

School of English, Media and Theatre Studies,  
National University of Ireland, Maynooth

Module Code: EN631: Mini-Dissertation

---

W.B. Yeats,  
1904 Popular Theatre and the Politics of  
Cuchullain.

By

Niamh Ennis

A mini-dissertation submitted in part fulfilment for the MA in Twentieth Century  
Irish Writing and Cultural Theory

Supervisor: Professor Chris Morash

Submitted: 05 August 2010

# Contents

Introduction_____	2
Chapter One – What Was Going On In 1904?_____	4
Chapter Two – Yeats’ Theory on Theatre_____	18
Chapter Three – Theory in Action? On Baile’s Strand_	35
Conclusion_____	51

## **INTRODUCTION:**

“Last night the new theatre which the Irish National Theatre Society has...was opened under the happiest auspices...Long before the curtain rose the pit and gallery were packed...*On Baile’s Strand* is one of the best acting plays that Mr Yeats has written...there is less of the mystical and more of the human element in the composition than in most of Mr Yeats dramas [and] the characters are virile and actual” (1976, 128-9). This quote, from *the Freeman’s Journal*, illustrates the initial success and relevance of The Abbey’s opening play, Yeats’ *On Baile’s Strand*. However, what one doesn’t get from this review, is the reality of the mundane Abbey. In 1904, as the first chapter of this thesis shall illustrate, The Abbey Theatre held one of the smallest crowds in Dublin, and its success on opening night was nothing in comparison to the audience Queen’s Theatre just over the River Liffey held the very same night. Yeats’ brand of theatre was by no means popular in comparison to the melodramas of J.W. Whitbread. Yet, as will be illustrated in chapter two, Yeats set out to prove that his ‘Theatre of Art’ was to go against that very commercial and political type of Irish play that theatres like Queen’s performed, not to mention the horribly materialistic types of entertainment at the other main Dublin theatres. He was going to do it by blending “the simplicity and responsiveness to the supernatural and the esoteric that he associated with the west of Ireland peasantry” (2005, 12). Also he was going to add the elegance of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy which he related to a premodern time of “chieftains and kings” that was, in his words, “noble” (2005, 160&158).

But against popular belief, he was going to present it in English. This is the reason many thought he was not fulfilling the job he set out to do; to create a ‘national’ theatre. Yet before this point, “all Irish nationalist popular political

movements” had reverted to the use of English in their “propaganda” (2005, 44). However, as regards the furious debate as to whether Yeats was an active republican, it appears he was never seriously aligned with any of these political movements. Rather, as he stated in *Samhain* countless times, he thought propaganda and the use of it in plays was not a viable solution to the Irish question. He instead chose symbolism to demonstrate his own political beliefs, refusing to force politics on anyone. His main aim was to present the living speech of the people and the character of the Irish person. Yet, with *On Baile’s Strand*, Yeats only achieved some of his aims. His political ideals were kept under the guise of tension between Cuchullain and an added character Conchubar, yet his aim of living speech was seriously undermined by his occult associations and the chanting used in these groups. The final chapter shall illustrate how *On Baile’s Strand* both fulfilled and undermined the playwright’s attempts at creating a New Ireland, where politics were not at the forefront of art, where they would force people to “tare each other’s character to pieces” (1997,189).

## **CHAPTER ONE: What was going on in 1904?**

Around the time William Butler Yeats was planning his national theatre with Lady Gregory (and this was said to begin after a conversation at Coole in 1898), there were already a few well-known commercial playhouses in Dublin. Queen's Royal Theatre was said to be the most important in the period between Yeats' first idea and the realisation of this idea, some would say, especially DeBurca who held that "before the Abbey...the Queen's was known and loved by every Dublin man and woman" (1973,17). But there were other theatres in business too; including The Gaiety Theatre, The Tivoli, Theatre Royal and The Empire (formally the Star of Erin Music Hall), and as DeBurca is P.J. Bourke's (a lead playwright for Queen's) son, he gives a rather biased account of theatre life. Yet Queen's, formally known as the Adelphi, was probably the most important in the context of this dissertation; because of the fact that it performed Irish plays. According to Morash it was the "self-proclaimed 'Home of Irish Drama' " (2002, 109). But this wasn't the only genre played there. It may have been the only place in Dublin to show Irish work before the Abbey opened, but what is interesting is the types of works it shared with the other theatres around Dublin. This is the main thing Yeats in his theory of theatre seems to be working against.

The first thing Queen's was known for at the time was the annual Christmas pantomime, a tradition which it shared with the Gaiety, and more importantly, British theatres, a fact that Yeats disliked, and has no relation to any idea of 'national' theatre. According to DeBurca, the pantomime is "a survival from Shakespeare"; that of men playing women on the stage (1973, 11). Yet, as he is not an academic, this assertion is not necessarily true, although Shakespeare's theatre had been known for cross-dressing. The most important period for the pantomime was also the most important for Irish plays in Queen's surprisingly, that of the management of J.W. Whitbread

between 1882 and 1907. Whitbread particularly “flourished...in the 80s” according to De Burca (1973, 11). Until 1951, “pantomime” was “an annual event” (11). Queen’s Royal Theatre did many productions of old fairytales including *Dick Whittington’s Cat* in 1882 and *Jack and the Beanstalk* in 1910 (1973, 11-12). These examples (given by De Burca) are interesting because they were written by British people, or at least for the British stage. *Dick Whittington’s* was written by an esquire named Fred R. Evanson and *Jack and the Beanstalk* was written by the same person who wrote the “Drury Lane London pantomimes”, J. Hickory Wood (1973, 11-12). Yet the programmes fascinatingly advertise Dublin scenery and costume shops, meaning that the production wasn’t completely foreign, even if the sets offered in the advertisements were designed for “Cromwellian, Williamite and Georgian periods” (12). Yet *The Irish Times* somewhat contradicts this “annual” pantomime assertion of De Burca’s, as after Whitbread started writing plays, the number of Christmas pantomimes decreased and instead the usual St Stephen’s day slot was filled with his political and other dramas. They performed *Little Bo Peep* in 1896 and for the following years up until the year that is of interest to this dissertation, 1904, there is no reference to any Christmas pantomime (Irish Times, 6).

But Queen’s is not the only theatre known for its Christmas pantomimes; The Gaiety was, and still is. The Gaiety opened in 1871 and was the Dublin location of an already established theatre as there had been a Gaiety in London since 1864. The London Gaiety played some of the common genres that re-occurred in some Dublin theatre; musical comedy and opera. The Gaiety Dublin has hosted a pantomime every year since the mid 1850s. On the theatres website, they pride themselves on bringing “the highest quality musical...entertainment”, which is true since their main genres overlap with the London Gaiety, “Opera, musicals, drama ...comedy, concerts”.

Musical productions are their forte, and the late 1800s and early 1900s were no exception. According to Chris Morash, “only [the Gaiety’s] own annual Christmas pantomime” was produced by them and their company, meaning that everything else was done by touring companies in the 1870s and onwards, companies which were mainly English and American (2002, 104). This is an odd paradox as the pantomime being an import from Britain, still gave a British theatre feel to the only “home” produced play in the Gaiety’s repertoire (104). These touring companies took over the routes originally held by Smock Alley, introducing places like Belfast, Waterford and Cork to more international types of theatre. It can be said that “much of what appeared on the Gaiety stage originated in England” and the rest came from America (107).

The Gaiety had a pantomime every year without fail except for in 1898 when the *Irish Times* on the 20<sup>th</sup> December of that year reported that it has a “comic opera” in the place of “its usual custom” (3). The Theatre Royal also changed its usual format in that year, taking the opportunity to start having pantomimes of their own at Christmas time which started with a pantomime favourite *Cinderella* and continued annually up until 1901 when they returned to popular musical plays with “Geisha” (*Irish Times*, 21 December 1901, 6). They played some of the same pantomimes as the Gaiety, on alternative years of course, including *Aladdin*, which was performed in 1900 according to an advertisement in the *Irish Times* (5). Other pantomimes held in Theatre Royal include *Robinson Crusoe* in 1899 (*Irish Times* 23 December, 3). Yet this seemingly change of mode may only come as part of the Theatre’s historical bad luck as it was only rebuilt in 1897 after a fire in 1880 according to Morash (2002, 106). The only other playhouse to hold any sporadic pantomime in the 1890’s and early 1900’s was The Star Variety Theatre (*A Sweep for a King* in 1890) and The

Rotunda (which had a Wild West pantomime and *Cinderella* in 1892) (*Irish Times*, 2&6). This meant that The Gaiety was the main place for Christmas pantomime, holding *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Sinbad the Sailor* and *Aladdin* various years. More importantly, pantomime was a form the Abbey only took over in 1951, and The Abbey pantomime was different; they used actors of the right sex.

Whereas Christmas entertainment at the Gaiety was always pantomime, opera always reigned over other theatres such as the Rotunda and Theatre Royal and the Queen's sometimes had melodrama. In 1981 for example, Queen's held a performance of one of the first political melodramas of its long history; *The Nationalist*. But this was true for the rest of the year also. Musical comedies and operas were very popular in Dublin's theatres in the 1890's and early 1900's (which is the relevant time frame) and even earlier. The Gaiety, known for its musical theatre, even opened with a musical comedy in 1871 *She Stoops to Conquer* (Gaiety Website). Queen's was also known for its 'music-hall fare' in the time before Whitbread, but that would soon change. Around that time, The Star of Erin Music Hall was also popular with its many concerts. But of course this became the Empire, and like many other places, it then catered for the theatre-goers who enjoyed opera. Opera was considered a big thing for centuries in theatre. Fitz-Simon, an important writer on theatre, states that even in the 1800's, when many new theatres opened in the 1820's, this "did not mean an increase in drama for they all housed opera, operatta, music-hall variety and other types of spectacle" (1983, 84). Of course, Yeats would consider the drama that emerged later as spectacle also. Local companies were nowhere in sight either. Morash also agrees that opera was very widespread (2002, 108). The Gaiety and The Theatre Royal in particular "had their long term commitments to visiting...operatic companies from London, [even though] the Queen's was totally

given over to melodrama” (135). Yet Cheryl Herr would disagree here. According to her, Queen’s array of melodrama was “complimented by imported English companies...or a troupe like Mr F.S. Gilbert’s Grand Opera company, which would present such favourites as *Martiana, Il Trovatore...Faust...and Terra Diavolo*” (1991, 6). In a chapter entitled ‘dramatic trends 1800-1900’, Kavanagh calls opera, highlighting especially Italian opera, “one of the most popular forms of dramatic entertainment in Dublin” during that period, “the nineteenth century” (1946, 399).

Yet as Kavanagh discusses, this could not compete with tragic drama, in particular that of Shakespeare. This trend can be seen almost across the board as regards Dublin theatres. Shakespeare was seen to have influenced the dramatic art of Christmas pantomime, but his plays were also popular among the theatres. Even the Gaiety, which was known for musical fare, had “almost annual productions of *Hamlet*” according to Morash (2002, 107). He also quotes an actress Maire Ni Shiubhlaigh who commented that you could see “*Hamlet* or *Othello*” in theatres around the time, and it is true that those two were favourites (107). Henry Irving was a popular Shakespearean actor and he generally played in *Hamlet* and *Othello*, as maintained by Seamus De Burca (1973, 14). Shakespeare was believed, as indicated by Fitz-Simon, to “take precedence over all” and this is how it “should” be according to some (1983, 82). But musical theatre (including the opera) was still popular as people enjoyed music. Yet the opera was in decline because of its elitism and particularly the price. So musical comedy became popular, even if as Morash points out, it was “only a part” of theatre-fare (2002, 106). As Kavanagh quotes from *The History of the Theatre Royal* written in 1870, “‘funny’ entertainments are, at the present day generally more attractive to the public than regular drama” (1946, 400). In this Kavanagh can be said to be biased, due to his great dislike of the Abbey project,

as he bitterly wrote about later, so he would have deeply romanticised other forms of theatre. Yet all this dramatic art he referred to was imported; aside from Queens, everywhere else had foreign works by foreign companies. As Fitz-Simon describes, there was a “growing reliance upon London to provide the plays and the actors...and the theatrical fare was chosen much more with the audiences of Manchester or Bradford in view” (1983, 82). But it wasn’t just English and American actors. Christopher Morash states that “in addition to opera, Irish audiences were fond of non-English language performers” that were involved in dramas, comedy and Shakespearian works (2002, 108). Ibsen was also presented to Dublin crowds along with “Wild West plays” and American melodramas (107). There was, in line with Morash, “often little room for Irish plays” (2002, 108). In this The Queen’s Royal Theatre was an exception.

According to Kavanagh, the melodrama was a popular form since the 1800s because after the Act of Union, the nobles that would usually habituate Dublin and go to its theatres had moved to London or elsewhere and the theatre declined to a great extent. Whereas before there were an abundance of playhouses being filled, in the 1800s there was only one theatre (The Theatre Royal) that “scarcely [found] encouragement through daily supplied with first-rate performers from London” (1946, 395). Kavanagh is also known as a great supporter of The Theatre Royal so the former statement is subject to bias. The previously upper-class audience of the theatres was being replaced by “the common working man” and this audience wanted distraction from real life, which Kavanagh credits with “the popularity of the melodrama” which made this form become one of the “distinctive marks of the nineteenth century, more especially the last two decades” (396). This is where Queen’s Royal Theatre is very relevant, and contradicts Yeats’ own theory on Irish drama as needing to represent

real-life. J.W. Whitbread took over management of Queen's in 1882, and since then political melodramas were key to the playhouse's success. It was for the common man, and as Herr presents it in her collection of melodramas, melodrama was the closest thing to a proper representation of national folklore to the ambivalent theatre-going public in Dublin. The theatre was a place for "melodramatic tradition to blend with rural lore, historical research, current events...to create a new generic formation-the Irish political melodrama" (1991, 19). But she seems to assume that the melodrama is a better representation of real-life than Yeats' peasant, and not the extensive dramatisation of certain events as occurred in Whitbread's plays. This is an almost opposite argument to Kavanagh's who held melodramas as an escape. Kavanagh is more accurate in this case, but this will only become relevant in the second and third chapters.

Regardless of their motives, the Dublin community flocked to see Whitbread's plays and others like them. Queen's was much associated with melodramas and Herr proclaims in her introduction to *For the Land that They Loved* that "many of the plays that are most strongly associated with the flourishing of Queen's [are]... patriotic melodramas [that] had been popular in Ireland-plays such as Hubert O'Grady's *Famine* (1886) [and] Whitbread's *Wolfe Tone* (1898)" (1991, 4). Queen's always hosted a melodrama (usually by Whitbread) at Christmas, but according to both Herr and De Burca, Irish plays were performed one third of the year, or "fifteen weeks" (1991,6). Morash states that Whitbread wanted to produce profit from foreign productions but still "maximise [on] the Irish audience for Irish plays" (2002, 109). Although he still encouraged touring companies who visited to "whenever possible bring in Irish plays, so that for approximately ....fifteen weeks annually, the Queen's presented Irish material" (110). This included lent also, when not just melodrama was

played. Herr holds that “during Easter week or occasionally...the entire Lenten season...would be devoted to Irish history, melodrama, comedy and music” (1991, 6). This would then suggest a ‘national’ theatre of sorts if Irish work and culture was to be presented. These plays (and in particular the melodrama) was said to create a sense of community, a sense that the characters were real to the extent that audiences were said to be, according to Morash “bound....in what can only be described as pleasurable hatred....of a character who betrays his country”, creating a cult of the treatment of the informer in melodramas by people such as Hubert O’Grady and, of course, Whitbread (2002, 110). These plays were a move on from Boucicault’s influential style of the melodrama to ones with “a sharper political edge” (2002, 112).

The popularity of Whitbread’s melodramas can best be illustrated by Herr’s use of reviews. According to the *Evening Herald* the day after the opening of *Lord Edward*, there was a “crowded house” and Herr also says that “the paper found this play to be one of the most successful that Whitbread had produced” (1991, 7). But although the *Irish Times* reported that it “was impossible to get even standing room” in the popular sections of the theatre, it was nothing compared to comments on the opening of *Wolfe Tone* in December 1898. By the second performance on 26 December newspapers reported that “hundreds of people who thronged the doors, were obliged to go away” (1991, 8&9). Contrary to Yeats’ beliefs on the theatre, these plays were considered not like the Boucicault ‘stage-Irishman’ type, but rather to be in Holloway’s terminology “a little more of the genuine article...by a way of change” (9). Yeats makes no mention to Whitbread in his argument against melodrama (which will be discussed in Chapter Two), only Boucicault, so perhaps he isn’t able to argue against this. Another of Yeats’ arguments against plays before the Abbey is that they didn’t reflect the spoken word of the people, but the *Evening Herald*’s report on

Wolfe Tone, as referred to by Herr seems to disagree with this line of reasoning saying that “[Whitbread] has caught the vernacular... [and] draws his characters naturally....Of Irish characters he is a master” (1991, 9). Holloway also “noticed...the entire absence of buffoonery in the comic interludes” which seems to have been rare before (9). As Morash states, Boucicault travelled America with his plays about Irish people and had to suit America’s view of the Irishman, travelling to Ireland only with “American and English casts” (2002, 108). Whitbread on the other hand, regardless of his English roots, seems to have captured the Irish person in a non-caricature way. The only other Irish drama that appeared in Dublin briefly was that of Oscar Wilde whose works, according to Morash, premiered at the Gaiety for a short period in the mid 1880’s. Otherwise, The Queen’s Theatre was the main stage for Irish plays, although being by an English author; they are not necessarily ‘national’.

1904 was no exception to the forms and genres mentioned above. As of 1904, Joseph Holloway’s diaries are the best place to begin as he was a frequent attendee of the theatre and an everyday non-professional critic. The introduction to the microfilm at the National Library of Ireland sets him up as “regarded as one of the most fanatical theatregoers of all time... [who] attended almost every performance....in the period 1865 to 1944” (NLI,1985). The opening to his records are so extensive, they illustrate every performance at the Gaiety, Queen’s Theatre, Theatre Royal and various miscellaneous performances at The Tivoli, The Empire and The Rotunda, but most importantly, he charts the development of the Irish National Theatre Society from its use of assorted playhouses to finally its institution at the Abbey in December 1904. There is also details in the *Irish Times* archives of performances and reviews other than that of Holloway. But firstly, it would be helpful to reflect on then genres that still held precedence over Dublin Theatres. According to

Fitz-Simon, most plays were still “entirely “received” ” from England in 1904, or at least the works held at the “professional theatres” or what are referred to as “No. 1 venues” were (2004,8). At these theatres (named as the Theatre Royal and the Gaiety by Fitz-Simon) the usual genres such as opera and variety took hold, the latter taking over “forty-six weeks” of the programme as stated by Fitz-Simon (9). Opera seemed to be the main type of entertainment still, with thirteen different shows on offer, building on those aforementioned with a few new productions including *The Lily of Killarney* and *Tannhauser*. Opera was so popular, even Queen’s played *Faust* and *Maritana*. Yet for this ‘No 2 Venue’, Irish drama, and in particular melodrama, was still present.

Over the 11 months before the Abbey’s opening, Queen’s produced its usual array of James W. Whitbread melodramas along with, surprisingly, some of Boucicault’s work. Yet this was deemed the most important genre since as Fitz-Simon puts it, “with such widespread uniformity of product...anything even slightly different would have stood out; such was patently the case with the Irish plays presented mainly at Queen’s” (10-11). In January *Wolfe Tone* was revived, followed later in the month by an old play associated with Ireland despite the non-Irish author, *The Green Bushes*. This varies greatly from Yeats’ own idea of ‘national’ Irish works. The rest of the year progressed similarly with Whitbread’s other works *The Irishman* and *The Victoria Cross* (the latter whose topic was unexpectedly not Ireland) being revived in April. Boucicault’s work took up the summer months which included the much talked about *Arrah na Pogue* and *The Shaughran* (2004, 12). The programme returned to Whitbread then with *Lord Edward* and *The Insurgent Chief*, finishing up the autumn and continuing into winter with Hubert O’Grady; another melodramatist known for nationalist feeling.

It was only in the Christmas season show that something new was brought to the table; just in time to compete with The Abbey opening. Although Fitz-Simon seems to reject the possibility that this was purposefully done on Queen's part, Whitbread's new play *Sarsfield* (which was true to form with its topic of "the Siege of Limerick") drew great praise and systematically, crowds, the night before the Abbey opened (2004,17). Melodrama, after all, was popular among the theatre-goers of Dublin, at least those that "had some melodramatic element" fitted among the popular plays (14). Irish melodramas differed because of the political element and proved popular even in England where even Hubert O'Grady's "highly explosive material...passed as 'suitable for performance'" in accordance with Fitz-Simon's research (16). Even the characters were crafted to suit this highly political theme with the heroine often being the "embodiment of nationhood", the hero "trying to create...social reform" and the villain astonishingly rarely British but often an "agent of an absentee landlord or...an informer" (14).

Yet despite the popularity of that type of melodrama, nothing had changed in regards to importation of works. Shakespeare still overwhelmed all theatres; and especially the Number Ones. There were "three visiting companies" in 1904 and the usual favourites *Othello* and *Hamlet* were performed in The Gaiety in November joined by *Richard II* (9). The Theatre Royal also had some more upbeat offerings in the form of *Twelfth Night* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* along with the traditional tragedy *Julius Caesar* in the April of 1904. England's influences were also felt in performances of pantomimes for "eight weeks", with of course the traditional Christmas pantomime at the Gaiety that year being *Sleeping Beauty*, which also opened the previous night to the Abbey's debut (9). French works were also performed during 1904, including *La Dame aux Camellias* and *La Sorciere*.

Although Queen's seemed to differ from the import trend, it was no exception as Fitz-Simon points out - "most of its weekly attractions were light London comedies, thrillers and melodramas with the odd week of opera or musical comedy... often arriving at Dublin Queen's after fifty-two weeks or more on the road" (8-9). Holloway's recordings back up this trend with diary entries about Gaiety performances of *The Babes in the Wood*, *Othello*, *She Stoops to Conquer*, *Mary Queen of Scots* and *La Dame aux Camellias* among other foreign works from genres such as melodrama, opera and musical comedy (1904,2). What Fitz-Simon didn't mention was that as regards works by Shakespeare, The Gaiety also had productions of *Macbeth* and *As You Like It* (2&3). Nor does Fitz-Simon mention that Queen's hosted other operas called *Carmen* and *Satauella* in 1904 (1904, 10&11). Finally Fitz-Simon makes no reference to Christmas pantomimes, which are particularly important in relation to the time of year the Abbey opened, and should have been of importance to his due to the title of the chapter; "1904: Richness and Diversity Without the Abbey". Theatre Royal had a production of *Dick Whittington* in the Christmas season of 1904 according to Holloway and as mentioned previously, The Gaiety had *Sleeping Beauty*.

Christmas pantomimes were a common feature of Dublin theatres around Christmas time and St Stephens Day appears to be a traditional time to perform these pantomimes. In 1904, The Abbey opened the following day. The Irish National Theatre society had been performing their original works in various places all year and theatre-goers would have been aware of their work prior to the Abbey opening. Yeats' *The Shadowy Waters* had been played that year along with Lady Gregory's *Twenty-Five* and the *Townland of Tamney* by Seamus McManus according to Holloway (5) and it was a well-known fact that Miss Horniman intended to do

something with a disused theatre in Abbey Street when she had a meeting about it in June. Holloway speaks of this in his diary entry for Friday the 10<sup>th</sup> June, a night on which he went to a performance of Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and *The Shadow of the Glen* at Camden Street Theatre; he says that Miss Horniman's visit to Dublin about "The Abbey" Theatre was commented on and he was asked by many people "on the matter" as he was an architect on the project (285). In reading the microfilm of Holloway's diaries for 1904 It is also interesting to note that he often complained about the same thing Yeats did; the "buffoonery" in the representation of the Irishman on the stage, or as it is often referred to, 'the Stage Irishman'. Holloway also refers to the argument against such a representation in his 28<sup>th</sup> June entry along with many referrals to an official essay on the matter, stating that he loans the article to some people.

Holloway's diaries are also useful if one is interested in the architectural side of the Abbey and the objections it faced in June of 1904 and afterwards, but since the topic here is what Yeats' was reacting against in his theory on the stage, this dissertation shall carry on in that endeavour. Tracing the newspaper reports around the time of the Abbey opening (from the Irish Times) one can piece together what was being performed at the various theatres in December, particularly when the Abbey Theatre opened. The Gaiety and Theatre Royal hosted pantomime (Theatre Royal also had opera during the Christmas season), Queen's had a Boucicault favourite *The Colleen Bawn* and then a new Whitbread according to Fitz-Simon, The Kingstown Pavilion (which although not considered a theatre but still had entertainment) had a musical number called *Santa Claus, Santa Claus* and The Empire had some performers by the names of Jan Rudenyi, the Coloured Meisters and the Brothers De Wynne. So when The Abbey opened with *On Baile's Strand*, it was different from the

normal Christmas entertainment, regardless of the nationalist feeling in Whitbread's melodrama, and its so-called relation to Irish character and folklore.

## **CHAPTER TWO: Yeats' Theory on Theatre**

W.B. Yeats had a very specific theory on what Irish theatre and Irish literature should be. The best place to start is an essay written by him around the time of the opening of the Abbey, but not published until the 1906 edition of *Samhain*. In a footnote of the publication, he listed this essay as something that “gives a better account than anything [he had] written of certain dreams [he hopes] the theatre may in some measure fulfil” (1975, 347). These were ideas he developed over time, but the essay entitled “Literature and the Living Voice” is the best account of these ideas in their entirety and at full development. In many views of Yeats' writing, there is negativity that comes to many logical thinkers with those who believe in magic and the Occult. It is as if he cannot be relied upon to give a true representation of real life. People often refer to Yeats as ‘away with the faeries’ because of his beliefs, and this along with his place in theatre society, often makes one think that he has an idealised view of the life of the peasant, and that real life is far away from him. But, although his view of the life of the poor may be a little sugar-coated, it does not necessarily mean that he doesn't present some aspect of life as it was (or as he favours human emotion) in his plays, even if the main theme may be that of the heroic adventures of legendary characters. Also he uses his knowledge of educated life to his advantage to express the need for works of literature to suit the “common man” who after a hard day's work (unlike those who lead lives of leisure) would like to sit down to a play that represents their life and not have to try to understand some English work (a “meretricious book”) that needs study to comprehend (1906, 205&207). But some may wonder if he is doing the very same. Not according to Fay who said he wrote in the “humblest” way (1970, 52).

Yeats, in the 1906 essay, displays a dislike of English literature and theatre culture, particularly relative to Modernism. The same works and writers played everywhere according to him, and as can be seen in the previous chapter, this isn't quite an exaggerated view. A lot of playhouses (and music halls) held operas and musical comedies, although not quite to the extent Yeats holds. Yeats believed that the London music hall brand of theatre had taken over, and that this was meant to reflect a shared culture, but it didn't quite register everywhere. He recalls hearing some country boys singing songs from this culture, and he comments that this music is "impersonal as the noise of a machine" (1962, 203). He even goes as far as to say that music halls have ruined spoken theatre as it means people are used to words being limited by the musical notes, and the personal emotion is lost from song because songs are written for singers - "the thought became intricate and the measure grave and slow...declamation regulated by notes" (219). He himself aimed to find people who are better acquainted with "the singing of the cottage" (218). Speech to him was the most important thing in theatre, and in particular the real voice of the people, as indicated in the title of his essay. He even suggested that players read the lines assigned to them and then say how they themselves felt about the situation of the character, like Hyde's characters did.

Yeats himself was criticised for his work being unintelligible (according to him) because people were too used to the same musical fare everywhere. He states, "it is however... difficult to move those...whose ears are accustomed to the abstract emotion and elaboration of notes in modern music" (219). Speech should be the centre of songs not the musical accompaniment; songs should be written for "the word's sake" (217). He thought modern music does not contain "that richness of emotion"; the vivid speech of the storyteller (217). But music was popular and favoured by the

people; otherwise it would not have been so widespread. Yeats wanted theatre to return to an “old time” when speech was an art everybody practiced, in which case he is referring to oral culture in Ireland. It is not “literature” in his eyes, but it is real and common to everyone; “what we call culture” (203). It is not the literature of modern life that is, like fashion, written “to please themselves and to fit their lives”, them being “born to leisure”, what Yeats calls a “small cultivated class” (204&206). But, according to Morash, Yeats also wrote for the few; those who would understand his structure (2002, 117). English literature is not of the “folk” except for a few tales about Robin Hood (206).

There may emerge an issue here with language, when Yeats suggests performing the plays in English, rather than the true spoken language of these folktales, Irish. It seems that Irish Literature should be of the people and for them, but by someone who understands great world literature, putting him at the centre of this great destiny. This is a little presumptuous, even arrogant perhaps. But he has given a reason for it to be written in English beyond his own lack of understanding of Gaelic. People who speak English still have an interest in folk culture and although his main aim seems to be bring “the peasant” to the theatre, he also wants to save the disillusioned “spirits of Dublin”, presuming they speak English (210). Dublin, after all, is his main audience, and the ‘ugly’ modern art presented there, aside from opera, is in English. This is true, as can be seen from chapter one. Yeats disagreed with the forms of art presented around 1904, theatre that was “developing the player at the expense of the poet, developing the scenery at the expense of the player”; two areas Yeats was passionate about (213). This he blamed on commercialisation saying that the theatres were “doing whatever is easiest rather than what is noble” (213). He held that the poet or playwright should decide what was to be performed, and speech should be the centre

of the play, as it was before theatre traditions overrode speech as its subject. As he put it in his essay, “scenery...is little more than a suggestion” (211). He didn’t like musical fare due to its commercial nature and the fact that it stemmed from English theatres.

These theatres were polluting the system Yeats believed, but this was not entirely true. Melodramas were a form that could not be any more Irish, so he found another fault with these. Melodramas were his next biggest enemy as he refers to Boucicault and ‘the Stage Irishman’ a lot in his other writings. Here, he recognises that we can no longer “throw into our verses emotions and events of our lives, or even dramatise, as [storytellers] could, the life of the minstrel into whose mouth we are to put our words” (216). He is suggesting that he can only write what he knows about and that although he will try to represent the common man, it will in some way be only a representation. This is also a reflection on what plays about events the writer cannot have taken part in are like too; a poor representation dramatised for the audience’s pleasure. He thus accuses melodramas of being commercially driven. But he holds that he will not become a playwright who writes with “the restraints of commerce and custom” (211). He will not write what is popular, but to the best of his ability, what is true. And this isn’t exactly far from the truth. The Abbey was never particularly commercial in the early days, and Yeats never set out to make money or be incredibly rich, although he lived in relative comfort. Foster reflects on the fact that he often borrowed money from Lady Gregory to fund his interest in the Occult and Flannery, who wrote about Miss Horniman, refers to the fact that Yeats needed the aforementioned to pay for his lodgings as well as for the opening of the theatre itself, although this, one shall see later in the chapter, shall cause problems between Yeats, his ideals of a non-commercial theatre and Frank Fay.

Yeats accepts that a full return to this time of “exaltation of life itself” (207) would be almost impossible and a new form of the old is all he can hope for; it can never be “as good as that we have lost” (217). Yeats acknowledges the limits he must face in the implementation of his ‘dreams’ for the theatre. He recognises his minimal place in this great reformation, and how little he knows – “this change - which I cannot prove but only foretell... [and] the share my art will have in it” (1962, 208). Yet Foster seems to think that Yeats isn’t quite as humble as he seems. He quotes Russell in displaying that although Yeats hoped to create a “permanent Irish company”, the Fays were mostly responsible for the realisation of this dream (1997, 258). He also set to put himself at the centre of this great ‘destiny’. Yet Yeats is aware of the difficulty of his idea of theatre - “it is perhaps nearly impossible to make recitation a living thing” (217). He also realises after some time that plays to suit this dream will not be in Irish. By the time he writes the 1906 essay, he has decided the plays will be in English because of the English-speaking population of Dublin, but he did attempt in earlier years to present plays in Gaelic at the Irish Literary Theatre and The Irish National Theatre Society. This is mainly down to the Fays again due to their participation in *Inghinidhe na h-Eireann*, but he appreciates the art of Dr Hyde’s plays, even if he finds them a little too propagandist. He recalls in the *Samhain* of 1901; “we tried in vain to get a play in Gaelic...we wrote to Gaelic enthusiasts in vain, for their imagination had not yet turned towards the stage” (1962,73-4). He shows appreciation for Hyde in 1902, saying if he left propagandas aside for a while he could focus on writing in English with Irish idioms as that is the “living speech” of the people (1962,94).

But as time goes on his effort decreases as he criticises plays in Gaelic when he has only attended a few showings, at which he decides “Gaelic theatre in the country

is more important than its spread in Dublin” (99). Yeats writes in 1903 that Dr Hyde is the master of plays in Irish, but due to his propaganda, is unfavourable to the people who prefer “reading that is an end and not a means, that gives nothing but a beauty indifferent to our profuse purpose” (104). Yet although Yeats is right about the prominence of the melodrama, people wanted these plays as the Queen’s was full every night with enthusiastic crowds as discussed in Chapter One. Coming up to the opening of the Abbey in 1904, Yeats recalls how the Gaelic scene is empty of good writing in his opinion, with only old plays on show. Yet this is lack of effort on his part to see many plays in Gaelic that year. Despite these limits, he believes the ordinary man should have a place in “imaginative art” (1962, 205). He holds that “daily life” is the “handle” of the art “spear”, and theatre should represent the “ordinary people” (1962, 212&219). He dreams of no divides, that theatre become a place where “rich and poor sat down together”; he appeared to detest class lines. Yet here he is hypocritical. He and the Abbey benefited greatly from the fortunes of the well-off and he may have even found his audience in that class. Yet it was Miss Horniman’s wish that tickets would not be “cheap” to avoid the same variety type of entertainment Yeats hated. This is where his dream didn’t fully materialize.

Yeats had an intense dislike of melodramas, in particular political melodramas for he said that “folk-life” had been abandoned in favour of “the rhetoric of the newspapers” (151). Yet the people who went to the plays didn’t seem to think that they were being misrepresented. Yeats goes completely against Herr’s view of the melodrama which she connected to folklore, as seen in Chapter One. He connects melodramas to propaganda which he hated, even though *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was accepted as one on it’s opening in 1901 according to Foster. Herr also reckons that the audience would have no understanding of such a play if it weren’t for “the theatrical

conventions and resolutions” that Queen’s melodramas were well known for (1991, 17). Yet this was Maud Gonne’s overpowering influence; the play was after all “a vehicle for Gonne” (1997, 201). He himself had shied away from the production until one month before its first performance. Foster detects this as merely lack of involvement in the organisation, while using *Samhain* as an instrument to claim full credit. Yet he did tell one reporter, according to Foster, that the subject in this play “is Ireland and its struggle for Independence” (1997, 201). But this work stands out as his nationalist play, as the plays after aren’t quite as republican (although this shall be the subject of Chapter three in relation to *On Baile’s Strand*).

But nationalism is a point he is a little elusive on. For instance, he makes an interesting point in the 1906 essay -“years of imaginative politics have kept [people] from forgetting, as most modern people have, how to listen to serious words” (1962, 209). Yet regardless of his ideology on the subject, melodrama is something he is still opposed to. He wishes not to force politics on others. Yeats as a thoroughly peaceful man saw how politics tore people apart and thus he didn’t like them. He was attempting to repair “broken circuits...dislocated by the disruptions of political and social disaster” with his theatre as stated by Welch (1999, 20). Little did he know such politics would make Maud Gonne and Griffiths leave the theatre company in 1903, and cause a major split in the theatre with the Fay brothers. Although he wrote *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* to appease the brothers after Frank challenged him to write something with a “living interest” in an article (1970, 53), even though Frank rejected it in another saying Yeats “exhibited a startling misconception of the character of his countrymen”, according to Jordan (2003, 64). The point is: Herr does not have a convincing argument. According to her, it gave the people a voice. But whereas Yeats gave the people a voice as regards peaceful national identity (later referred to as

cultural nationalism), melodramas only gave people a riotous violent unity which is never good. Yeats is right not to want politics in art, however naive it may be to actually believe that that were possible. Weren't we trying with a theatre to prove we are civilized and not a nation of shouting 'barbarians' attacking stage actors and burning down theatres? It is unclear how Queen's was burned at least three times as the research in the area is sparse.

Yeats muses in the *Samhain* of 1901 on how some believe that "politics" are hard to avoid in art, yet he believes different (1962, 76). He wants but a "theatre of beauty" that represents the life of the common man, no man in particular for that would be a representation (1997,257). He is particularly critical of Boucicault, who most champion, saying that it would be better to study Ibsen than Boucicault and that most Irish plays are made without a plan; he believes that we should "learn construction from the masters, and dialogue from ourselves" (1962,81). This is an almost arrogant insertion of himself into the picture. It's a contradiction to the ideal of Irish plays for Irish people. It will be of the people and for them, but it will be by the more educated. Does the melodrama give the 'Irish' structure that Yeats does not? The answer is no, as at the time of Yeats' writing, melodramas were not written by an Irish person, but rather Whitbread, an Englishman. He shows in 1903 that he is anxious about the growth of political plays that are to him like "mouldy bread" (1962, 100). Yet others, like George Bernard Shaw, seem to think that Boucicault writes melodramas that are "far superior to the average modern melodrama" as quoted by Fay (1970, 23). Fay on the other hand agrees with Yeats on this saying that they don't "appeal to the cultural playgoer" and that Boucicault is doing what they try to avoid; giving the "public" what they want (23). Fay wasn't the only nationalist who was anti-melodrama surprisingly. According to Pilkington, a moderate nationalist monthly in 1895 had

“several articles” complaining about how “respectable drama” had been eradicated by works by playwrights such as “Dion Boucicault, James W. Whitbread and Hubert O’Grady” (2001,9). Yeats is also not overly fond of Shakespeare and other drama because it is making Irish writers “cast... too much on the English model”, but if anything, melodrama is evidence of the opposite both in character and in topicality (1962,78). Both Fay and Horniman criticised Yeats for outdated plots. Yeats has always in his writing shown a preference for world greats and influences “towards the east” (1901, 76). English models have too much connection to commerce and this is something Yeats is completely against. Fay disagrees with Yeats here, thinking that Shakespeare should be inspirational in his practicality; that which Yeats does not have. Shakespeare has the “vigorous themes” to suit the climate that Yeats does not; and Yeats’ own ideas are “delightfully vague” (1970, 51&2). Although the ideas are vague and sometimes contradictory, in Yeats’ mind, they were very precise and that is why they are treated here following as such, for the main part.

Yeats had certain ideas about how he would implement such a theatre, and this can be split into four sections; speech and music, actors and acting, what kind of plays to be produced and the other stuff such as scenery. Speech was Yeats’ “one art” (1962,218). Living speech was his main aim for the theatre; yet it isn’t quite as straight forward as studying the people and writing what they would say. He believed two elements were necessary for “beautiful words”, the speech of “countrymen on the roads” and the “idealised speech” of “poets” (1962, 212). The means for a regaining of the old oratory arts are the forms “narrative, lyrical and dramatic” before they were corrupted by print. Yeats isn’t particularly fond of the printing press of the printing of plays, even though he succumbs to publication after a while. To get these forms he must “go to the villages” and it must be the old music, the music of sailors where the

words are given precedence over the music (1962, 214). It appears that although Yeats doesn't like commercial modern music that has lost its way and that has "no relation to its own life", music is indeed important to his plan, even if the music is less important than the speech (1906, 214). It must be regulated by emotion rather than the melody (217). Yet perhaps this is where he agrees a little with Shakespeare. Wilson (in a footnote) makes the connection between the two playwrights - "he felt that at the crucial moments of the action even Shakespeare rejected 'character' in favour of 'lyricism'" (1961, 38). But the English play often had a forced or "strained lyricism", Yeats states in 1906's *Samhain* as it was never read aloud first (1906, 221).

Secondly the way his play was acted was important. He had his idea of a perfect player, and it was modelled on the minstrel. According to him, this type of player "will go no nearer to drama than we do in daily speech" (1962, 214). The problem with players as they are is that they know not of the "natural music" of speech and gesticulation had become popular in the theatre around this time (214). Morash explains this phenomenon - "emotive gestural style of acting [was] current on the stage" in the early 1900's (2000, 122). Yeats preferred when players acted out their roles by speech only. As Foster puts it, Yeats' ideal was that the actor "stressed control of dramatic effect through voice rather than movement" (2002, 262). The minstrel had almost the air of a storyteller, telling the narrative set him and then "a phrase about himself and his emotions" (1962, 215). He himself expressed his thought that real people told a story better than the best performer as early as 1901; he developed this thought in 1903 to the idea of "natural" acting, explaining a taste he had for amateur actors (1903, 98-9).

Irish actors must also be trained, yet this task was left to the Fay brothers and their school of acting in the end, to add to the flaw in Yeats' original plan of having

English actors to teach Irish actors. Yet it wasn't as bad as it seemed as shortly after 1901 (after "Diarmuid and Grania") Irish actors were favoured by Yeats also, although his preference for trained English actors before that caused problems between him and Frank Fay (1983, 136). The Abbey Theatre is known for its special brand of Irish acting; 'method' acting (2004, 66). Fay believed that the actors were more important than playwrights as well, which collided with Yeats idea of the poet coming first. Fay held that the actor would grab "the heart" of the audience because he or she is closer to "the truth in representing life" (1970, 51). Actors seemed to be given precedence, particularly in the way plays were written about and advertised. Holloway always spent more time speaking in his diaries about individual performances rather than the play's structure. Fay seemed to be fonder of gesture as he calls the actors Yeats wants "oratorical statues" (51). Holloway also complained of this stance; "what could be more inartistic or unnatural than four members of the Corporation...commenced to converse to each other...like mechanical figures with their "buttons" pressed" (2002, 122). Yet Fay didn't like gesture either, according to Morash, complaining in the *United Irishman* on various occasions. Here was another man who couldn't make his mind up. The English actors really annoyed Fay whose appearance in Irish plays was "absurd" (54). But to Yeats' credit, it was George Moore who found there to be "no suitable actors available in Dublin" as found by Fitz-Simon (1983, 135).

Yet much like Yeats a little later, Fay favours "amateur actors" for their natural capabilities but he also favours them for their native Irish tongue (1970, 57). That of course was the main point Yeats and Fay disagreed on. Returning to this issue of language, Yeats attempted to encourage some Irish language plays to be brought to his society's stage. But he eventually couldn't find the structure he wanted in those

plays, so convinced the language should suit the audience, settled on English. Fay on the other hand, an avid speaker, thought that “an Irish Theatre must...express itself solely in the Irish language; otherwise it would have no reason d’être” (1970, 50). English should be abolished and it should not be called an ‘Irish theatre’ otherwise. Yeats’ lack of knowledge of the language made it difficult to even give *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* a title, although misspellings by others prove him right on one front; the audience didn’t speak Irish. Fitz-Simon seems to agree with Yeats partially on the language front as he holds that although there were “many fine plays in Irish over the years” in the twentieth century, the most important were in English (1983, 138). Despite their opposite opinions regarding the early 1900s, Fay and Yeats would eventually agree. Yeats until old age believed that “if Irish is to become the national tongue the change must come slowly” because most people of that generation has English as their first language, which Fay eventually agreed with (according to his son Gerard) (1958, 21). Fay said that if it wasn’t their first language, as with writers, they couldn’t express in it the same way and they would become illiterate in two languages.

The next way Yeats had planned on carrying out his part in the reformation of theatre (which was in the “avante garde air” of London and Dublin according to Foster) was through the plays that were written for his new centralised stage (1997, 258). He had remarked early on that “it will matter less to [him] henceforth who plays them than what they play, and how they play”, meaning that the play is prominent, not the actor in Yeats’ mind, although he had already remarked on this in 1901 (1962,78). So important was the play to Yeats that he insisted on re-writing plays after they were performed to improve the “masculine” structure, a thought that Unterecker agreed with (1962, 220). Unterecker says this of the playwright -“in Yeats’ system...the job

of the artist is no philosophical communication; his job is construction, arrangement itself” (1959, 31). Gerard Fay also notes how Yeats “re-wrote constantly” (1958, 26). Yeats was not intending, as far as his work is concerned, to write in “service of a cause” but for the “emotion of beauty” that justifies itself (1962, 107&93). Although he did acknowledge in his direct breakdown of his plan in 1903 that he “cannot write a good play if there are not audiences to listen to it”, meaning that he cannot have full freedom from the audience’s wishes, contradicting his whole dream of freedom in theatre (115).

Yet he would take structure from the greats and add the “English idioms of the Irish” as he wished for Hyde to do. He would show audiences not what English drama continued to do and show “drawing-rooms”, but their own life and country people on the road (1902, 96). His plays would be about “artisans and country people” along with works on “romantic” heroes and “history”, but he will not make ideal versions of these people but attempt to capture their emotion in his work (1962, 96). Politics will not be a part of his work as the play is “personal” and politics is public (1962, 115). Yet he seems to contradict himself only lines after this by saying “if creative minds occupy themselves with incidents from the political history of Ireland, so much the better, but we must not enforce them to select those incidents” (115). But what he means is that these thoughts can be represented but not forced on the audience. Yeats is slightly naive when it comes to politics, it seems. No play could represent political events without it being political and received as so by the audience. Yeats is very ambiguous in his own political alignments, but in the following statement, he is clearer than ever; “I am a Nationalist” (116). Yet he does impress upon the reader that his plays are shaped by “dreams and daily thoughts” rather than him being driven to “write nothing but drama with an obvious patriotic intention” (116).

It is important to write of other things than politics, according to him. It is the “duty” of playwrights to “bring new kinds of subjects into theatre” (116). It is also important to write moral plays unlike the English who write with “the illogical thinking and insincere feeling” that he considers “effeminate” (1962, 112). Propaganda plays with “no intellectual tradition” behind them are also immoral according to Yeats’ theory. There must be “dramatic poetry” as well as “narrative” to draw the country people in (1962, 213). The construction of characters is important in the play also, with Yeats saying in 1904’s *Samhain* that he would never take a real person from his “own secret thoughts” but rather create a character so convincing it could take on the real life of the country and history to “create an illusion” (1904, 144&5). He accuses English theatre of creating idealistic characters, “typical” in fact. Shakespeare is accused of this in creating Richard II as “typical” because he presented himself in the thoughts of the monarch (1904,145). This archetypal type of characterisation he connects to Irish melodrama, saying that they insist on writing characters compiled by “personifications of averages, of statistics, or even personified opinions, or men and women so faintly imagined that there is nothing about them to separate them from the crowd” (146). But is it not ordinary Irish ‘folk’ that he wants to present? Here is yet another of Yeats’ paradoxes. Does he acknowledge his own critics on the topic of “the ideal young peasant” (146).

A lot of critics were known to view Yeats as an idealist. Herr, in particular does this harshly. She believes that Yeats and Gregory “fetishized” folklore due to the fact they had “the need to enrich their own Ascendency ambiance by retrieving and *stylising* Irish folk materials” (1991, 17 my emphasis). She also states that he was taking advantage of the city people’s lack of knowledge on the subject and the country people from who it originated lack of literacy. This is far too harsh even for

the strongest critic as she shows no mercy whatsoever. Understandably it is easy to believe that Yeats was living in relative luxury, but a little further research into Foster and other biographical works informs one of different circumstances. Patrons were needed and Yeats even had to sacrifice some of his 'non-commercial' aims for the theatre to keep Miss Horniman's generosity as she wanted to gain profit from the theatre. As Kavanagh says, it was only in 1919 Yeats "came to realise" the mistake of just producing peasant plays, especially comedic ones which resembled commercial plays (1984, 24). Yeats didn't quite get the "freedom" he first craved in expression probably due to this fact, meaning that Frank Fay had been right to be against "aristocratic patrons" who would surely be against nationalism (1970,58) like Horniman was, once calling it the "revolt of slaves" according to Flannery (1970,14).

It is important to notice that although Fay praised Yeats and agreed with him in the area of Irish actors and speech, he disagreed with him about language and thought him to be a bit of an idealist saying, he was "too much of a theorist", and that he needed to build up a theatre like Ibsen's before he can really achieve a theatre of art. Morash also calls Yeats an idealist. He is naive about how innocent and "uncorrupted" the audience will be, how politics will not be part of his theatre and as Morash particularly points out, he is ignorant of the "dramatic tradition going back to at least the seventeenth century", Yeats having stated that he will create a new Celtic and Irish "school" of drama (2002,116-7). Yet as far as the audience goes, Gerard Fay disagrees. He states that the audience was of a "new, young" kind who were "more in line" with the idealistic work of Yeats (1958, 20). Yet despite all this criticism, Yeats seemed to be well aware of his idealisations, and was aiming for them. Fitz-Simon quotes Yeats (And Morash also includes this quote), saying that he wanted Ireland to be seen as the "home of ancient idealism" (1983, 135). That said, the prologue to

Welch's book on the Abbey Theatre acknowledges the negative as well as the positive parts of the Irish spirit, as understood by Yeats according to the author, *Cul Raithin*; such as "this is how terrible we are" and this is "our shame" (1999, viii).

Although Yeats openly criticises Irish literature saying that although the Irish people are poor, they should have "better literature than this", he believes that "there exists in Ireland...an energy of thought about life itself, a vivid sensitiveness as to the reality of things" (1904, 146&147). Otherwise, he comments, he would never try to create an "Irish National Theatre" (147). Yet he seemed to know the true character of Ireland, and he wanted to move away from the representations of "buffoonery" according to Barnes to represent "the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland", which is also quoted elsewhere (2003, 6). Even when Yeats was asked to work in the prestigious Manchester Gaiety in 1908, as quoted by Flannery, he wanted to stay in Ireland to write "works for [his] own people-whether in love or hate [by] them matters little" (1970,14). This shows both dedication to his country people, and a slight arrogance that he will forever write as he chooses regardless of the audience, thus keeping his previous aims of poet before the commercial and audience. In a quote by Gerard Fay, Yeats proclaimed to "understand my own race and in all my work...thought of it... If the theatre fails I may or may not write plays - but I shall write for my own people" (1958, 20).

Yet his ideas of the play were not to be agreed on all levels. Language was an issue with Frank Fay, as was relativity. Miss Horniman wasn't far different on the latter, albeit not from nationalist feeling. She detested Greek tragedy, as expressed by Flannery, and she thought that this type of work which was about the "society existing in the imagination" where the National Theatre Society wanted plays about "real life" (1970, 10). She also thought plays about "Countesses" were irrelevant taking an

obvious stab at *The Countess Cathleen* (10). She agreed with Yeats about structure coming from the world greats, yet she was “a devoted Ibsenite” whereas Yeats seemed to dislike his social problem playwriting (10). He hated realism according to Morash (2002, 118) and Kavanagh agrees with the above point (1984, 5). Kavanagh later writes that by using drama to debate social problems, Yeats thought that Ibsen was limiting his character’s ability to express their soul “by its own laws” (1984, 25). He was more influenced by France, it is suggested by Fitz-Simon, like many other Irish writers such as Wilde and Synge and even Diarmuid and Grania was written in France (1983, 136).

Finally, as for the costumes and sets, all the work was to be done by Irish hands and it was mostly done by Miss Horniman and the members of the National Theatre Society. Some of the props were even said to come from the local shops although Yeats illustrated a hatred of this while viewing “An Posadh” in 1904 (1962, 129). He lays out his intentions for this clearly in the *Samhain* of 1903 saying that colours are to be minimal, so that scenery is but a “background in a portrait” (1903,109). There could be nothing to distract from speech. He considered Art, as at its best “when it is most human” and when it is about the living voice (110). He stated “speech [is to be] even more important than gesture upon the stage” meaning that his very precise stage directions won’t include much gesture (1903, 108). Yet taking Fay and Horniman into account, it is clear that Yeats’ theories would fail on some level. As for the political side of things, it is yet to be seen if politics could be left out of his work when the Abbey opened on December 27<sup>th</sup> 1904. His *On Baile’s Strand* was to be on the set list, and this is to be the subject of the following chapter.

### **CHAPTER THREE- THEORY IN ACTION? ON BAILE'S STRAND**

“Ireland in our day has rediscovered the old heroic literature of Ireland, and she has rediscovered the imagination of the folk” (2004, 566). Above is a proclamation by Yeats about the presentation of *On Baile's Strand*. The Cuchullain saga is a particularly important one in Irish Folklore. According to Ure up until the 60s it was told among the people of the West of Ireland; often in verse. So on the outset; it appears Yeats does capture real Irish tradition in his play *On Baile's Strand* as it appears mostly in verse. Yet the actual legends, as they are printed in various places vary from Yeats' version. Especially when it comes to the story he, according to Gantz, took as “the source, at some distance for...*On Baile's Strand*”, ‘The Death of Aife's Only Son’ (1986, 148). This particular version, as told by Gantz, shows the ‘hero’ in crude light. He is an arrogant man who knows it is his son that he is killing, and tells Emer (who doesn't appear in any other version including Yeats') who tells him who it is who has arrived on the shore to be quiet and that “it is not a woman's advice [he seeks] regarding deeds of great splendour” (1986, 150).

He continues on to challenge the boy (who receives a name, Condlae) straight away threatening to kill him if he doesn't reveal his name. They fight immediately and the boy is presented as arrogant like his father. This version is brief and not much time occurs between their first meeting and Cuchullain's wounding of his son. Grief is presented as occurring, but not in the great detail of other versions. The fact that Yeats is romanticising Cuchullain is in line with the representation of heroes that he was criticising melodramas of. A type he accused of being too commercial, like the other forms that were popular, and overtly political. Is Yeats doing the very same then? In another version, as written by Hull, which is perceived by her to be “the oldest form of this story” (1909, 278), the same main events happen. Cuchullain challenges the

boy for the honour of the Ulaid (which also occurs in Yeats), the boy is not tall enough to reach Cuchullain's waist, other people go out to face the boy first but he attacks them with stones, and father kills son with a famous weapon and the events of the boy's death are almost identical, right down to Cuchullain's declaration of it being "true" that it is his son (1986, 151). Practically every scholar on Cuchullain mentions the "Gae Bolga", the legendary weapon only the hero knows how to use, and which is the only thing the magician Scatach didn't show Conlaoch. What varies in the second version is the detail, the length of speech (which no doubt influenced Yeats), the demeanour of the boy and most importantly, Cuchullain's own opinion of doing battle. In this version, he and Aoife had agreed on his son being sent to the magician, referred to here as Scáth, and the oath that would lead to his downfall. Conlaoch would promise to fight any person, not give his name and not turn back from any journey.

Cuchullain is aware of whom he is doing battle with and "he liked not the combat" (247). Yet he still participated for the honour of his people, and with a bit of arrogance as he lists 'anger' at being mocked as a reason. The speeches are also important in context of Yeats, and Conlaoch makes a very specific one in this version; about how "cruel" Aoife is and that she sent him to battle Cuchullain. Yet all this aside, it was Lady Gregory's "free adaption" in *Cuchullain of Muirthemme* that he uses (2004, 567). It is interesting that in her version also, Cuchullain was aware of having a son, but the ring he gave to Aoife so he would recognise him was not seen, causing the tragedy. It is also interesting that she includes a mention of Conchubar, which was to be almost unique in Yeats; except in Lady Gregory's version, but her mention is only brief. Cuchullain however is given more grace as he doesn't instantly challenge Conlaoch, yet he gets angry before killing the boy. The boy is presented as modest and is only there due to his mother's "bonds", saying he would not fight

Cuchullain only he has to obey them (1909, 520). Aoife here is presented as vengeful, but only due to Cuchullain's marriage to Emer.

An interesting difference that appears in the finished play is the inclusion of certain characters that never emerge in the original tale. The Fool and the Blind Man are the first of these. The occurrence of these is particularly interesting as they start and finish the play. The insertion of such characters is not uncommon in Yeats' work, and these figures are often given precedence. In *the Pot of Broth* for example, the beggar is the person who succeeds in the end of the play. Brown, a leading critic on Yeats says that the character of the Fool was to "fascinate him in much of his...work" (1999, 132). This is means of having poor and rich sit down together in the theatre, as he suggested in *Samhain*. The Fool and The Blind Man represent the ordinary Irish person; those not of nobility and leisure. They appear as the most wise and this is also a remnant of another master; Shakespeare. The use of these characters both upholds Yeats' theory and undermines it in a single swoop. On one hand, he is telling the story through an average Irish person and giving them some precedence (also using the mode of the storyteller whom he favours) but he is also using much of the form of a playwright that he formally rejected as commercial.

The play itself is also written in a way and with a lyricism that resembles Shakespeare. Brown goes as far as to say that Yeats was directly influenced to write "a play of Shakespearean scale" after seeing the "history plays" in Shakespeare's hometown of Stratford-Upon-Avon (1999, 133). He himself even refers to "rhythmical utterance" which is essential in his introduction to his plays (1981, 85). Yet to further complicate matters, the "Shakespearean model" does not leave enough room for the symbolism needed according to Wilson, and Yeats let himself down with his idea of masculine structure, as it left no room for experimentation (1961, 40).

Symbolism is central to Yeats' aim of creating a poetic theatre and important as regards the politics of the play.

But to return to Fool and Blind Man, they are the characters that inform us of the tragic knowledge that the young man is Cuchullain's son - "I know who the young man's father is...go and ask Cuchullain" (1989, 253). They also tell us of the tragic hero's might and previous feats. This fills in the gaps that are left by beginning Cuchullain's story at this point. It also acts as a background to Cuchullain's life before he became timid and spent his days hunting and singing around the camp fire; of how he had "killed kings" and was a fighting man (251). This sets up the republican symbolism that is to follow in the representation of the Cuchullain and Conchubar. This storytelling displays the oral culture of Ireland Yeats is trying to preserve, and which he accomplishes with this element of the tale. The Fool also offers a poetic turn to the phrasing, while the Blind Man offers wisdom. Some suggest these are the shadows of the struggle between Conchubar and Cuchullain, and if this is so, The Fool is meant to represent Conchubar as he thinks that Cuchullain's "head [is] in the clouds" (251). A thought that sounds familiar in regards to Yeats' own critics.

The Blind Man also tells of Aoife's hatred of Cuchullain (the "boy was brought up to kill Cuchullain...she hated Cuchullain" (252)) and this is rather interesting. The Blind Man appears to be replacing the son in telling this story. This frees the young man of the blame as in Yeats' version, he does not know that Cuchullain is his father and has not been sent to kill his own father, but a champion, as it appears in Gregory's version. He is a lot milder, and in the play he agrees to befriend Cuchullain even after Cuchullain challenges him in the dramatic final moments of the young man's existence. He does not brag of his strength but rather says "But.... but I did not" when

he is accused of Witchcraft (271). The fight is not shown. What should be the most important part of the play is dulled by a conversation between the Fool, some prophetic women, the Blind Man and eventually Cuchullain. It is in their conversation Cuchullain realises who he has “slain” (276). These ordinary Irish as represented by the Fool and the Blind Man, do not care who has been killed, but only for their own hunger and greed. This is where the anti-republican feeling takes hold. They, being the “parody” of the relationship between Cuchullain and Conchubar, also represent the tension between republicanism and anti-republicanism, or rather Yeats’ dislike of relentless fighting (1969, 63). Yet the length of time it takes for the main event is also what Conchubar adds to the story; this gives him time to show Cuchullain as a flawed character and as Ure puts it, serves to “tangle and thicken the ironies” (1969, 64).

Conchubar is also an interesting addition to the plot, as not represented in the original tale, and only briefly mentioned in Gregory’s. Conchubar, on first analysis, is present to display Cuchullain’s faults. He shows the audience of Cuchullain’s more human nature; he is no longer just a flawless hero. Conchubar has come to calm the man who has “ran too wild” and has become foolhardy (249). Cuchullain has weaknesses. Thus he is the epitome of real life human emotion, which Yeats was attempting to achieve. He appears not quite the caricature Yeats accused melodramas of creating of historical figures. The truth may not be completely present, but he is avoiding the flawless representation all the same. The main facts are still present, and Cuchullain mourns his son with the same raw emotion as in the original story. Yet this part of the story is given more background as Conchubar also serves to show what Cuchullain lacks and wants; children. Conchubar has normal expectations and ways, but Cuchullain has grown to want “impossible things” and no woman appears to be good enough to bear him a child (257).

But Yeats also displays Cuchullain in an idealistic light, much like the melodrama. Despite the flaws Conchubar's presence displays, Yeats presents Cuchullain in a more favourable light to the folklore. He is presented as the victim of destiny, instead of the young man who doesn't even receive a name. He is unaware of what he is doing despite the talk of Aoife and their reconciliation for a night. Yeats glosses over the hero's arrogance and love of honour, undermining slightly any attempt he has made at representing real life. Although he does show how Cuchullain attempts to shift the blame to other places immediately after finding out whom he had killed. He shows some of his arrogance in boasting of his feats of driving out "Maeve of Cruachan and the northern pirates, the hundred kings of Sorcha" (255). Yet his arrogance before slaying his son is eradicated in Yeats' version. That said, Yeats does not, as Ure has stated, present Cuchullain in a "romantic idealization of character and theme" but rather places the figure in a context that in which an "element" of his own nature creates the tragedy (1969, 61-2).

Cuchullain is idealistic like Yeats, and he often had "identification" with the hero; that much is clear (1999, 374). But what then does Conchubar represent in opposition? Many critics make the connection between Cuchullain and Yeats. Brown in particular holds that "much of [Yeats'] own development as a man had gone into the figure of Cuchullain" particularly in *On Baile's Strand* (1999, 134). It is true that Cuchullain's contradictions are in fact Yeats'. Yet there is an area where many disagree on; what the relationship between Conchubar and Cuchullain represents. Some believe it is the tense relationship between WB Yeats and his father for instance. Due to the subject of the plot, this theory is understandable. Yeats had a difficult relationship with his father also, and bitterness may have been a result. Bloom holds that Yeats had a "life-long struggle with his father's ideas" and this he

connects to how Cuchullain rejects then accepts Conchubar's ideals (1970, 152). Interestingly enough, he also links the representation of Aoife (and thus the replacement of her son's message for that of the Fool) to the bitterness Yeats felt towards Maud Gonne after 1903, when she left the company. This is also a reasonable theory given Yeats own identification with Cuchullain, and the betrayal he must have felt given his dedication to her. Just like Cuchullain, his own aims were muffled briefly by her beauty; he disregarded his hate for outward nationalism by writing *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* just like Cuchullain forgot his hatred for the night of a "difficult truce", but both tales end in tragedy of sorts (259).

Yet, the strongest theories are the ones that suggest this play is anti-modern and anti-republican. The question then is, does this go against Yeats' ideal of not bringing politics into Theatre? The answer is no, because as is earlier mentioned, Yeats believed in politics just not forcing them on others and any political agenda is well-hidden in symbolism. As Wilson puts it, it is a play that was "at least intended to be symbolic" (1961, 39). This symbolic language was to be incorporated, according to Wilson by the inclusion of characters, and explains that this is the reason the legend has been "robbed of its individual life", meaning it has been changed to suit this "motive" (1961, 39-40). However although many praise and condemn the inclusion of the Fool and The Blind Man sub-plot and all suggest it as the source of the symbolism, it is with the tension between Conchubar and Cuchullain the real symbolism of the play occurs.

The first reasonable explanation for the relationship between Conchubar and Cuchullain is that it represents anti-modernism, as put forward by both Ure and Moses. Ure identifies a cross between old and new in the play, stating that Conchubar's ideals of building a city (as occurred in the earlier version in particular)

would destroy “another kind of life” (1969,64). Conchubar represents the new “political unity” (2004, 567) as presented in modernism with a unity of ideas (which Yeats detested and displayed much dislike of in *Samhain*) and Cuchullain represents a culture where the freedom to “dance or hunt...or make love wherever and whenever” is present (1989, 255). Perhaps Fay and others are then proven wrong in saying that Yeats’ plays were not topical. Modernism was a bit issue at the time and there was much debate about what negativities came with it. Yeats’ own ideals on the modern seem to seep in here, as he was a much publicised traditionalist. But as Cuchullain accepts Conchubar’s ideals (and Cuchullain represents Yeats’) does this mean that Yeats accepts some sense of modernity? This is interesting as Yeats’ own theatre was indeed a modern one, unfortunately run by the want of profit by its patron Miss Horniman. Moses goes further on this point saying that Yeats got his “first major heroic verse tragedy” as a result of using “modern material culture” (2004, 566). Yet the answer here is again, no, as it is agreement to an oath to this new way of life that has led to the tragedy and Ure agrees. He states that “Conchubar’s paramount authority, strengthened by the oath, is...the agent responsible” for the tragedy (66).

However it is also interesting that Yeats chose belief in witchcraft as the reason for Cuchullain’s decision to fight. This is a strong theme in the play and something Yeats himself believed in. It is also something connected to the “pagan and primitive” age Yeats was attempting to create with this play according to Brown (1999, 133). This sense of the “mystical” was what Yeats was chiefly adding to the tale (1999, 133). As Ure puts it, Yeats was taking Gregory’s adaption of the folklore and aimed to “vitalize” it with his own “customs” (1969, 63). This is Yeats’ own “vision” of the past world (63). This is why it is extra interesting that this should be the reason he invents for Cuchullain’s change of mood. Yet there is no real reason to explain why

the playwright would build up this world of sea-gods and chanting only to source witchcraft as the reason for tragedy, except to blame his paradoxical nature. Yet he is suggesting that modernism tries to trivialise older beliefs and people who still believe them are forced to forget, disintegrating their own heritage; a tragedy. Yeats even uses old world symbolism, as Wilson refers to it, that of the sea representing the “the material world” by having the sea wash away Cuchullain at the end, just as the modern world’s other representative, Conchubar is the agent of his tragedy (1961, 38).

However if the play is anti-materialist as well as anti-modern, it could refer to theatre rather than the world at large. Ure quotes Parkinson who states that the Abbey plays have always seemed to demonstrate the “conflict between the fixed palpable world of human affairs and the world of passion and inspiration which is beyond reason” (1969, 65). Yeats held that theatre that was popular in Ireland was political and commercial. This type of theatre was one person’s (or nation’s) idea of theatre forced on others (as with English authoritative theatre) whereas Yeats’ theatre hoped to bring that freedom of expression that was built solely on human emotion and poetry. Conchubar in this context is almost a reference to the English patent on theatres that made Irish theatres subject to certain rules, whereas the Abbey Theatre was freer in this area due to its unique case. It is almost as if Yeats’ theatre is the free from structure, natural subconscious and English theatre has to be rational and be subject to authority. But then this authority could also be Miss Horniman or Fay to whom Yeats’ ideals were constricted by. But the modernist stream of consciousness is more likely, as Moses backs up.

Also the personal freedom that is subject to an oath is more of a reference to the constraints of republicanism, which Moses also thought was an undercurrent in the

play. Interestingly enough, Yeats “never took any oath” when joining the only republican group he has been successfully connected to (1997, 112). Moses holds that the form of Greek tragedy was deemed “politically irrelevant” by those who favoured modernism and this is why Yeats set about recreating a “pre-modern” style and does so in his plays about Cuchullain (2004, 561&2). He would revive it through tragedy as he was highly influenced by Nietzsche and his thoughts on “Wagnerian opera” (563). Moses directly refers to Yeats as part of an “anti-modern turn” (562). Yeats believed, according to him, that a return to the old legends would have “a regenerative power” against the “materialism of the nineteenth century” (565). *On Baile’s Strand* is an attempt to “bridge the cultural divide” that has come between oral culture and the English-influenced Irish drama, the melodrama. But Moses is critical of the success of this aim. He states that Yeats has failed in his attempt at bringing a pre-modern play to the people, as it is materialistic at its foundations, being funded by the upper classes, revised by the printed word (which he hated) and presented in English. But he does agree with Ure that this play represents a conflict between the “pre-modern and “stateless” phase of Irish culture and...an increasingly centralised, regulated...form of political life” (567).

So, really, the problem here was with centralised politics. Moses presents the tension between Conchubar and Cuchullain as two “alternatives” for “Irish independence” the latter representing the poetic form that Yeats was trying to create (2004, 567-9). But this is only the tip of the ice-berg. The play is most definitely anti-republican, although in presenting Cuchullain as the hero, this complicated an icon usually in service of the republican cause. It also uses the oath to Conchubar as a way of bringing in the common nationalist theme of self-sacrifice for one’s state, particularly that of young people as is presented in the death of a young man.

According to Brown, Yeats “did not care for the political battle” and this is why he and Maud Gonne went their separate ways (1999, 139). It is particularly odd and paradoxical that Yeats uses Cuchullain to symbolise his negative feeling towards the republican movement when as Sisson points out, Cuchullain was often a “figure...mobilised” by people like Pearse (UCD Scholarcast series 1, 2), and Yeats didn’t share “his politics” (2010, 194). The motive for such republican figures was probably the fact that Cuchullain was a great warrior who fought for the honour of his country, much like he does in *On Baile’s Strand*. But is Yeats’ motive any different?

Sisson states that it was used by “cultural nationalism” also which is a heading Yeats falls under, but aside from language, Pearse was much more than this (2). Yeats claimed to be leaving politics out of theatre. But does he succeed in this by using an emblem used and so associated by the republican Pearse? Yeats himself was very vague on his feelings on the matter and this changed to a feeling of utter hatred around his death when he said that what “comes before” states ( he is referring to the violence which he detested) is “not worth the blade of grass God gives for the nest of the linnet” (2004,561). This mirrors something Daniel O’Connell said about the loss of blood and a nation not being worth it. *On Baile’s Strand* is particularly about self-sacrifice and the unnecessary tragedy. Yeats was more aligned with O’Connell and Parnell’s type of nationalism and he even told Holloway in a letter in 1905 that he was thinking of Parnell when he wrote *On Baile’s Strand* (2004, 567). Both Brown and Foster state that any connection between the I.R.B. and Yeats is minimal, and that he only “may have joined”, and any connection was due to Gonne who he later referred to as having “blinded idealism” (1999, 51&140).

The image of the young boy was both an attempt (by republicans) to turn English criticism of the Irish as childlike and feminine on its head and a way to get young men

involved in the struggle. It is almost a paradox as this is exactly what the English would do in times of war; recruit young men and make them believe they had to serve their country (as various World War I documentaries will show you). But what Yeats does is show that Cuchullain was once brave and fierce for his country, but now his time has come to be calm and settled. Conchubar in fact asks the opposite of what he suggests for Cuchullain, as Cuchullain is no longer wild, but is more settled than ever. By Conchubar's oath, which he agrees to out of honour (which is similar to the war idea mentioned above), he gains the need to be violent again. It is this oath, which seems to mirror the oath taken by I.R.B. that calls for its speaker to kill regardless of personal feeling for the good of his people. As Moses states, the oath "binds him to fight...against all enemies, both domestic and foreign" (2004, 568). This is also an attack on the political melodrama, which often focused on the killing of the traitor, the one who is part of the group but is subject to suspicion and is killed as part of the oath taken when joining the group.

Aoife, who is also displayed as a reason for the tragedy, is another interesting representation. Although she is still fierce (as in defiance against Punch archetypes which present women as meek and in need of saving from "rapacious and troublesome Fenians" (3)) Cuchullain favours this and is blind to her revenge plot. This is where she could easily be said to represent the active republican Maud Gonne who fooled Yeats into producing *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and who then betrayed him. It is likely this is an attempt to show what he thought were the detrimental effects of having women involved in the struggle which he would later criticise in 'Easter 1916'. Yet it was cruel Aoife who sent the young man to battle Cuchullain, even in the original version (written as early as 1901 according to Ure); before Maud's betrayal (1969, 62). Yet Bloom holds that he made Aoife more cruel as time wore on

(1970, 152). But the most important part of this is the use of Cuchullain to symbolize the complete opposite to what he did for republicans; an alternative type of independence which was founded, as a nation should be, on an intellectual level. As quoted by Moses, he would later say that “State and Nation are the work of intellect” (2004, 561). Yet Moses appears to hold that Yeats was indeed a republican stating he was involved in the I.R.B. Although he does state that Yeats was attempting “to cultivate an independent Irish nation on ...pre-modern grounds... [to] offer a counterweight to the forces of (English..) modernity” (2004,562). Yet Moses sees this as part of a “militant cultural and political programme to free modern Ireland from imperial British rule” (562). But all the above proves that this is wrong. Moses offers no proof to Yeats’ membership of the I.R.B. but rather just states it. The play in its conclusion proves that Cuchullain’s peaceful dancing and hunting way of life is favourable. Even Moses describes him as belonging to a “nation of patriots who would happily put behind them the violent heroic struggle” (2004, 568). Also he describes Conchubar as creating “needless and bloody conflict”, much like republicanism (2004, 569).

Politics aside, Yeats still had a number of areas to attend to if he wanted to prove his theory worked. The play itself didn’t quite suit the worldly forms Yeats had hoped, but rather stuck to a Shakespearean model which hindered his lyricism. Yet as Brown points out, Shakespeare showed a dislike for materialism in the very play Yeats criticised in *Samhain, Richard II*-“*On Baile’s Strand* ...was offering an Irish version of the struggle....between the poet Richard II and the practical man Bolingbroke...[the] poetic...is to be preferred to the brutally materialistic exercise of political power” (1999, 134). Interestingly enough the way in which the politics are hidden in symbolism (which stays true to Yeats ideals on politics) hinder another area.

According to Bloom this very complication makes the play have an “imaginative incoherence” (1970, 157). This is true in some sense as Cuchullain’s personality is slightly undermined by his inability to stick to one side of the argument, or so it would seem. Yet as Yeats and other critics spoke of on many occasions, character and personality are less important than lyricism. But Bloom undermines this by saying that J.B. Yeats and William Butler Yeats shared the thought that personality was in fact giving “human nature....self expression” (1970, 154). Is speech not self-expression?

To express human nature is Yeats’ main aim in theatre also. Cuchullain’s lack of resolve also seems to be a reflection of Yeats’ own paradoxical nature. This fact goes against Yeats’ earlier claim (as mentioned in Chapter Two) that a poet should never express himself in a character. This was his criticism of Shakespeare and *Richard II*, and he has contradicted himself. But to return to lyricism and speech, Yeats succeeds on this level to some extent, as the wording of the various speeches is very lyrical. The speeches are written like a poem, with metaphors and rhyme to be seen everywhere. Nature and animals, such as the “hawk” are used quite a bit (1989, 257). Yet, again, he undermines himself in his stage direction. As Wilson points out, Yeats had the players “half-chant the words” in his early theatre which had “as little in common with natural speech”, which after all was what Yeats was aiming for (1961, 38). He had resigned himself against Irish due to the fact that nobody spoke it outside of the country towns because he was looking for ‘living speech’ (1962, 94). That said, Wilson is of the opinion that Yeats should use a “plain verse” and have other things as the forefront of attention, which was the opposite of Yeats’ theory. But natural speech was regained through “pre-modern” art, and in tragedy great speeches were proclaimed similar to Yeats’ directions according to Moses (2004, 564).

As for acting, Yeats gave directions to Frank Fay, who was to play Cuchullain. He was in control of how it should be acted like he had hoped, even if Fay had different ideas. The way he described how Cuchullain should be showed how much of himself he put into the character, according to Bloom and Yeats in some sense acknowledged how this can be done by “instinct” (1970, 152-3). Stage directions are basic, usually only being in relation to movement of arms and direction of walking. The strongest gesture is probably when Cuchullain “seizes” Conchubar (1989, 270). Scenery was quite minimal as Yeats wanted. It is interesting however that the setting was changed from the shore to this hall, likely to avoid the cost of producing a set of the sea and distracting the audience from the action. Also much of the action of the play takes place away from the scene of Cuchullain’s tragedy. The stage directions are quite long at the beginning but this is the only mention of a set and although it is descriptive, it only includes a basic “long bench” and chairs and a brief description of costume (1989, 247).

Costume is probably the most extravagant part of the production, although it was well-known that due to poor finances costumes from other shows were re-used. In pictures included in a memorial book for a Yeats exhibition, it is clear that costumes had a Viking warrior feel to them (2007, 68). Cuchullain for example is shown wearing a helmet with horns on the top, and with roman soldier sandals. In the stage directions, there is mention of masks and Cuchullain is described as carrying a “long staff, elaborately carved with or with an elaborate gold handle” (254). Characters, as already discussed, are quite well defined by human feeling if not reduced to serve lyricism. The Fool and Blind Man show parts of Irish character, which Yeats wanted. He, according to Brown, would never write imaginatively “at the expense of a passionate involvement with his native land” (1999, 133). Yet although many critics

praise the Fool and the Blind Man, according to Bloom, he does not believe they are fully “realized” to represent the solar opposites they are meant to (1970, 153). This however is not the issue, and in their laidback way, they represent the “it’ll be grand” Irish spirit so well-known to us. Yet The Young Man remains very underdeveloped; forever changing from strong to weak, much like Yeats and Cuchullain. This may be for family resemblance, but it most likely is just a fault.

## CONCLUSION:

The Dublin theatre world of 1904 was a complex and commercial place, meaning that Yeats was subject to much competition. Foreign companies of actors toured Ireland annually, and Dublin's theatres had travelling shows in performance for a major part of the year. Pantomimes and opera in particular were popular in these theatres, all of which came from England or America. Irish drama was also exceedingly popular and Queen's was by far the most popular venue, regardless of De Burca's bias. The melodramas that were performed there drew large crowds, and as Morash states it was like a "community"; all allied against the villain of the piece, usually the traitor. Yet more research is needed in this area, as due to the limited resources, chapter one was a little biased in favour of the early period before the Abbey, particularly romanticising The Queen's Theatre and its use of Irish plays and subject matter.

Yeats, in the various editions of *Samhain*, argues against the types of theatre presented in Dublin. In his opinion there was too much of the same limited number of forms, and all of these were corrupted by the English theatre, its immorality and its commercial nature. He also held that speech had to be regained from the musical "notes" that had ruined its natural sound (1962, 219). Irish people's way of life was being corrupted by this "world [that] surrendered to the competition of merchants" (2005, 158). Theatre had become too commercial and rejected noble art for the sake of profits. Yet unfortunately, The Abbey was subject to the same fate, as its financier, Miss Annie Horniman priced its seats above the amount the common Irish man (who Yeats hoped to attract to the theatre) could afford. She wanted a "prosperous theatre" as well as an artistic theatre, so Yeats' own theatre was also to be a commercial one (1970,12). Yeats in particular disliked the political melodrama, saying it had come to

resemble the propaganda of the “newspapers” (1962, 151). He also problematised the portrayal of heroes in an idealistic light in these melodramas which, he thought, forced politics into art.

Yet this is where Yeats can be said to commit the very crime he loathed; he created an ideal version of Cuchullain in his play *On Baile’s Strand*. Yet Cuchullain is also where he presents the human emotion he wanted, and the politics he sought to hide. Cuchullain is clearly a representation of Yeats himself in opposition to many forces; modernism, English theatre and Republicanism. It is interesting that Yeats chose a republican icon to symbolise his anti-republican feelings, especially with its connection to Pearse. Conchubar is the site of modernism in the play, but more importantly, he represents all that republicanism brings; oaths, tragedy and self-sacrifice. It is Conchubar’s oath that brings Cuchullain’s son to his tragic end and Cuchullain to his downfall. It is better to represent “battles... [that] can never be won” (1962,79). Yeats is elusive on his actual feelings on republicanism, but as his membership of the I.R.B. could never be proven, and as the oath and Conchubar were added to the play, it is safe to say that “he hated the violence” in 1904 as much as he did later in life (1999, 274). His other aims, as set out in *Samhain*, fell a little short with all the symbolism going on in the play, but at least Yeats didn’t do what he clearly loathed; force his politics on the audience, even if his theatre didn’t quite become what he had hoped.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Barnes, Ben. *The Book of Days*. Dublin; The Abbey Theatre, 2003.
- Bloom, Harold. *Yeats*. NY; Oxford UP, 1970.
- Brown, Terrence. *The Life of W.B. Yeats: a Critical Biography*. Dublin; Gill and Macmillan, 1999.
- Callan, Edward. *Yeats on Yeats*. Portlaoise; Dolmen Press, 1981.
- “Christmas Amusements”. *Irish Times* (Dec 20, 1898) p4.
- “Christmas Amusements”. *Irish Times* (Dec 21, 1892) p6.
- “Christmas Amusements”. *Irish Times* (Dec 20,1900) p5.
- “Classified Ad 145”. *Irish Times* (Dec 21, 1901) p6.
- Cleary, Joe and Claire Connelly ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*. Cambridge; CUP, 2005.
- DeBurca, Seamus. “The Queen’s Royal Theatre 1829-1966”. *Dublin Historical Record* 27:1 (December 1973): 10-26.
- Duncan, G.A. *The Abbey Theatre in Pictures*. Dublin; National Press Service, 1962.
- Fay, Gerard. *The Abbey Theatre; Cradle of Genius*. London; Hollis and Carter, 1958.
- Fitz-Simon, Christopher. *Irish Theatre*. London; Thames and Hudson, 1983.
- “1904: Richness and Diversity Without the Abbey”. *Player and Painted Stage: Aspects of the Twentieth Century Theatre in Ireland*. Dublin; New Island, 2004.
- Flannery, James W. *Miss Annie F. Horniman and the Abbey Theatre*. Dublin; Dolmen Press, 1970.
- Foster, Roy. *W.B. Yeats: A life. I: The Apprentice Mage 1864-1914*. Oxford; OUP, 1997.
- Gantz, Jeffery. *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*. London; Penguin, 1986.
- Gregory, Augusta. *Lady Gregory’s Complete Irish Mythology*. London; Bounty Books, 1994.

- Herr, Cheryl. *For the Land They Loved*. New York; Syracuse UP, 1991.
- Hogan, Robert ed. *Towards A National Theatre: The Dramatic Criticism of Frank J. Fay*. Dublin; Dolmen Press, 1970.
- The Irish Literary Theatre: 1899-1901*. Dublin; Dolmen Press, 1975.
- Laying the Foundations; 1902-1904*. Dublin; Dolmen Press, 1976.
- Hull, Eleanor. *Cuchullain: The Hound of Ulster*. London; George Harrap and Co, 1909.
- Hunt, Hugh. *The Abbey: Ireland's National Theatre 1904-1978*. Dublin; Gill and Macmillan, 1979.
- Jordan, Anthony J. *W.B. Yeats: Vain, Glorious, Lout. A Maker of Modern Ireland*. Dublin; Westport Books, 2003.
- Kavanagh, Peter. *The Story of the Abbey Theatre*. Dublin; The National Poetry Foundation, 1984.
- The Irish Theatre: Being a History of the Drama in Ireland From the Earliest Period to the Present Day*. Tralee; The Kerryman Ltd, 1946.
- Morash, Chris. *A History of Irish Theatre 1600-2000*. 2002.
- Moses, Michael Valdez. "The Re-birth of Tragedy: Yeats, Nietzsche, The Irish National Theatre and the Anti-Modern Cult of Cuchullain." *Modernism/Modernity* 11:3 (Sept 2004): 561-579.
- Ni Dhuibhne, Eilis. *W.B. Yeats; Works and Days: Treasures from the Yeats Collection*. Dublin; NLI, 2007.
- "Pantomime in Dublin." *Weekly Irish Times* (Dec 23, 1890) p3.
- Pilkington, Lionel. *Theatre and the State in Twentieth Century Ireland: Cultivating the People*. London; Routledge, 2001.
- "Ro-Peep at the Queen's Theatre". *Irish Times*. (Dec 28 1896) p6.

- Sisson, Elaine. "The Boy as National Hero: The legacy of Cuchulainn". UCD Scholarcast, Series 1.
- "The Star Variety Theatre". *Irish Times* (Dec 23, 1890) p 2.
- Unterecker, John. *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York; Noonday Press, 1959.
- Ure, Peter. *Yeats the Playwright: A commentary on Character and Design in the Major Plays*. London; Routledge, 1969.
- Welch, Robert. *The Abbey Theatre 1899-1999: Form and Pressure*. Oxford; OUP, 1999.
- Wilson, F.A.C. *W.B. Yeats and Tradition*. London; Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1961.
- Yeats, W.B. "The Irish Dramatic Movement: 1901-1919". *Explorations*. London; MacMillan&Co Ltd, 1962. P 73-222.
- *The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats*. Dublin; Gill and MacMillan, 1989.