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Theatre of Dissent: the Historical Imagination of the Irish Workers' Dramatic Company

Lauren Arrington

While the dominant theatre of the Irish Literary Revival relied on ahistorical mythologies to imagine a unified (and arguably Unionized) nation, the Irish Workers' Dramatic Company was intent on a drama of disruption.¹ Based at Liberty Hall, the headquarters of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, and concerned with the material welfare of the working classes, the amateur company presents an alternative to the preoccupations of the Abbey Theatre with its mystical depictions of an uncorrupted west, representations of an imaginary peasantry and its concern with nationality. Whereas the aim of Yeats and Gregory was to represent the nation in plays dealing with Irish legend or 'Irish historic personages or events', the Irish Workers' Dramatic Company aimed to intervene in the present moment, to reimagine the place of the individual in history and in the process to effect material change.²

The Irish Workers' Dramatic Company (IWDC) was established in June 1912 by Delia Larkin, sister to the labour leader and founder of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU), Big Jim. Prior to the costly Lockout of 1913, the ITGWU had the resources to invest in cultural enterprises. Delia Larkin began by organizing a workers' choir and a workers' band, and the popularity of these pursuits inspired her to organize an amateur dramatic club. The choir, the band and the dramatic club served several functions. They offered free, edifying entertainment for the workers in the evenings, with rehearsals providing an alternative to the public house. The clubs were only open to members of the ITGWU or the Irish Women Workers' Union (a subset of the ITGWU) and served as a way to increase union membership, since interested parties would have to join the union if they wished to take part. Furthermore, the performative aspects of the clubs served to propagandize the values and objectives of the union. In addition to this

propagandistic element; productions by the IWDC had the potential to agitate audiences to action. Although the genre was not officially constructed until the German and Russian workers' theatres of the 1920s, the IWDC functioned as an agitprop theatre, and the way in which the company engaged with the historical imagination of the Irish Revival and reimagined history in response to the dominant ideology is central to the group's aesthetic.

The IWDC's productions can be divided into two categories: plays that explicitly rejected the terms on which peasant-centric Revivalist drama was constructed and plays that were based on Revivalist tropes but subverted romantic nationalist stereotypes. Essential to the type of Revivalist drama prevalent in Dublin is what Edward Hirsch has described as the 'aestheticizing' of the peasantry, a process in which a 'complex historical group of people is necessarily simplified by being collapsed into one entity, "the folk"'.³ In these plays, a peasantry that is gifted with supernatural abilities or a wealth of imagination is contrasted with 'the modern industrial and commercial British spirit'.⁴ Of course, this was not the only type of play being staged at the new National Theatre. Ben Levitas has shown the extent to which the Abbey included working-class realism in its programme long before the well-known plays of Sean O'Casey. Important innovations such as Fred Ryan's *The Layings of the Foundations* (performed by the Irish National Theatre Society in 1902) and St. John Ervine's *Mixed Marriage* (1911) gave voice to a radical consciousness that departed from the PQ's of peasant quality and instead proclaimed the 'proletarian quotient'.⁵ Ryan's play imagined a future state of class relations in Irish society, while Ervine's play – although not overtly historical – uses the 1907 dockers' strike in Belfast as the plot for his anti-sectarian message. In an interview with the *Pall Mall Gazette* following the Royal Court's production of *Mixed Marriage*, Yeats was asked whether he privileged idealist, imaginative drama over the 'tractarian'; he responded, 'Logic in art should be hidden up as bones are hidden by flesh. But I look upon realistic drama as a phase in the evolution of national drama [...] And so we are delighted to get plays setting forth the clash of interests and of thought at work today.'⁷

Although the Larkins admired the Abbey's programme, and Delia Larkin praised *Mixed Marriage* in the ITGWU's newspaper, the *Irish Worker*, she argued that working-class people did not have access to the drama of which they were the subject:

the good coat and nice blouse disdain to sit side by side with the collarless, shoddy coated son of toil, or the drab bloused factory

girl [...] the working class as a rule, either out of sheer sensitivity, or out of utter contempt for these persons and their snobbishness, shun the Abbey. Not because they do not admire 'Art', not because the bigger ideals portrayed by the newer drama does not appeal to them, but because of the rank snobbishness that is the rotten core of the middle class, and which has spread into the Abbey like an infectious disease.⁸

Her solution was to commission Andrew Patrick Wilson – ITGWU member, columnist for the *Irish Worker*, and actor in the Abbey's second company – to serve as manager and director of Liberty Hall's new workers' theatre. On 28 December 1912, the IWDC held its first performance, which was comprised of four one-act plays: Rutherford Mayne's *The Troth* (1909), Norman McKinnel's *The Bishop's Candlesticks* (1901), the premiere of Wilson's *Victims: a New Labour Play* and *The Matchmakers* by Seumas O'Kelly (1909).

The Troth was a sombre opening to the evening.⁹ An historical drama, set in 'the middle of the nineteenth century', it depicts the struggle of the McKie family and their neighbours against the tyranny of a morally corrupt landlord, Colonel Fotheringham, whose inhumanity causes the death of Francis Moore's wife and children and the McKies' only child. Desperate, with no recourse to the law (Fotheringham enjoys the protection of the police), Moore and Ebenezer McKie plot to kill the landlord in a tense scene in which McKie invokes the legacy of his ancestors who fought in 1798. Mayne's anti-sectarian message is underlined by an exchange between the two men in which the audience learns of McKie's son's burial in the meeting-house cemetery, whereas Moore's son was buried in the chapel graveyard. The action makes it clear that the success of future generations depends on the alliance of the men, despite their religious differences. Moore, a widower, bravely stands to suffer the consequences of the assassination, although it was McKie who fired the shot that killed Fotheringham. The play ends with Ebenezer appealing to Mrs McKie, who is horrified by the realization that her husband is a murderer: 'Peace, woman. Moore has no wife.'

The class politics of *The Troth* are complicated by Mayne's character John Smith, a labourer employed by the McKies. Described as 'stout' and 'brawny' in the stage directions (in comparison to the 'poverty stricken' Mrs McKie and Ebenezer McKie who is 'gaunt with privation'), Smith's politics are not those of the stereotypical peasant. He believes that the farmers deserve eviction because of their disloyalty, declares himself a Tory, and goes to work for the gardener at the Big House when

the McKies can no longer afford to pay him. Smith's character problematizes what would otherwise be a simplistic tenant-farmer/landlord dialectic, which is complicated further by the questionable soundness of McKie and Moore's characters. Mrs McKie – the only blameless character in the play – describes Moore as having eyes that 'were flaming [...] He's next mad, that man, about his wife'.¹⁰ She also suggests that her own family's hardship could have been prevented if her husband had not cheated his sister out of £50 at old McKie's death.¹¹ The wronged sibling now refuses to come to their aide. The morality of the killing of Fotheringham is ambiguous; Mrs McKie – a cipher for the audience – is suspended in the moment of deciding the verdict on McKie's guilt. The information to which the audience is privileged throughout the play suggests that the assassination was not necessary. Had the characters worked together, exhibited class solidarity and moral rectitude in their relationships, the desperate end may have been prevented. Mayne undermines the mystical, self-sacrificial rhetoric of 1798 epitomized in Yeats and Gregory's *Cathleen ní Houlihan* (1902); *The Troth* privileges human relationships and the problem of material hardship. Mayne uses the historical moment of the failed revolution as a model for class solidarity in another historical moment (the Land Wars), establishing a continuous narrative in which the contemporary audience could situate itself as the inheritor of a legacy of class war.

In her study of workers' theatre in the United States, Colette A. Hyman discusses the way in which the amateur workers' groups there used conventional 'popular entertainment styles, images, and motifs' such as melodrama rather than attempt to create new genres.¹² We can see this tendency in the IWDC's productions, in the company's use of rural Revivalist tropes as well as in its use of melodrama. *The Bishop's Candlesticks*, which followed *The Troth* in the IWDC's opening night, is Norman McKinnel's adaptation of a scene from the beginning of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. The play was first staged at the Duke of York Theatre in London in August 1901 and was also popularly revived in New York, both in vaudeville performances and in benefits for working-class organizations.¹³ McKinnel's play is characteristic of melodrama in its vilification of the Bishop's sister, Persomé, who bullies the family servant, Marie, and chastises her brother for his charitable acts. Yet the Bishop in his goodness sees only the best in Persomé, comically interpreting her admonishment, 'You'll sell the candlesticks next!', as a suggestion. An armed convict (the character of Jean Valjean in Hugo's novel) who enters the house demanding food is greeted by the Bishop with kindness and sympathy. Encouraged to speak about his life before

prison, the Convict remembers fragments of his past: a picturesque cottage, his wife becoming ill, and being caught stealing food to save her. The Convict meets the Bishop's charity with hardened suspicion, believing that it is merely a forerunner to an attempt at conversion. In the night, he absconds with the candlesticks. Persomé urges the Bishop to call the police, but he refuses: 'The candlesticks were mine, they are *his* now. It is better so. He has more need of them than I.'¹⁴ A Sergeant and three *Gen darmes* catch the convict, find the candlesticks and attempt to return them to the Bishop. Persomé welcomes the arrest, but the Bishop tells the police that he has given the candlesticks to his friend. The play ends with him helping the Convict to escape to Paris.

Unlike Boucicault's subversively nationalist melodramas in which the rascal Irishman is the hero, the audience for *The Bishop's Candlesticks* is aligned with the Bishop; the Convict is presented as a type deserving pity but not celebration. A long speech makes his position in the play explicit:

Look here, I was a man once. I'm a beast now and they made me what I am. They chained me up like a wild animal, they lashed me like a hound. I fed on filth, I was covered with vermin [...] They took away my name, they took away my soul and they gave me a devil in its place, but one day they were careless [...] They feed you in Hell but when you escape from it you starve.¹⁵

The Bishop's actions do result in a conversion, despite the convict's resistance: not only does he ask for the Bishop's blessing before leaving the house, he also declares that he feels as if he 'were a man again and not a wild beast'.¹⁶ *The Bishop's Candlesticks* as a pedagogical text asks the audience to reconsider its attitudes to criminals, who are depicted as not belonging to a separate class but as victims of the same inequalities from which the audience suffers.

The connection between the 1798 Rising in Ireland, mentioned in *The Troth*, and the post-revolutionary France that is the setting of *The Bishop's Candlesticks* is implicit and perhaps even an unintentional theme in the programme. Even so, the opening night of the IWDC began with two plays that invoked two iconic moments of class struggle. The third play in the programme, *Victims* by Andrew Patrick Wilson, changed the tenor of the performance from the imagined past to the politically charged present.

In the autumn of 1912, Delia Larkin organized two successful strikes in Dublin against Keogh's Sack Factory and the Pembroke Laundry in

protest against the working conditions under which women laboured. Wilson drew specifically from the Irish Women Workers' Union's recent campaigns and gave voice in *Victims* to Della Larkin's argument that the public labour of married women was a 'crime', what James Connolly called a 'double domestic toil'.¹⁷ Wilson's protagonists are Jack Nolan, an unemployed mechanic, and his wife, Anne, who has not gone out to work because of their sickly child, but she takes in sewing. Traditional gender roles are firmly articulated, with Jack reflecting self-consciously on his masculinity ('my very manhood has been snapped and taken away when I allowed you to attempt such work at all'), and Anne's belief that motherhood is 'the greatest joy a woman can know': women do not work for firms but 'for those they love'.¹⁸

Victims is not an historical drama but a play about the possibility of historical change. Wilson's style has been described as 'early twentieth-century agitprop', and this is a useful way of understanding his work for the IWD/C.¹⁹ The urban setting of a tenement house gives the themes raised in *The Troth* and *The Bishop's Candlesticks* immediacy. Like Mayne, Wilson rejects a simple dichotomy of class differences. The capitalist owners of the shirt-making firm do not appear in the play; instead, Wilson depicts a collaborating white-collar worker in the way of a clerk who comes to the Nolan home to tell Anne that she is not working fast enough, and a rent collector who does the landlord's bidding. The clerk's speech concisely articulates the exploitative tactics of the ITGWU's antagonists: 'Some regular hands at this shirt sewing work can do as many as a dozen and a half a day, or if they have handy kids they can do two dozen'.²⁰ Anne has only finished 12 shirts in three days, since she has no candles to work at night (and no money with which to buy them). But the clerk is merciless:

Scott and Scott don't take no notice of dying kids; they've heard all that yarn before. As for your husband being out o' work, well, maybe he is and maybe he isn't. Maybe you have a husband and perhaps you ain't got no husband. I don't know, and Scott and Scott don't care [...] So long.²¹

The depiction of the rent collector who comes to evict the Nolans – three weeks behind on their payments – is similar. When Jack refuses to pay up or get out, the middleman replies, 'I think it is the height of insolence and ingratitude [...] It is scandalous, sir, indeed I may say it is infamous'.²² The interjection of a comedic reply not only anticipates O'Casey in its register but may also predate Brecht's strategy of

alienation. The intensity of the moment is broken, creating space for the real crisis of *Victims*, Jack's appeal for solidarity:

If you get the sack my friend[] You will be a victim as well as me then. We are all victims[] [A]s we cannot fight profit-mongers we fight one another. One victim tearing another victim and all done in the sacred name of profit.²³

The repetition of the title signifies to the audience that this crisis between would-be comrades is the issue. If the rent collector is to escape victimization, he must ally himself with the tenants. The audience is not gratified by a change in character (as they would be in a melodrama); here, the rent collector refuses to accommodate the Nolans and is forced out of the room. The act of solidarity is delayed, giving the impetus to the audience to do their duty outside of the theatre.

The agitation aspect of Wilson's agitprop is encoded in Jack's speech to the rent collector that refers to the title of the play; its propagandistic elements can be located in Anne's mistreatment by Scott and Scott and Jack's trade unionism, which is not assumed but is openly discussed by the couple in unrealistic dialogue. This exchange, unlike the dialogue between Anne and the clerk, does not work as realist drama since the intimacy of the married couple's relationship and their shared history is sacrificed for direct speech in which the audience is given Jack's history. He tells the audience that the employers see him as a 'dangerous man' because he took a prominent role in union-organized strikes over wages:

The strike lasted for weeks, but like nearly all sectional strikes it was doomed to failure. The Union was smashed, and then the masters, not content with their victory, sought to teach the men a lesson by proclaiming a lock-out.²⁴

Jack's mention of 'sectional strikes' is propaganda for the founding principles of the ITGWU, which campaigned for the improvement of conditions for skilled and unskilled workers. Such plain speech is typical of the theatrical language required by agitprop, described by Baz Kershaw in *The Politics of Performance* as 'language that was quickly read in the urgency of the political moment, and which was deliberately simple'.²⁵

The simplicity of Wilson's language is complemented by the extremity of emotion in *Victims*, which can be seen to reflect both melodramatic elements and the highly externalized expression that characterizes

agitprop theatre. Emotion is at fever-pitch from the start, with Anne's lullaby to her baby, followed by a half-soliloquy:

Sleep on my darling, sleep on my pretty one, and forget all your suffering and hunger. Oh God! to think that my little child should be dying with hunger, and his mother powerless to save him. My boy, my boy. (*A brief pause during which she bends closer over the cradle, then starting up more wildly, breaks out*): But you must not die. You shall not die! God cannot be so cruel as to take you from me now. Your father will find a job, someone will give him work soon, and then your mother will get lots of food and nice things for her little baby. (*Relapsing again into her former mood*.) Oh, how wasted and worn he looks, and it is growing so very cold with no fire to warm the room.²⁶

The emotional tenor changes from grief to anger when the clerk of Scott and Scott arrives, and it changes again to desperation when Jack comes home and the baby's worsening health is discussed. Anne tells Jack that she has sent for the doctor, who refuses to come unless he is paid first. Jack's reply, spoken to the baby, serves as an irritant to the audience: 'Had you been the cub of some rich employer you would have had nurses and doctors, heaps of them dancing about you, but you don't count.'²⁷ Jack's anger intensifies rapidly, and he goes so far as to say that he would prefer to kill his child – 'dashing his brains out' – to spare him the machinery of 'the system' that will 'chain and grind him as chatted all the days of his life.'²⁸ At this moment, the rent collector arrives, and Jack gives his metatheatrical appeal for solidarity of all of the working classes. In the final seconds of the play, as Jack turns toward Anne, she tells him that the baby is dead. The stage directions stipulate 'Slow Curtain'.

The Matchmakers concluded the IWDC's opening programme and was to some extent a return to convention after Wilson's experimental urbanism in *Victims*. However, Seumas O'Kelly's play is subversive in its demystification of the Revivalist peasant and in its privileging of modernity over the imagined past. First staged by the Theatre of Ireland at the Abbey Theatre in 1907 and popular with amateur companies throughout the country, the plot concerns the attempt of two matchmakers, Larry Dolan and Tom O'Connor, to fool one another and the couple.²⁹ Mary Noonan (Larry's niece) was born without her right hand, and Sean O'Connor (Tom's brother) is described as having 'bandy legs'; neither can find a suitable match in the village because of their physical impairments.³⁰ The matchmakers arrange for Mary and Sean to be

married, while keeping the physical conditions of each disclosed from each. Crucially, Larry also keeps Mary's condition secret from his fellow matchmaker, Tom. While Sean, Mary and Larry's wife, Mrs Dolan, are out inspecting the cattle that are to be Mary's dowry, a neighbour – Kate Mulvany – reveals Larry's secret to Tom and threatens both men with public shame, punishment by the law, and excommunication from the Church for 'conspiracy, fraud, and corruption.'³¹ When Mrs Dolan, Mary and Sean return, Larry and Tom admit their deceit, at which point Mary and Sean reveal that each already knew about the other's imperfections. Furthermore, Larry and Tom did not make the match; Kate had introduced the pair before: 'we all kept our minds to ourselves. We thought we might as well have the last laugh at the matchmakers.'³²

In its rural setting and focus on materiality, *The Matchmakers* is similar to *The Truth*, but it goes further in its critique of the peasant aesthetic. Mary Noonan's attempts to look her best before Sean's arrival are 'sarcastically' lambasted by her uncle, who teases her for her pride in her 'fine cloak', her silver brooch, and her single glove, provocatively asking her about her silk scarves, gold bangles, emerald earrings, 'red sunshade', diamond necklace and ivory walking stick.³³ Furthermore, tradition (signified by matchmaking) is shown to be corrupt. Kate Mulvany's recourse to democratic institutions – the newspaper and the courts – makes this clear, although O'Kelly's use of humorous malapropism ensures that the comedy is maintained: 'The law. Bad and all as it is, can't let the like of you go on malfoostering the people'. Tom and Larry attempt to intimidate her with threats rooted in history and nationalism, accusing her of being an informer, out for blood money, a spy (suggesting she should work for Dublin Castle), but their attempts at coercion are impotent. History is the stuff of myth; the excommunication of the men will be 'Like St. Patrick driving the snakes out of Ireland.'³⁴ Modernity is what is valued here.

The opening programme of the IWDC consisted of plays that were easily available, inexpensive to produce and reflected the values of the labour movement. Each of the plays privileges a moral economy that is based on neighbourliness, or – in labour terms – solidarity. Furthermore, all of the plays represent a society that is negatively affected by profit-seekers. Importantly, this occurs both in rural and urban settings, in history (*The Truth* and *The Bishop's Candlesticks*) and in the present (*Victims* and *The Matchmakers*). The IWDC represents a counterculture at work in Dublin that is not restricted to the anti-pastoralist dramas of Mayne and O'Kelly, which were produced by other companies, but is extended to a total critique of the contemporary and historical social

structure. This critique is made possible due to the themes that emerge from the programme when it is considered as a whole, the self-evident politics of the company, and the politically charged space in which the performance took place.

Estimating the efficacy of performance is a slippery task and ultimately depends on the individual's sense of commitment to the ideology that is being represented (or challenged) in the show.³⁵ This commitment is stronger when the individual spectator is part of a community of shared values, as the Liberty Hall audience can be presumed to have been. Even so, it is impossible to credit the IWDC's production with any future action on the part of playgoers. The most that can be said for the efficacy of the company's December 1912 performance is that it provided an alternative to dominant, nation-centric and capitalist ideology, and was a model for resistance. This resistance is exemplified in the crisis of industrial relations that occurred in 1913. By October of that year, 25,000 Irish people were out of work, either on strike in sympathy with the ITGWU or locked out because of their union membership. One-fourth of Dublin's citizens were without an income. Delia Larkin attempted to alleviate the hardship of the city's workers through the medium of culture: a tour of the Irish Workers' Dramatic Society to England.

The context of the IWDC's performances abroad, with the company's transparent political affiliations and motives, has a direct bearing on the perceived meaning of the plays that the workers produced.³⁶ The IWDC's tour included Lady Gregory's *The Workhouse Ward* (first performed by the Abbey in 1908) and William Boyle's three-act comedy *The Building Fund* (1905). The *Irish Worker* followed their tour: the first stop was Liverpool, where the IWDC performed at the David Lewis Theatre, a music-hall with a seating capacity of 1000 people. After two nights in Garston, the company returned to Liverpool for a performance at St George's Hall before travelling to Birkenhead, Manchester, Oxford and London, where they played at the William Morris Hall and the King's Hall Theatre. The use of large spaces conveys the mass of support for the ITGWU as well as reinforces the way in which popular venues were co-opted by the workers' theatre. Plays generally interpreted in the specific context of the Abbey Theatre became part of a different discourse and can be read in ways that reflect non-hegemonic values. The differences in the politics of the IWDC and the Abbey Theatre company became the subject of lengthy discussions in the *Irish Worker*. Lady Gregory refused permission for the IWDC to perform *The Workhouse Ward* in England, after the company had embarked on tour. In her discussion

of the controversy, Karen Steele cites Gregory's anxieties about her own and the Abbey's financial well-being as the motivating factor, while Gregory maintained that her publisher, Samuel French, acted without her knowledge.³⁷

The Workhouse Ward opens with a dialogue between two men, Mike McInerney and Michael Miskell, who reminisce about their childhoods in an idyllic Skehanagh, where their only trouble was bad neighbours (that is, each other). Mrs Donahoe, McInerney's sister, arrives with a proposition: McInerney can come to live with her if he is willing to earn his keep, tending the fire, 'stirring the pot with the bit of Indian meal for the hens, and milking the goat and taking the tacklings off the donkey at the door, and maybe putting out the cabbage plants in their times'.³⁸ Her gift of a suit of new clothes persuades him to accept. Miskell protests at being left behind in the workhouse 'with rude people and with townspeople, and with people of every parish in the union, and they having no respect for me or no wish for me at all'.³⁹ Miskell's complaints have little effect on McInerney at first, as he imagines himself young again in a landscape of plenty: 'Wheat high in the hedges, and getting and nothing scarce! Sport and pleasure and music on the strings!' But, he realizes, there will be no conversation. This inspires him to ask Mrs Donahoe if she will take them both. She refuses, leaving the two men where they started, talking and then arguing as the curtain falls on a pillow fight. Gregory's note to *The Workhouse Ward* in *Seven Short Plays* discusses the plot in terms of a national allegory:

I sometimes think the two scolding paupers are symbols of ourselves in Ireland [...] 'it is better to be quarrelling than to be lonesome'. The Rajputs, that great fighting race, when they were told they had been brought under the Pax Britannica and must give up war, gave themselves to opium in its place, but Connacht has not yet planted its poppy gardens.⁴⁰

Opium here signifies industry, which has been neglected by Irish people who are instead busy quarrelling over political differences that are reductively presented as petty disputes between neighbours. Analysed in the context of a production by the IWDC, a different reading is available. Steele reads the play as an allegory of 'working-class struggles over "having their say" in the future of Ireland'.⁴¹ Yet, it is possible to read the working-class politics differently. Offered the opportunity to take part in the domestic economy of Mrs Donahoe's house, McInerney refuses

to leave his ward-mate. Although they have a history of disagreement, he will not abandon Miskell (another Michael, who could be himself) for the lure of an imagined pastoral. The life that Mrs Donahoe offers is not one of halcyon retirement but one of hard manual labour: building, stirring, milking, harnessing and planting. And she, his sister, will remain landlord. Rather than show the men's quarrelling as lazy distraction, the concluding scene has the potential to codify an opportunity for the workers to end their historical divisions and to work together, refusing enslavement by their brothers and sisters. The ITGWU was crippled by a lack of support from British trade unions, and the question of solidarity was hotly debated in the British and Irish national press. In its immediate relation to union politics, *The Workhouse Ward* expresses what Steele describes as 'the character and content of trade unionism', although it goes much further, and in performance codifies working-class solidarity.⁴²

Like so much peasant drama, William Boyle's *The Building Fund* deals with a contested will and a potential marriage. It opens with the misery Grogans – Shan and his mother – refusing to donate to a building fund for a new chapel. One of the building-fund collectors, Michael O'Callaghan, makes a frank appeal, which softens Mrs Grogan's heart. Secretly, she writes a will leaving all of her possessions in trust to the parish priest, 'to use at his discretion, partly for the benefit of poor persons who are not beggars, and partly to the building fund, just as he thinks proper'. The will has further consequences when the blossoming romance between Sheila and one of the building-fund collectors, MacSweeney, is upset by the revelation that MacSweeney was only interested in Sheila's potential inheritance. The curtain falls on Shan Grogan's line, 'Ah, my friends! Whatever some may think, I feel that I have been too long a stranger in my pastor's holy influence.'⁴³

First produced at the Abbey in 1905, Boyle's work was part of a new wave of dramatists whose plays retained a rural setting but satirized rather than idealized rural life, although Boyle would refuse to go so far as Synge, withdrawing his work for a period following the Abbey's production of *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). Yeats believed that Boyle's plays dealt with the corruption of the peasantry by modernization, contrasting his characters with the people represented in Gregory's drama:

Lady Gregory has written of the people of the markets and villages of the West, and their speech, though less full of peculiar idiom than that of Synge's people, is always that vivid speech which has

been shaped through some generations of English speaking by those who still think in Gaelic. Mr. Colum and Mr. Boyle, on the other hand, write of the countryman or the villager of the East or centre of Ireland, and the speech of their people shows the influence of the newspaper and the National Schools. The people they write of, too, are not true folk; they are the peasant as he is being transformed by modern life.⁴⁴

Following Yeats's lead, in the context of an Abbey production, critics have read *The Building Fund* as an anti-materialist treatise. Robert Welch writes that in this 'odd, nasty little play [...] The consciousness of the power of money, its domination over all other impulses, whether of passion or belief or fellowship, is clearly registered'.⁴⁵ Welch reads the conclusion of the play – Shan Grogan's sudden interest in the Church: 'Ah, my friends! Whatever some may think, I feel that I have been too long a stranger in my pastor's holy influence' – as evidence of the character's self-interest. Mary Trotter offers a different interpretation, decoding in the play's conclusion a message similar to Gregory's politics in *The Workhouse Ward*: 'a call for unity among different factions of the nationalist movement with competing claims for the "national inheritance"'.⁴⁶ Staged by a workers' theatre, wholly concerned with materiality and part of a discourse outside of the paradigm of nationalist politics, *The Building Fund* demands reconsideration. Rather than a satire of rural society corrupted by financial concerns, it can also function as a morality play warning against the consequences of miserliness. O'Callaghan's appeal to Mrs Grogan has a metatheatrical resonance in the context of Delia Larkin's fundraising campaign:

it won't be long before both of us will have to leave the much or little we may have behind us. Do you ever think of that? [...] Want in this world has been a terror to you all your life; and yet you are not afraid to face the next world without making the least provision against want there.⁴⁷

In another scene, O'Callaghan uses 'Cripple Moore, the stone-breaker' as a positive model: 'The poor old creature gave us half-a-crown. There's an example for you'.⁴⁸ It is possible to imagine a production in which this direct instruction would be delivered to the audience in a non-naturalistic style. Yet even in a performance that maintained the conventional illusion of the fourth wall, the pedagogical nature of the performance is clear, given the explicit purpose of the performance, or

what might be termed its intertextuality in relation to real-world events. The IWDC's tour was successful in terms of its reception, receiving favourable reviews and playing to large houses, but the company's profits did not defray the costs of the tour, and the IWDC was disbanded in the wake of the Lockout.

Growing out of and responding to the culture of the Irish Literary Revival, the IWDC profited from aesthetically rich plays, such as those of Mayne, Gregory and O'Kelly, which were given new meaning staged by a workers' company alongside the more schematic drama of Andrew Patrick Wilson. As S. E. Wilmer summarizes in his essay, "Travesties: Ideologies and the Irish Theatre Renaissance": "Members of specific ideological movements would sometimes invade the territory of another for their own ends."⁴⁹ The interests of the Irish Workers' Dramatic Company can be clearly contrasted with the dominant ideology of the theatre of the Revival: a concern with materiality versus spirituality; the demythologized peasant versus a portrayal of the folk; class politics versus national politics; polemic versus disclosed logic. For the workers' theatre group, history was not a repository of the ancient idealism ascribed to it by Yeats and Gregory but instead was a narrative of repression and class struggle, which could be used to provoke intervention in the contemporary historical moment.

Notes

1. For the Unionizing impulse in ahistorical depictions of Ireland, see Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Cork: Cork University Press), 170.
2. For an example of Yeats's aesthetic, see "The Irish Literary Theatre" (1899) in John P. Rayne (ed.), *Uncollected Prose*, Vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1975), 163.
3. Edward Hirsch, "The Imaginary Irish Peasant", *PMLA* 106 (5) (1991): 1116-33 (1117).
4. Hirsch, 'Imaginary Irish Peasant', 1120.
5. See Brenna Katz Clark, *The Emergence of the Irish Peasant Play at the Abbey Theatre* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982).
6. Benjamin Levitas, 'Plumbing the Depths: Irish Realism and the Working Class from Shaw to O'Casey', *Irish University Review* 33 (1) (2003): 133-49.
7. 'The Irish National Theatre', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 9 June 1911, in Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *The Rise of the Realists 1910-1915* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1979), 126-7.
8. D. L., 'The Newer Drama: Reply to "Mac"', *Irish Worker*, 17 November 1912, 1.
9. Rutherford Mayne was the pen name of Samuel Waddell, whose success writing plays for the Ulster Literary Theatre resulted in an invitation to join William Mollison's Company, which first staged *The Troth* at the Crown Theatre, Peckham in October 1908. Later in 1908, the Ulster Literary Theatre

staged *The Troth* on tour to the Abbey, and Maunsel published the script, singly in 1909 and again in 1912 in *The Drone and Other Plays*. See Eugene McNulty, *The Ulster Literary Theatre and the Northern Revival* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 120; Rutherford Mayne, *The Troth: a Play in One Act* (Dublin: Maunsel, 1909) and Rutherford Mayne, *The Drone and Other Plays* (Dublin: Maunsel, 1912), 131-44.

10. Mayne, *The Troth*, 12.
11. Mayne, *The Troth*, 4-5.
12. Colette A. Hyman, *Staging Strikes: Workers' Theatre and the American Labor Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 111-20.
13. 'Hackett in a Sketch: He and E. M. Holland Appear in Vaudeville in "The Bishop's Candlesticks"', *New York Times*, 18 May 1909, 9; 'Newsboys' Benefit at New Theatre', *New York Times*, 18 April 1910, 7; 'Theatrical Notes', *New York Times*, 17 January 1912, 8.
14. Norman McKinnel, *The Bishop's Candlesticks: a Play in One Act* (London: Samuel French, 1908), 17.
15. McKinnel, *Bishop's Candlesticks*, 13.
16. McKinnel, *Bishop's Candlesticks*, 20.
17. Karen Steele, *Women, Press, and Politics During the Irish Revival* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press), 146.
18. Andrew Patrick Wilson, *Victims in Irish Worker*, Christmas Number (21 Dec. 1912), I-III. This is a special insert with different pagination to the rest of the issue.
19. Steven Dedalus Burch, *Andrew P. Wilson and the Early Irish and Scottish National Theatres, 1911-1950* (Lewisston: Edwin Mellen, 2008), 28.
20. Wilson, *Victims*, I.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Wilson, *Victims*, III.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Wilson, *Victims*, II.
25. Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992), 80.
26. Wilson, *Victims*, I.
27. Wilson, *Victims*, III.
28. *Ibid.*
29. George Brandon Saul, *Seumas O'Kelly* (Lewisberg: Bucknell University Press, 1971), 24-5.
30. Seumas O'Kelly, *The Matchmakers: a Comedy in One Act* (Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1908), 3.
31. O'Kelly, *Matchmakers*, 21-3.
32. *Ibid.*, 27.
33. *Ibid.*, 8.
34. *Ibid.*, 23.
35. Kershaw, *Politics of Performance*, 29.
36. For the relativity of ideological meaning discussed in an Irish context, see Adrian Frazier, 'The Ideology of the Abbey Theatre', in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004), 39; for a more theoretical reading, see Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance*, 33.

37. Steele, *Women, Press, and Politics*, 158–9 and E. Sullivan Jr., letter to the Editor, *Irish Worker*, 23 May 1914, 4.
38. Augusta Gregory, *The Workhouse Ward in Seven Short Plays* (Dublin: Maunsel, 1909), 154–5.
39. *Ibid.*, 156.
40. Gregory, *Seven Short Plays*, 207.
41. Steele, *Women, Press, and Politics*, 165.
42. *Ibid.*, 166.
43. William Boyle, *The Building Fund* (Dublin: Maunsel 1905), 49.
44. D. E. S. Maxwell, 'Yeats and the Irishry', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 1 (1 June 1975): 27–38 (32).
45. Robert Welch, *The Abbey Theatre, 1899–1999: Form and Pressure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 37.
46. Mary Trotter, *Ireland's National Theatres: Political Performance and the Origins of the Irish Dramatic Movement* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2001), 121–2.
47. Boyle, *Building Fund*, 24–5.
48. *Ibid.*, 31.
49. S. E. Wilmer, 'Travesties: Ideologies and the Irish Theatre Renaissance', *Theatre Ireland* 28 (Summer 1992): 33–7 (36).

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