear first in some of the other plays. *The Playboy*, it is announced, will be given later, but the date has not yet been given out. The presentation of the monstrosity is a challenge to the Irish people of New York which will be taken up. There will be no parleying with theatre managers, or appeals to Lady Gregory’s sense of decency. *The Playboy* must be squelched, as the stage Irishman was squelched, and a lesson taught to Mr. Yeats and his fellow-agents of England that they will remember while they live.

When a woman chooses to put herself in the company of male blackguards she has no right to appeal for respect for her sex.

Mrs. Mary F. McWhorter, National Chairman, L.A. A. O. H, Irish History Committee, writing in “The National Hibernian,” 1913

When it was announced about two months ago that the Abbey players would appear in repertory at the Fine Arts Theatre, in the city of Chicago, I made up my mind to witness all of the Abbey output, if possible, and see if they were as black as some painted them, and now I feel I have earned the right to qualify as a critic.

Having seen them all, I have this to say, that, with one or two exceptions, they are the sloppiest, and in most cases the vilest, and the most character-assassinating things, in the shape of plays it has ever been my misfortune to see. If, as has been often stated, the plays were written with the intention of belittling the Irish race and the ideals and traditions of that race, the playwrights have succeeded as far as they intended, for the majority of the plays leave us nothing to our credit.

Thinking the matter over now, I cannot understand why *The Playboy* was picked out as the one most dangerous to our ideals. True, *The Playboy* is bad and very bad, but it is so glaringly so, it defeats its own ends by causing a revulsion of feeling.

There are other plays in the collection, however, that are apparently harmless ; comedies that will cause you to laugh heartily, 't is true, but in the middle of the laugh you stop as if some one slapped you in the face. You begin to see, in place of the harmless joke, an insidious dig at something you hold sacred, or, if it is something you think is inspiring and patriotic, right in the midst of the thing that carries you away for a few moments on the wings of your lofty dreams and inspirations some monster of mockery will intrude his ugly face, and again the doubt, " Is it ridicule ?" The certainty follows the doubt quickly, and you know it is ridicule, and immediately you are possessed of an insane desire to seek out Lady Gregory or some one else connected with the plays and then and there commit murder. That is, you will, if you have the welfare of your race at heart. Of course, if you are careless, or in some cases ignorant of the history of Ireland, or unfamiliar with the conditions there, you will accept the teaching of the Abbey school, and say to yourself, " The Irish are a lazy, crafty, miserly, insincere, irreligious lot after all."

In *The Rising of the Moon* our patriotism is attacked, not openly, of course, but by innuendo. We are made to appear everything but what we are. The policy of " Let well enough alone," is the keynote of this play, bringing out the avarice and selfishness that, according to the Abbey school, is a part of our nature.

It has often been said by our enemies that to have a priest in the family is to be considered very respectable by the average Irish Catholic family, and to bring about this desired result we are willing to sell our immortal souls. All this, not from motives of piety, but to be considered respectable.

In the play *Maurice Harte* this is brought out very forcibly. The family sacrifices everything to keep the candidate for the priesthood in college. The candidate has no vocation, but he is not consulted at all. When this poor, spineless creature sees the members of the family have set their hearts upon his becoming a priest he lets matters drift till the day set for his ordination, and then we behold him going mad. All very far-fetched.

We do admit that we like to have a priest in the family—what Irish mother but will cherish this hope in her bosom for at least one of her sons, or that one of the daughters of the house will become the spouse of Christ ? Not, however, from such an unworthy motive as to be considered respectable, but from the pure motive of serving Almighty God.

The *Workhouse Ward* gives you nothing more edifying than the picture of two hateful old men snarling at each other in a truly disgusting manner.

Coats gives the picture of two seedy, down-at-elbows editors, who, while apparently the best of friends, still are thinking unutterable things of each other.

The Building Fund is a disgusting display of avarice and insincerity. It strikes at the roots of all we hold sacred, and instead of being sincere, religious Catholics, the family is depicted as grasping, miserly creatures, who have no real love for the Church. There is not a redeeming feature in the whole play.

Family Failing, to my notion, is the worst of the output. *Family Failing*, of course, is idleness and all it carries with it. It is a strong witness in favor of that old fallacy, so often repeated by our enemies, that it was not the cruelty of English laws that sent us forth wanderers, but our lazy, idle, shiftless ways. The curtain goes down after the last act of this play on a disgusting spectacle of a lazy uncle snoring asleep on one side of the stage, and his lazy nephew occupying the other side, snoring also.

Kathleen ni Houlihan is beautiful, but every one knows Yeats wrote this before he became a pagan and went astray. His *Countess Cathleen*, written since then, is a weird thing. [2] One can see he strives after his early ideals, but it is a failure, for who can picture a sincere, devout Catholic lady calmly selling her soul to the devil, even though it is to purchase the souls of her poor dependents. And it is a rather dangerous lesson it teaches to the weak minded, when the angel comes to console the weeping peasantry after the countess dies. Supposedly in damnation, he tells them she is saved, because of the good intention she had in selling her soul to Old Nick.

The Magnanimous Lover presents the nasty problem play. Of course our humiliation would not be complete without the "problem play." And the words that this play puts in the mouth of the Irish peasant girl!

My blood boiled as I listened. What on earth do our Irish peasants know about the nasty problems so much affected by certain writers of to-day? American newspaper correspondents have commented from time to time on the chastity of the Irish peasants, and even the hostile ones have marvelled at the complete absence of immorality among them. But what is that to the Irish National (?) dramatists?

It is plain to be seen the self-styled Irish writers affect the present-day style in vogue among French writers. We have seen the result of all this as far as France is concerned. To-day that once proud nation is in a pitiable condition. And so the Abbey crowd would bring about the same undesirable conditions in Ireland if they could. By clever innuendo they would take all the splendid ideals and noble traditions away from the Irish and leave them with nothing high or holy to cling to. But the Abbey butchers will not succeed. They are reckoning without their host. The Irish character is too strong and too noble to be slain by such unworthy methods.

The plays taken as a whole have no literary merit. The backers of the plays preach about Art with a capital A, but they have no artistic merit, for art is truth, and the plays are not true. The great majority of the plays are made up of nothing more than a lot of "handy gab." You can hear the same any day, in any large city in Ireland, indulged in by a lot of "pot boys," or "corner boys," as they are sometimes called. (May I be permitted to use the American vulgarity, "can-rusher," to illustrate what is meant by "corner boy?") Nor is the conversation much more edifying than would be indulged in by those doubtful denizens. . . .

With this dangerous enemy striking at the very strands of our life and from such a dangerous source, the necessity is greater than ever for the men and women of our beloved society to be earnest and honest in their efforts for the revival of Irish ideals. Brothers and Sisters everywhere, place a little history of Ireland in the hand of each little boy and little girl of the

ancient race, and all the Lady Gregories in the world will not be able to destroy an atom of our splendid heritage.

[2] The first performance of *The Countess Cathleen* was in 1899 ; *Kathleen ni Houlihan* was written in 1902.

From “ The Outlook,” December 16, 1911

In The Eyes of our Friends

The Irish Theatre

By Theodore Roosevelt

In the Abbey Theatre Lady Gregory and those associated with her—and Americans should feel proud of the fact that an American was one of the first to give her encouragement and aid—have not only made an extraordinary contribution to the sum of Irish literary and artistic achievement, but have done more for the drama than has been accomplished in any other nation of recent years. England, Australia South Africa, Hungary, and Germany are all now seeking to profit by this unique achievement.

The Abbey Theatre is one of the healthiest signs of the revival of the ancient Irish spirit which has been so marked a feature of the world’s progress during the present generation ; and, like every healthy movement of the kind, it has been thoroughly national and has developed on its own lines, refusing merely to copy what has been outworn. It is especially noteworthy, and is a proof of the general Irish awakening, that this vigorous expression of Irish life, so honourable to the Irish people, should represent the combined work of so many different persons, and not that of only one person, whose activity might be merely sporadic and fortuitous. Incidentally Lady Gregory teaches a lesson to us Americans, if we only have the wit to learn it. The Irish plays are of such importance because they spring from the soil and deal with Irish things, the familiar home things which the writers really knew. They are not English or French ; they are Irish. In exactly the same way, any work of the kind done here, which is really worth doing, will be done by Americans who deal with the American life with which they are familiar ; and the American who works abroad as a make-believe Englishman or Frenchman or German—or Irishman—will never add to the sum of first-class achievement. This will not lessen the broad human element in the work ; it will increase it. These Irish plays appeal now to all mankind as they would never appeal if they had attempted to be flaccidly “ cosmopolitan” ; they are vital and human, and therefore appeal to all humanity, just because those who wrote them wrote from the heart about their own people and their own feelings, their own good and bad traits, their own vital national interests and traditions and history. Tolstoy wrote for mankind ; but he wrote as a Russian about Russians, and if he had not done so he would have accomplished nothing. Our American writers, artists, dramatists, must all learn the same lesson until it becomes instinctive with them, and with the American public. The right feeling can be manifested in big things as well as in little, and it must become part of our inmost National life before we can add materially to the sum of world achievement. When that day comes, we shall understand why a huge ornate Italian villa or French chateau or make-believe castle, or, in short, any mere inappropriate copy of some building somewhere else, is a ridiculous feature in an American landscape, whereas many American farm-houses, and some American big houses, fit into the landscape and add to it ; we shall use statues of such a typical American beast as the bison—which peculiarly lends itself to the purpose—to flank the approach to a building like the New York Library, instead of placing there, in the worst possible taste, a couple of lions which suggest a

caricature of Trafalgar Square ; we shall understand what a great artist like Saint-Gaudens did for our coinage, and why he gave to the head of the American Liberty the noble and decorative eagle plume head-dress of an American horse-Indian, instead of adopting, in servile style, the conventional and utterly inappropriate Phrygian cap.

From New York “ Journal”

December 18, 1911 :—The hysterics and rowdyism that attended the opening of the Irish plays in New-York having died away, listen to a few facts concerning the extremely interesting and valuable work of Lady Gregory and her associates, the Irish playwrights and actors.

Some of those entirely ignorant of that which they discussed thought that the Irish players were wilfully irreligious, and others equally ignorant thought that they were weakly lacking in Irish patriotism.

As a matter of fact, the Irish playwrights and actors . . . are thoroughly imbued with the Irish spirit and are trying as well as they can to present certain Irish conditions and characters as they are, utilising literature and the drama as mediums.

. . . It was thought by some good people who had not seen the plays that they were irreligious in character and showed lack of respect especially for the Catholic faith. But this is not true.

In the play called *Mixed Marriage* all the bigotry and religious stupidity is shown by the old Protestant father. The unselfishness, real patriotism, courage, and broad-minded humanity in this play are the possessions of the Catholics—as is, indeed, usually the case in Ireland.

It is interesting to observe how real merit wins and overcomes ignorant prejudice.

Many of the very men that hissed and hooted at the Irish plays on the first night without listening to them now attend the performances regularly.

Those that enjoy most thoroughly the wonderful wit and pathos of the Irish race, as shown in these plays, are those Irish men and women.

Sara Allgood, as the old patient wife and mother in *Mixed Marriage*, is a perfect picture of the womanhood that has created Ireland.

Lady Gregory and her friends have rendered a real service to this country and to Ireland by bringing the plays here.

Our Irish theater ; a chapter of autobiography (1913)
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