Shadows from the Past: Sean O'Casey and the Abbey[*]

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Abstract: *This article examines the programme of the Abbey Theatre's Centenary commemorations, "abbeyonehundred", culminating in the Theatre's one-hundredth anniversary on 27 December 2004. In particular, the absence of plays by Sean O'Casey is noted from all but a touring programme, which, in his case, occurred after the anniversary itself. It is argued that this may be seen as a belated repercussion of the controversy surrounding the rejection of* The Silver Tassie *in 1928, and that a significant opportunity was lost by the current directorate of the Abbey Theatre to celebrate the memory of one of the most important Irish dramatists of the twentieth century.*

In the field of human endeavour a centenary is always a worthy cause for celebration. In the fickle world of the performing arts, any institution that can clock up a century of activity is particularly deserving of its royal or presidential telegram of congratulations. The Abbey's one-hundredth anniversary, on 27 December 2004, was a proud moment in the nation's history, and Ireland had every reason to commemorate the inaugural performances by the Theatre. The seed planted by W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, with Annie Horniman's all-important backing, has borne some fine fruit, and the tree would appear to be as vigorous as ever. Set up as the embodiment of the Irish National Theatre Society, the Abbey Theatre is today arguably Ireland's flagship cultural institution, as much a national icon as the shamrock itself. On the occasion of the Abbey's coming-of-age, in 1925, the Dublin correspondent of *The Times* registered the role that the Theatre had established for itself in the life of the nation in the following terms, "The stimulus of its imaginative criticism of Irish life has been felt throughout the land. Its satires have done much to break down barriers of prejudice between castes and creeds, and to bring realism into Irish intellectual life" (*The Times* 28 December 1925: 14). The writer associated the theatre directly with the country's recently achieved independence by recalling that "the rebels of 1916 were headed by two playwrights whose works in Gaelic and English respectively had been written for the Abbey stage and had foreshadowed their revolt." An auspicious start indeed for a national theatre.

The honour of planning the birthday celebrations for such an illustrious centenarian must also have been something of a headache. Appropriately enough the Theatre's management elected to commemorate its century of achievement with a carefully chosen programme of new productions and revivals, performed throughout the year. Drawing up the guest list for this year-long bash was therefore an exercise in honouring the giants of former times whilst at the same time paying due homage to the talents of today, upon whose strengths the Abbey's future depends. However, the name of one dramatist was conspicuously absent from the list. Although the Abbey's celebrations included a touring production of *The Plough and the Stars*, no play by Sean O'Casey was staged at the theatre itself as part of "abbeyonehundred". The members of the selection committee would undoubtedly have argued that no offence was intended to the memory of the playwright, and would probably even have said that there was no difference in status between those plays taken on tour and those performed on the Abbey stage itself. Were he alive, however, Sean O'Casey would most certainly not have agreed.

In *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* Christopher Murray had no hesitation in arguing that "O'Casey stands out as Ireland's greatest playwright of the century," justifying his statement as follows: "He it was who most passionately, most powerfully and most memorably dramatised the traumatic birth of the nation. He it was who gave to the twentieth-century theatre a greater range of vivid and original characters, male and female, than any other Irish playwright" (88). In the history of the Abbey, O'Casey's three Dublin plays were of pivotal significance in the Theatre's second phase, in the 1920s, as Declan Kiberd recalls when he points out that O'Casey "saved the Abbey from financial ruin by wooing large numbers of the Queen's audience to his plays" (220).

O'Casey's halcyon period with the Abbey was, of course, brought to an abrupt and premature end by the notorious rejection of *The Silver Tassie* by the board of directors on 30 April 1928. This questionable decision and the ensuing controversy provoked a rift between O'Casey and the Abbey that was never satisfactorily bridged. In addition to the centenary of the Abbey itself, 2004 also marked the eightieth anniversary of the Abbey première of O'Casey's most enduring success, *Juno and the Paycock*, on 3 March 1924, as well as the fortieth anniversary of the playwright's death, on 18 September 1964, either of which could have been profitably commemorated in the course of the abbeyonehundred celebrations. Were he alive today Sean O'Casey would undoubtedly have interpreted the relegation of *The Plough and the Stars* to the Abbey's outreach programme as proof of the long shadow still cast by the *Silver Tassie* decision, a ghost not yet laid to rest.

A close reading of the six volumes of Sean O'Casey's autobiography, published over a fifteen-year period from 1939 to 1954, leaves no doubt as to the significance that O'Casey attached to the Abbey directors' decision. The first evidence that O'Casey had begun work on his "semi-biography" comes in a letter to Charlotte Shaw in November 1931 (Krause 1975, 441), just three and a half years after the rejection of *The Silver Tassie*. The timing is highly significant, for the *Autobiographies* offer a very different

perspective on O'Casey's former colleagues at the Abbey from that provided by the letters that he wrote prior to the traumatic affair. (For an extended investigation of this question, see Harris 2004.) O'Casey's attitude towards those whom he considered to be directly or indirectly involved with the rejection of his play was marked by a profound ambivalence, a characteristic which is not discernible in relation to writers who deceased prior to 1928 or those of his contemporaries who publicly expressed their solidarity with him during the controversy itself.

In 1928, the board of directors of the Abbey Theatre was made up of W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and Lennox Robinson, as well as Dr. Walter Starkie, the Irish Government's representative, appointed to safeguard the administration of the state subsidy to the theatre, who was strongly in favour of O'Casey's play being produced. Although O'Casey's relationship with the Abbey Theatre and its directors was by no means entirely negative, the rejection of *The Silver Tassie* in 1928 had indelibly stained his recollection of his former associates by the time he started work on the first volume of his autobiography in the 1930s. *The Silver Tassie* was not, of course, the first play of O'Casey's that the Abbey had refused. In 1920 the Theatre had turned down his first two plays *The Frost in the Flower* and *The Harvest Festival* and, two years later, *The Seamless Coat of Kathleen* and *The Crimson and the Tri-Colour* were also rejected. O'Casey finally got his toe in the door in November 1922, when the board accepted *On the Run*, which received its première as *The Shadow of a Gunman* on 12 April 1923.

In *Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well*, the fourth volume of his autobiography, begun in 1945 and published in 1949, O'Casey provides an accurate summary of the positive critique of *The Crimson in the Tri-Colour* that Lady Gregory wrote in October 1921, and of which a copy was sent to him in confidence by Lennox Robinson on 5 November (Krause 1975, 96). Despite her initially favourable reaction, *The Crimson in the Tri-Colour* was eventually rejected by the Abbey board, the decision being communicated to O'Casey by Lennox Robinson in a letter dated 28 September 1922. The reason for the delay of almost a year in the Theatre's directors coming to their final decision was that Lennox Robinson lost the manuscript for a time.[1] The shocking news that the manuscript had been lost only served as a renewed incentive to the eager playwright to prepare another play for submission:

> He had made up his mind years ago that the Abbey Theatre curtain would go up on a play of his; and up it would go, sooner or later. First decide slowly and deeply whether it is in you to do a thing; if you decide that you can, then do it, even though it kept you busy till the very last hour of your life. Maybe, too, the play would be found again; and so, in the meantime, he would go on writing another play (O'Casey 98).

It is a measure of the profound ambivalence that O'Casey felt towards the Abbey that the very same paragraph that opens with this expression of the determination of his

forty-two-year-old self to have a play staged at the theatre concludes with his reassessment, with the hindsight of sixty-six years, of the relative insignificance of the plays actually staged by the Theatre:

> It was years after, when he had left Ireland forever, that bitterness, mingled with scorn, overtook him, for he began to realise that the plays refused by the Abbey Theatre were a lot better than many they had welcomed, and had played on to their stage with drums and colours (O'Casey 98).

Almost two decades after the rejection of *The Silver Tassie* O'Casey's rancour continued to render his view of the Abbey Janus-faced.

Sean O'Casey was to deny consistently that he had suffered any influence from W.B. Yeats. However, he was never to forget the terms employed in the notorious letter that Yeats dictated to his wife on 20 April 1928 (Krause 1975, 267-78), and we see them echoing throughout his writing well into his advanced years, rankling away in his subconscious like a festering sore. Yeats was thus an inescapable negative influence on O'Casey's thinking and writing. Even Yeats's remark, clearly intended as a compliment, that, in the Dublin plays, O'Casey had "moved us as Swift moved his contemporaries" seemed to be salt in O'Casey's wounded pride. On 3 April 1939, eleven years after Yeats's wife had penned the fateful letter, O'Casey, writing to Gabriel Fallon, insisted that he had read nothing by Swift:

> Like W.B. & L.R. once saying I was the present-day Swift (maybe I am), but no thanks to Jonathan – I never read him, either – not even "Gulliver's Travels". All I know of him is "The Writing on the Window Pane" [by W.B. Yeats – 1934], & "Yahoo" [by Lord Longford – 1933] (Krause 1975, 789).

Almost twenty years later, O'Casey was still pointedly denying anything more than a superficial knowledge of Swift's writing, as may be seen in his letter to Robert Hogan of 25 April 1958 (Krause 1989, 598).

In O'Casey's immediate reply to Yeats's criticism he reserved particular scorn for the precept that "the whole history of the world must be reduced to wallpaper in front of which the characters must pose and speak," which he described as containing nothing but "the pretentious bigness of a pretentious phrase." He went on to argue that it was in their very attempts to follow the terms of this prescription that the Abbey playwrights of the time were revealing themselves to be most deficient in their craft, since this was exactly "... what most of the Abbey dramatists are trying to do – building up little worlds of wallpaper, and hiding striding life behind it all." (Krause 1975, 272). Like any generalisation, such a statement is as easily challenged as confirmed. It would scarcely be fair, for example, to describe an ambitious attempt at analysing the changing state of Ireland like Lennox Robinson's *The Big House* (1926) as a mere world of wallpaper. On the other hand, the plays of George Shiels, produced at almost annual

intervals between 1921 and 1948 are considered by Peter Kavanagh and others to be a "great vulgarizing influence on the Abbey Theatre." Kavanagh goes on to say:

> Shiels was a dramatic journalist rather than a playwright. His work proved vastly amusing to audiences interested only in the superficialities of life. Any subject was good enough; many of his plays really had no subject at all. There was never any danger of his offending the crowd, and everyone was satisfied except those interested in genuine comedy" (147).

Whether or not the Abbey playwrights in general were heeding Yeats's advice, O'Casey was unable to erase the phrase from his consciousness. Thus, on 28 July 1928, about three months after receiving Yeats's letter, when he read of Lennox Robinson's impending lecture tour of the United States, he wrote to his friend Gabriel Fallon, commenting scornfully that, "The Boston Sun has it that LNX R[obinson] is going this Winter to tour America lecturing about how to pattern properly Yeats's worlds of Wallpaper" (Krause 1975, 302).

The phrase surfaces again, sixteen years later, as the subtitle of one of O'Casey's least successful plays, *Oak Leaves and Lavender*, written in 1944 and first performed in 1946. The play is an attempt to pay homage to Britain for the stand taken against Hitler during the Battle of Britain in 1940. The subtitle, *A World on Wallpaper*, fuses the words "war" and "world" in a satirical reference to Yeats's comment. More than a decade later, when O'Casey himself was almost eighty years old, we can detect his angry words to Yeats underlying his comment, in a letter to Ronald Ayling, at that time a twenty-three-year-old student working for his MA at Nottingham University. Writing on 21 March 1958 he stated that *The Silver Tassie* was written at a period when he had become aware "how meagre and mean were the plays that the Abbey did" (Krause 1989, 570).[2] Meagreness and meanness are the essential qualities represented by the ambiguous metaphor of wallpaper which, for Yeats, represented a static backdrop against which to stage a drama, but which O'Casey understood to be a superficial covering hiding an ugly and rotten structure beneath it.

The ambivalence in O'Casey's attitudes before and after the Abbey's rejection of *The Silver Tassie* is seen most dramatically in the case of Lennox Robinson. The correspondence exchanged between O'Casey and Lennox Robinson before the events of April 1928 presents a remarkably different picture of the relationship between the two men from that drawn in the *Autobiographies*, so much so that one might be excused for believing that there were two Lennox Robinsons. Although the number of letters in question is not great (David Krause collected five letters written by Lennox Robinson to O'Casey, and ten written by O'Casey to Robinson in the period prior to the letter of 9th May 1928, when Robinson returned the manuscript of *The Silver Tassie* to its author), they nonetheless enable us to draw some reasonable conclusions about the relationship between the two men at that time.

Despite the fact that the majority of these letters deal with the formal process of the submission and rejection of O'Casey's early manuscripts, it is immediately

apparent that they contain no suggestion of the irony with which O'Casey was to view the figure of Robinson in retrospect. Indeed, they reflect a mutual respect, not to say admiration, that existed between them. On 29 December 1923, for example, O'Casey wrote Lennox Robinson a letter thanking him for what was probably a Christmas present:

> I was delighted with the volume of Tchehov's Plays for two reasons: because I wanted to read them – I have read some by the same Author, lent to me by Arthur Shields, The Cherry Orchard, etc – and was anxious to read more; and because your name is in the book, a fact of which I shall be a little proud. It was a thoughtful gift and a kindly tribute, and I thank you very much. I spent a most enjoyable evening on Friday looking at, and listening to your White-headed Boy.
> It is a glorious work – I mean *glorious*, mind you – and as you envy every word of Lady Gregory's Jackdaw, I envy you every word of the White-headed Boy. This is no hasty opinion, for I read the Play before I went to see it, and though honestly, I thought at first, I was going to be disappointed, I soon found myself laughing, and it takes a good man to make me laugh, now (Krause 1975, 107).

Although O'Casey was forty-three years old when he wrote this letter, one could be forgiven for thinking that the words are those of a star-struck teenager. At one point in the autobiography O'Casey does indeed admit to having idolised Robinson before disillusion set in. He registers the change in his attitude as occurring around about the time of his imprudent criticism of the Abbey's revival of Shaw's *Man and Superman* on 10 August 1925. Lennox Robinson's reaction, upon being shown O'Casey's tactless letter, was to murmur "in an ethereal voice ... 'It's just like Sean!'" On the following page O'Casey writes, "He began to question in himself the once-held thought that Lennox Robinson was as near to knowing all about things theatrical and literary as any educated man could be" (157).

O'Casey's correspondence at this time, however, reflects no significant change in his opinion of Lennox Robinson. On the contrary, in a letter written just a couple of weeks after the *Man and Superman* incident, he suggests that his opinion of Robinson's professional capacity was as high as ever. On Saturday, 22 August 1925, O'Casey had arrived at Coole Park, where he was to spend a summer holiday of two weeks in the company of Lady Gregory. On 30 August, in the second letter he wrote to his closest friend, the part-time Abbey actor, Gabriel Fallon, whilst he was there, he confided that he was eager for Lennox Robinson to produce *The Plough and the Stars*, "What do you mean by a "good Producer"? I'm anxious that Lennox Robinson should produce the play. As soon as he returns to Dublin I'll ask him" (Krause 1975, 143).

Since the beginning of his career as an Abbey playwright O'Casey had had ample opportunity to compare Lennox Robinson's work as a director with that of others.

Apart from all the other plays that he had watched at the Theatre, there was also the fact that his first two plays (*The Shadow of a Gunman*, in April 1923, and *Cathleen Listens In*, in October of the same year) had been directed by Lennox Robinson, while the next two (*Juno and the Paycock,* in March 1924, and *Nannie's Night Out*, in September that year) had both been directed by Michael J. Dolan. Sean O'Casey obviously had no doubt about which of the two was the more competent.

Although the last reference to Lennox Robinson in *Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well* presents him as a figure of ridicule in the March 1924 production of *At the Hawk's Well* – "Passively funny was the sight of Mr. Robinson doing a musician," (O'Casey 233) –, thus implying that it was in this light that O'Casey saw him as he set sail for England in early March 1926, O'Casey's correspondence gives the lie to this too. For example, on 1 October 1926, after he had been living in London for almost seven months, he wrote to Gabriel Fallon mentioning the fact that, "Robbie sent me a copy of "White Blackbird & Portrait" [two plays by Robinson which had been first performed in 1925], which I (shamefully) didn't even acknowledge yet" (Krause 1975, 207). The intimate use of Robinson's nickname seems to suggest a continuing cordiality between them. In another letter to Fallon, written just two days afterwards, he seems to criticise his friend for underestimating the quality of Lennox Robinson's *The Big House*, which had opened at the Abbey Theatre the previous month (Krause 1975, 208). A couple of months later, on Christmas Eve, in fact, he wrote to Lady Gregory expressing his sincere hope that the Abbey was doing well, and reporting enthusiastically that, "The "Whiteheaded Boy" is doing splendidly here" (Krause 1975, 211).

O'Casey's apparent enthusiasm for Lennox Robinson and his works was reciprocated by Robinson himself, so much so that, in mid-March 1928, he greeted the arrival of the manuscript of *The Silver Tassie* with an uncharacteristically hearty "Three cheers!" (Krause 1975, 232). Even after reading the play and believing that O'Casey would need to rethink the last two acts, when Robinson wrote to Lady Gregory in April, he still referred to the playwright's "genius" (Krause 1975, 238).

It is only after the rejection of *The Silver Tassie* that the tone of O'Casey's epistolary remarks about Lennox Robinson undergoes the profound transformation that was to be reflected later in his *Autobiographies*. Gone are the chummy references to "Robbie." In letters to Gabriel Fallon, the nomenclature employed by O'Casey passes progressively from the impersonally contemptuous "Robinson," on 16 May 1928 (Krause 1975, 247), to the anonymous "LNX R," on 28 July, (Krause 1975, 302), and "LNXR," on 3 September (Krause 1975, 310). A letter to Lady Gregory on 7 November that year refers to "L.S.R" (Krause 1975, 319), sarcastically invoking the second names, Esmé Stuart, that Robinson elected not to use. In a letter to Gabriel Fallon, penned the same day, O'Casey refers to "Links" (Krause 1975, 322), and, by 9 January the following year, in another letter to Fallon, he reached the nadir of anthropomorphic satire with "Lynnx" (Krause 1975, 331).

At the same time, O'Casey's previously held opinions about Lennox Robinson as a playwright and a theatre director were subjected to exhaustive revisionism. The

same man who had so breathlessly praised the dialogue in *The Whiteheaded Boy* in 1923 now wrote to Fallon, on 16 May 1928, profoundly offended by the suggestion that he should take Robinson's dialogue as an object lesson in dramatic technique, "And did Yeats really say that "if I could only write dialogue like Robinson?" Holy God, he's adding insult to injury!" (Krause 1975, 247). In a letter to Lady Gregory on 7 November 1928 he declared that, "What Robinson does, or does not, doesn't matter much – he'll never add one jot or tittle to life or literature ... " (Krause 1975, 319). Writing to Gabriel Fallon the same day he rejoiced in the *Dublin Opinion*'s negative review of Robinson's latest play, *The Far-off Hills*, arguing that Robinson had never produced any work as good as his very first play, "Dublin Opinion's opinion of "Far Off Hills" seems to say the play's not the thing. Anyhow, you can't build flesh & blood structures on tea and toast. He never rose above his "The Clancy Name"" (Krause 1975, 321). In the light of such causticity, it is scarcely surprising that the comments on Lennox Robinson in *Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well*, notwithstanding the long interval that had elapsed before it was written, should be so unremittingly satirical.

Although it only took the Abbey seven years to reverse its decision and grant *The Silver Tassie* its Irish première on 12 August 1935, it took Sean O'Casey considerably longer to exorcise the ghosts from his past. In the case of Lady Gregory, of course, he left it too late, for her death in 1932 deprived him of the chance to make amends for his petulant snubbing of her request to visit him in London in 1929. Lady Gregory had written to him from Dublin, a couple of days before setting off to London. Her letter was written on 11 October, the same night that *The Silver Tassie* opened at London's Apollo Theatre, and she wished it success, saying that she hoped to see it and also to see him and his wife and son, whom she had never met, whilst she was in London (Krause 1975, 368-698). In his reply, dated 15 October, O'Casey wrote that he felt "it would be much better to set aside, for the present, the honour & pleasure of seeing you & talking with you" (Krause 1975, 369), justifying this by arguing that he might say things about Yeats and Robinson that might hurt her. In a note to the letter, David Krause records that he read this letter to Sean O'Casey in 1963, when he was compiling the first volume of the *Letters*. O'Casey groaned when he heard it and said, "That was one letter I should never have written, especially that cruel last sentence, to my poor dear Lady Gregory! But I suppose my wounds were still raw and I wasn't strong enough or wise enough to forgive and forget" (Krause, 1975: p. 369 n.). Pricked by remorse over this error of judgement, O'Casey made his peace, on a personal level at least, with Yeats before the latter's death in January 1939. He was also prepared to temper his dismissal of Lennox Robinson's play-writing skills. At the age of seventy-seven, when *Juno and the Paycock* was selected for the 1957 Tostal Week, O'Casey wrote to Eric Gorman on 14 May and went so far as to say that Robinson's *Whiteheaded Boy* would have been a worthier choice for the festival (Krause 1989, 429).

What remains, however, is the evident rancour towards the Abbey that fuelled the writing of the *Autobiographies*, whose final full stop was penned on 20 September

1953. Perhaps as a result of his Protestant upbringing as much as of his combative personality Sean O'Casey found it extremely difficult to forgive and forget. Almost exactly half a century later, on 19 November 2003, the Abbey Theatre announced its centenary programme. An attentive analysis of the menu for this thespian feast leads one to the conclusion that, as far as the Abbey's current directors are concerned, O'Casey still does not deserve inclusion as a main course.

On the Abbey's Internet homepage, Artistic Director Ben Barnes described the abbeyonehundred programme as "both diverse and extensive" and anticipated that "the Abbey will have over thirty openings and hundreds of performances in Ireland and throughout the world in 2004 as it reaches out to over a million people" (http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/abbey100). Grouped around five themes or seasons, the plays were chosen with evident care to reflect the full range of the Abbey's work throughout its one-hundred-year history. Given that the Birthday itself fell on 27 December, the five seasons were scheduled to fill the year from January to December. Thus, the season entitled "The Abbey and New Writing" ran from January to June 2004, "confidently celebrat(ing) and showcast(ing) a range of plays from leading Irish writers both new and established," including work by Paula Meehan, Peter Sheridan, Stuart Carolan and Eugene O'Brien, and returned in December with an additional play by Paul Mercier. From January to May, "The Abbey and Europe" season included Tom Murphy's new version of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, a play which, like the Abbey itself, was completing its first century. The season also comprised Seamus Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes*, based on Sophocles' *Antigone*, and the guest appearances of three European theatre companies.

From May to September the "Summer at the Abbey" season was calculated to "celebrate the range and depth of the repertoire and to appeal to a local and visitor audience". The season included Boucicault's *The Shaughran* and Stewart Parker's *Heavenly Bodies*, as well as a new play by Colm Tóibin, *Beauty in a Broken Place*. The centrepiece of the season, however, with a month-long run from 5 August to 11 September, was Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*. Ben Barnes's production, which "promise(d) to celebrate and commemorate one of the classics of Irish theatre on a national and international scale", entered the Abbey repertory in between the two stages of its Irish and American tour. Prior to its arrival at the Abbey the production was seen by Irish audiences, from June onwards, at venues in Galway, Letterkenny, Belfast, Dundalk, Cork, Kilkenny and Sligo. After its Abbey slot the production went on to a three-month US tour, taking in New Haven, Philadelphia, Stamford, New York, Boston and Chicago. In addition, the "Marking and Remarking" section of the centenary programme, dedicated to commemorative initiatives in print and other media, underlined the *Playboy*'s position as flagship production for the year with the publication of a "book describing the page to stage process of the 2004 production of this Abbey classic play with an accompanying DVD".

On the Abbey stage, the "Summer at the Abbey" season was followed, from September to November, by "The Abbey and Ireland", a season comprised of seven

"classic plays from the repertoire" and ten "rehearsed readings of plays representative of each of the decades of the first one hundred years". The full productions included Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, Marina Carr's *Portia Coughlan*, Yeats's *Purgatory* and Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, as well as plays by Bernard Farrell and George Fitzmaurice. (Plans to give an airing to Lennox Robinson's *Drama at Inish* in this section were quietly shelved after the initial announcement of the programme.) At the beginning of October, Abbey audiences also had an opportunity to see a revival of Ben Barnes's 2001 production of Tom Murphy's *The Gigli Concert*, upon its return from its tour to the Australian cities of Sydney and Brisbane. The "Reading the Decades" fortnight of dramatised readings in the Abbey Theatre Rehearsal Room ensured that a series of important names were included in the festivities: Lady Gregory, G.B. Shaw, T.C. Murray, Denis Johnston, George Shiels, M.J. Molloy, Walter Macken, Thomas Kilroy, Tom MacIntyre, Sebastian Barry and Brian Friel, – a resounding roll-call.

Finally, for some of those unable to get to Dublin, there was "The Abbey on Tour", an outreach programme taking three of Ben Barnes's productions to cities in Ireland, Australia, the USA and the UK, supposedly from June to December. As we have seen, two of these productions also made their appearance on stage at the Abbey as well. The third play to be taken on tour was the 2002 production of O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*. At first sight, the inclusion of a "critically acclaimed" staging of O'Casey's powerful play was apparently an appropriate acknowledgement of the importance of a dramatist who played such an instrumental role in the Abbey's history in the 1920s. However, further analysis suggested that this was a somewhat half-hearted homage. Unlike the other two touring productions, O'Casey's play did not get a look-in on the Abbey stage itself. More significantly still, the tour of *The Plough and the Stars* did not take place until January 2005, after the champagne corks had popped on 27 December. The "tour" in fact consisted of a staging at a single venue, London's Barbican. It is perhaps symptomatic of the appendant nature of this final item in the Abbey's celebratory programme that, in late October 2004, the Barbican's information officers were unaware that the Abbey players would be coming in the New Year!

Any reader of "The Sleeping Beauty" will need no reminding of the difficulties inherent in drawing up guest-lists. While the abbeyonehundred programme paid due recognition to the significance of Synge and Yeats in the Theatre's history, supporters of Lennox Robinson were undoubtedly mystified by the axing of *Drama at Inish*, and Lady Gregory's fans were peeved that her work received no more than a dramatised reading. However, neither of these playwrights was involved in a much-publicised dispute with the Theatre such as that generated by the rejection of *The Silver Tassie* in 1928. The staging of *The Plough and the Stars* in the UK after the finale of the year-long centenary commemorations sent out a regrettably mixed message. As we look forward to the Abbey's next hundred years it would have been welcomed by all if the current board of directors had dealt more unequivocally with the Theatre's shadows from the past.

Notes

* Acknowledgements are due to FAPESP (The São Paulo State Research Support Foundation) for financial assistance received under Grant no. 04/02342-7, which made it possible to present this paper at IASIL 2004 at the National University of Ireland in Galway.

1 The first play that O'Casey submitted to the Abbey in typescript was *The Seamless Coat of Kathleen*, on 10 April 1922, after he had bought a second-hand typewriter. Prior to that, all his plays were hand-written and, for that reason, he had no second copy of them. See O'Casey's letter to R.D. Dougan, written in 1957, for the full story of the lost manuscript. Even then, thirty-six years after the event, it appears that Sean O'Casey and his wife were still obliging Lennox Robinson to search for the manuscript! (Krause 1989, 428, 428n).

2 Later in the same letter O'Casey refers to articles by David Krause and Brooks Atkinson analysing the impact that *The Silver Tassie* itself had on later drama, and citing Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* as a play that had suffered such an influence. It was perhaps due to her wish to explore this link that, on leaving America for her trip to England in 1956, Marilyn Monroe was reported as saying that Sean O'Casey was the one man she wanted to meet there!

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