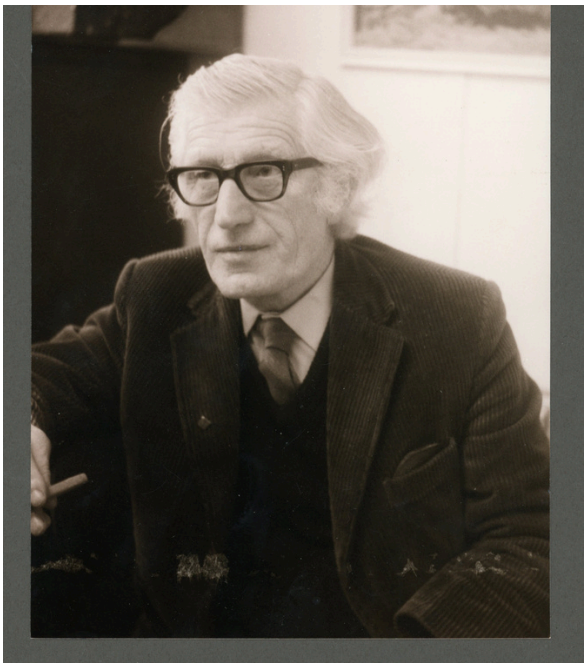
Irish Theatre Heritage in the Archives at Maynooth University Library

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In 2025, I had the pleasure of working on two collections relating to the theatre in Ireland. Interestingly, both collections happened to be in the archives of Irish publishers. The archive of the New Theatre Group is part of the Thomas O'Brien (1914-1974) collection. Documents relating to An Damer, form part of the Caoimhín Ó Marcaigh (1933-2014) archive.



Thomas O'Brien (1914-1974), Maynooth University Library

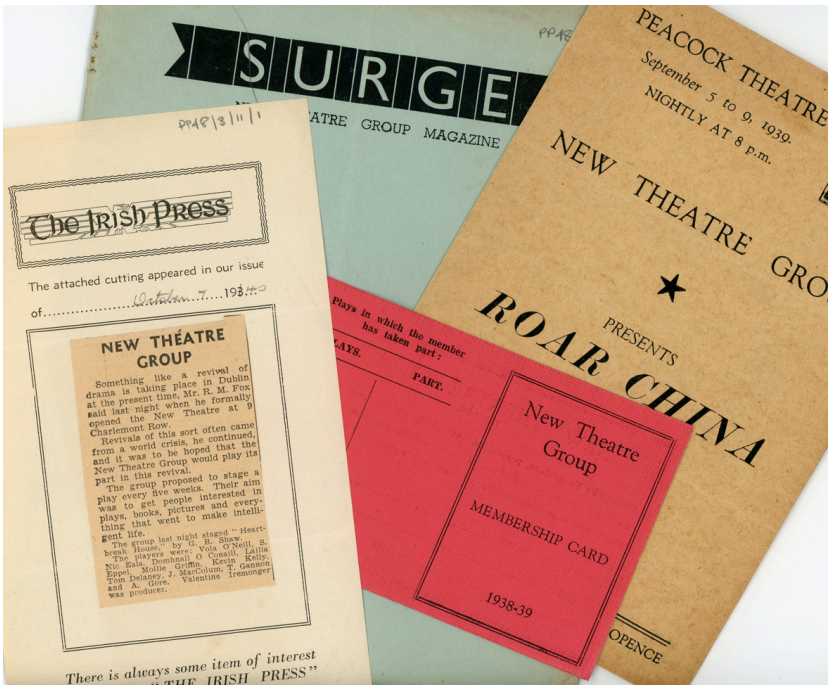
The New Theatre Group began life in Dublin in 1937, when a group of friends with similar left leaning politics, decided to start a worker's theatre. Most had been members of the short-lived Left Book Club, and all were from republican, socialist or trade unionist backgrounds. The New Theatre Group was not affiliated with any political organisation. It declared itself to be anti-fascist, anti-war and pro working-class. Founding members included Thomas O'Brien and Alec Diggs, both of whom left Ireland in 1938 to fight for the Spanish Republic in the Spanish Civil War. Playwright Seán Ó hEidirsceoil (1916-2002), and siblings Roddy Connolly (1901-1980) and Nora Connolly O'Brien (1892-1981), children of James Connolly, were also responsible for the establishment of the Group.

The first production staged by the New Theatre Group was *Waiting for Lefty* by Clifford Odets. It ran for one night in the Engineers Hall, Dawson Street, in June 1937. O'Brien took a minor acting role in the production, which he would do in many plays staged by the Group. The play was a remarkable success, and O'Brien later wrote that *'the audience roared its approval'* (Surge, March 1943, MU/PP48/3/13/7). It was another ten months before the Group produced a second offering. A double bill of *After All those Years* by Joe Corrie, a satirical two-act play, and *Where's that Bomb?* by Herbert Hodge and Robert Buckland, was staged in February 1938. Subsequently the fledgling Group endeavored to produce a new play each month, a huge undertaking for an amateur group. Plays were staged in the Peacock Theatre and Trade Union Halls, before they secured their own premises. They settled first at Charlemont Row, before moving to Rutland Place in 1941. The Group staged a mixture of works by international leftist playwrights and original productions by members of the Group. This included O'Brien's play, *The Last Hill* (September 1939), based on his experience of the Spanish Civil-War, Séan Ó hEidirscoil's play *Lockout*, concerning the 1913 Lockout (December 1939), and *Partition* (October 1939) by O'Brien and his fellow New Theatre Group member, William Clare.



Members of the New Theatre Group on their annual summer outing, Carrickmines, County Dublin, 1938, including Louise Gebler, Des McNamara, Simon Sevitt, Alex Diggs, Tommy Gannon, Barney Larkin, Owen Keating, Paddy Byrne, Ann Peach, Ann Sevitt, Thomas O'Brien and Dudley Allen. Maynooth University Library.

The New Theatre Group archive contains 383 items including, correspondence, programs, and reports on productions. Items of note include a minute book from 1943-1944, producer's reports from various productions including for *The Last Hill* and a production of George Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House*. The archive also holds 180 letters, both incoming and copy outgoing, relating to the operation of the New Theatre Group. These letters cover the day-to-day administration, including payment of royalties and dealing with Trade Unions. They also deal with the payment of subscriptions by members. Additionally, there are letters from the Group's solicitor. These address members objections to being referred to as a communist organisation and as a vehicle for communist propaganda by a journalist in the *Catholic Standard* newspaper (May 1941).

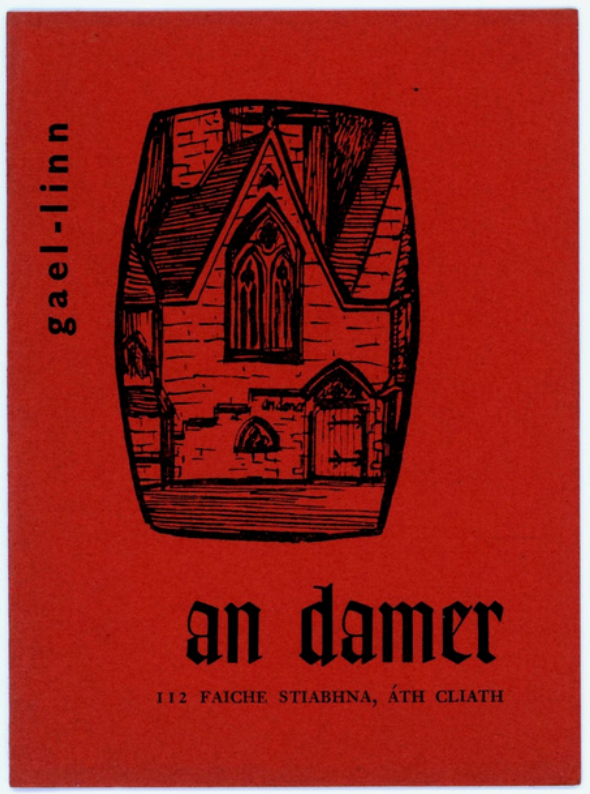


Ephemera from the Thomas O'Brien archive, relating to the New Theatre Group. Maynooth University Library

The New Theatre Group ended in 1944. By then many of the founding members had left. O'Brien felt that the Group had '*completely lost its "Waiting for Lefty" audience*' (Surge, March 1943, MU/PP48/3/13/7) and wrote that if the Group was to survive it needed to return to its roots as a worker's theatre. Thomas O'Brien would later establish The O'Brien Press with his son Michael, in 1974.

In 1955, a vastly different theatre began life in the basement hall of the Unitarian Church on Saint Stephen's Green, Dublin. The Damer Theatre or An Damer, was established by Gael Linn. It aimed to produce plays in the Irish language, and to prove there was an audience in Dublin for such a theatre. Gael Linn also established a drama club, An Club Drámaíochta. The club not only attracted aspiring actors but also provided the Damer with an audience of Irish speakers. For an annual fee, members got one ticket for each production of the season. By the end of the first season, the club had five hundred members.

The 1955-1956 season began in November, with three short plays performed by Dublin based drama group, Aisteoirí Chéitinn. The plays, *Ríte* by Máiréad Ní Ghráda, *An Caidéal sa Chlós* by Máirtín Ó Díomsaigh and Gearóid Ó Tiarnaí, and *Olc Maith*, translated by Ó Díomsaigh from the play by Philip Johnson, were all produced by Ó Díomsaigh. The productions were well received. The Irish Independent described *Ríte* as '*an excellent presentation*', while also praising the cast (Irish Independent, 15 November 1955).



Membership Card for An Club Drámaíochta at An Damer. Maynooth University Library

In 1956, Gael Linn decided to hire a professional theatre producer. Proinsias Mac Diarmada (Frank Dermody) (1907-1978), a veteran of the Abbey and Taibhdhearc Theatres, London's West End and the BBC, was recruited. He had a huge influence on the Damer. Mac Diarmada's first production was a translation by Tomás Tóibín of the Catalan play *La Herida Luminosa* by José Maria de Sagarra. It was entitled *Bua na Créachta*. The play ran from the 11th until the 16th of March 1957 and was well received.

However, the third season at the Damer proved to be its most successful to date. It opened in November 1957 with an original play entitled *Labhrann na Fallaí* by Éamon Ó Guaillí. Another original production was staged in February 1958. Written by Máirtín Ó Díomasaigh and performed by Aisteoirí Chéitinn, *Scáth a Chéile* was well received. The final play of the season however, really put the Damer on the map for theatre goers. On the 16 June 1958, Brendan Behan's original play *An Giall* opened at the Damer. It was Behan's first play in the Irish language. *An Giall* was a tremendous success and played to a full house for three weeks. The Irish Times described it as 'a very cleverly written play'. The reviewer singled out Séamus Páircéar in the lead role, writing '*at no time was his acting anything but first-class*'. Of Mac Diarmada he wrote, '*Mr. Frank Dermody's production was of a high quality which coupled with Mr. Behan's pen, presented a most entertaining show*' (Irish Times, 17 June 1958).

Other successful productions at An Damer included the first production of *An Triail* by Máiréad Ní Ghráda (1896-1971). Opening in 1964 it ran for two weeks in September, two in October and two in November. It featured Caitlín Maude in the role of a young, unmarried mother who takes her own life and that of her child. Fionnula Flanagan also played the role when the run of the play was extended. It played to a full house each night, despite its grim topic. Writing in the Irish Times, L. MacG. stated that '*The play is significant because it has an urgent theme and is entitled to rank as the most important offering the Theatre Festival makes available... Go neartuighidh Dia do pheann, a Mháiréad Ní Ghráda agus do'n fhuireann a chabhruig leat an dréma so do staitsiú*' (Irish Times, 23 September 1964).



Ticket and flyer for the first performance of Brendan Behan's An Giall at An Damer, 16 June 1958. Maynooth University Library

While operating primarily as a theatre for Irish drama, the Damer also hosted a series of other events. Most notable of these was their Oícheanta Seanchais. At the end of their first season in 1956, on the suggestion of Máirtín Ó Cadhain, musician Séamus Ennis (1919-1982) and Dónal Ó Góráin, organised an Oíche Seanchais. Dancers, musicians, and storytellers, the majority from the Gaeltacht, were brought together for an evening of entertainment. The event ran nightly from the 14th until the 19th of May. It was so successful that people were turned away from the door each night. The Oícheanta Seanchais became a staple at the Damer, running annually to a packed house.



Caoimhín Ó Marcaigh (1933-2014)
Maynooth University Library

The Damer archive is part of the archival collection of Caoimhín Ó Marcaigh (1933-2014). Ó Marcaigh, a life-long Irish language advocate, was the manager at the Damer Theatre from 1957 until 1960. He also enjoyed a busy career as a teacher, writer and was the editor of Irish language journal, Comhar. He worked for the Educational Company of Ireland and the Mercier Press and served as senior editor with An Gúm. In 1981, he took over Irish language publisher Sáirséal agus Dill (later Sáirséal Ó Marcaigh), with his wife Aingeal.

The archive contains a small selection of administrative documents, correspondence, lists of members of An Club Drámaíochta, guestlists, and notes. The core of the archive, however, is a sizable collection of ephemera. This includes, tickets, posters, programmes and newspaper cuttings relating to productions at the Damer from 1956 -1965.

Both the Thomas O'Brien archive and the Damer collection in the Caoimhín Ó Marcaigh archive can be accessed by contacting Special Collections & Archives library.specialcollections@mu.ie

An online exhibition based on the Damer collection is also available at https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/library/events-exhibitions/virtual-exhibitions