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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN
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"SET DESIGN IN THEATRE IN IRELAND"

by
Jennifer Curran

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
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INTRODUCTION

Irish theatre is internationally renowned and we have a great tradition of literary genius: Yeats, Synge and O'Casey to name but a few, while today, playwrights such as Tom Murphy, Brian Friel and Hugh Leonard are continuing this tradition. Ireland is considered to be a literary nation.

But what of the visual arts and what about the visual element within theatre? Theatre is after all, a combination of many different art forms. The literary and visual arts combine to create one single effect and that effect culminates in a play or theatrical production.

However, while there is an acknowledgement of the "written word" in a production, there is little appreciation generally, of the design element which is involved. Read a theatre review, for instance and while the critic will praise or denounce a production, discussing the text and the work of the actor, he will rarely if ever, mention the set or costumes and the overall visual quality of the performance.

There is a lack of interest in the area of set design which is so vital a part of a production. This was the main reason for writing this thesis, that is, to discover why there is apathy concerning this area. In order to do so, it was necessary to trace briefly the development of set design up to the present day, to understand the position of set design in contemporary theatre and this situation is analysed in Chapter One. The process which evolves in bringing a design idea from concept to reality is assessed in Chapter Two and this is undertaken through an analysis of four productions in detail. While Chapter Three debates the role of the script versus the image and looks to the future.

The lack of appreciation of the work of the set designer became very apparent in the researching of this thesis. While there is an abundance of information concerning the "written word" in theatre in Ireland both past and present, there is very little recorded about set design in Irish theatre.

The subject is a transient art form, so when a production is finished the set is disassembled rarely to be seen again. Theatre companies keep few clear and informative records of the set and even designers themselves fail to record all their work.

Therefore, the research for this thesis has consisted mainly of interviews and informal conversations with set designers, artistic directors and actors, the reading of newspaper articles and reviews, watching videos of past productions, reading old theatre programmes and of course, attending live productions at the various theatres. General theories on theatre and set design have also been applied to the Irish situation where relevant.

This has resulted in a thesis which concentrates and focuses on set design in Dublin. Dublin theatre sets and in particular the Abbey Theatre and the Gate Theatre sets were selected as the main focus as they reflect the general trend in this country towards set design. This thesis does not discuss fringe theatre or new and experimental theatre as they do not provide a continuity of presentation of which an analysis can be made.

In writing this thesis I hope to highlight the importance of set design in theatre, with the intention that in the future, set design will be recognized as an art form in its own right.

CONJUNCTION

CHAPTER I

THE EVOLUTION OF SET DESIGN IN IRISH THEATRE

For a full understanding of the position of set design in Irish theatre today, it is necessary to trace briefly the evolution of set design within Irish theatre up to the present day. Before the establishment of the Abbey and Gate theatres at the beginning of the century, the situation was very different and to appreciate the efforts of these theatres the period up to this time, the early years of both the theatres will be discussed in this Chapter.

Some form of theatre has existed in Dublin for the past 320 years. However, the struggle to produce a theatre which could be called "Irish" has occupied the best part of those years and finally, in the twentieth century, we can honestly state that the theatre in Ireland is an Irish theatre. By the term "Irish" I mean that many if not most of the plays produced here, are written by Irish writers, acted out by Irish actors, directed by Irish directors and of course, designed by Irish designers.

From inception, the aim of the theatre in Ireland was to produce work which imitated the English stage. Irish actors and dramatists strove to work on the English stage, Farquhar, Goldsmith and Sheridan to name but a few who succeeded in this aim and who, therefore may have been Irish but did not reflect in their work the society, culture, the identity of the land of their birth.

A glimpse of hope of an Irish theatre expressing Irish thought was shown in the 18th century when William Philips wrote a play in the year 1700 entitled "ST STEPHENS GREEN". In this piece Philips ridicules the copying of English ideals and customs. Charles Macklin does the same in "THE TRUE BORN IRISHMAN" in 1783. A year later, Robert Owens (MacOwen) began management of the Fishamble Street Theatre, aiming to produce plays by Irish writers. The theatre was popular but its success short lived however. In 1786 the manager of Smock Alley Theatre obtained a patent granting exclusive rights of production of plays in Dublin for the next fourteen years.

The first theatre in Ireland was founded by a Scotsman called John Ogilby. It was situated in Werburgh Street and opened late in the year of 1637. The writers for this theatre were English. Among them James Shirley wrote especially for it and one of his plays, "ST PATRICK" for example showed great knowledge of Irish history. The theatre was closed at the outbreak of the 1641 rebellion. Ogilby opened another theatre in 1662 however and it was the first Restoration Theatre. It existed until 1787.

Other theatres existed during these years but the first real rival to Smock Alley was Crow Street Theatre. Established by an Irish actor Spanger Barry (who for a period managed Covent Garden), it continued to hold performances, up to 1820.

Theatrical activity in Ireland in the 18th century was mainly based in Dublin, although Smock Alley Theatre toured the country and there were theatres in Cork, Belfast, Galway and Waterford.

However it was during the 19th century that theatre in Ireland "came into its own". In 1821 "The Theatre Royal" opened in Hawkins Street and in 1871 "The Gaiety" opened. Unfortunately the policy of imitating all things English continued and English plays were still produced.

The turning point came in 1899 when "The Irish Literary Theatre" was founded by W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn. While the effort was made to produce plays written by Irish writers, actors were still English. It was only when in 1902, The Irish Literary Theatre joined up with W.G. Fay's "Irish National Dramatic Society" that Irish plays acted by Irish actors began to be produced. This new theatrical group, the "Irish National Theatre Society" gained a home in 1904 in the newly built Abbey Theatre.

In 1928 The Gate Theatre was formed by Hilton Edwards and Michael Mac Lámhóir. The object of this theatre unlike the Abbey was to produce foreign classics and its first performances were given in the Peacock Theatre. This was opened in 1927

expressively for new experimental work. The Gate was formed into a limited company in 1930 and the Concert Room of the Rotunda was leased. English, American, European and Irish plays, notably plays by Denis Johnston, David Sears and MacLiammóir were staged. In 1936 Lord Longford who had previously been a producer at The Gate formed a company "Longford Productions" and began to produce plays at the theatre for six months of the year.

The formation of "The Abbey Theatre" was the turning point where the production of Irish plays using Irish actors was concerned. However, the literary element of theatre production was of primary importance at this time. The acting came second while set or costume design came a poor third. Costumes, sets and props used in Dublin theatre were brought over from England. A paper on the history of Irish Stage by Charles F Power (housed in the National Library, Kildare Street) was read to the University Gaelic Society on 7th February 1911 and pointed out that in the 18th century all theatre accessories and scenery had been manufactured in Ireland, but asked the question "could the same still be said today (i.e. turn of the century) even though everything else was English".

William Butler Yeats, the poet and Lady Gregory were to dominate the Abbey's history right up to their deaths in the late 1930's. During this period of dominance their joint aim was to create Irish dramatic literature by returning to the old myths and folklore as a source for this true Irish literature.

However it must be said that Yeats, while trying to revolutionise writing in Irish Theatre, also wished to see something different happen to the scenic art in Theatre. In a "Samhain" article in October 1903 he wrote:

**"I think the theatre must be reformed in its
plays, its speaking its acting and its scenery."**
(YEATS.W B, 1903, pg9)

He went on to state that:

CONCORDIA

III

"..it is necessary to simplify both the form and colour of scenery and costume. As a rule, the background should be but a single colour, so that the persons in the play pre-occupy our attention."

(SAMHAIN, 1903, pg9)

It was a view which was later to be held by Edwards and MacLíammóir who introduced it more successfully to the Irish critics and audiences and will be discussed at a later stage.

While the first productions by the "Irish Literary Group" were of a realistic or representation manner ("THE COUNTESS CATHLEEN" in 1899). Yeats tried to pursue a policy of non-representation in stage design.¹ One production, that of "KINCORA" in March 1905 embodied all the ideas Yeats voiced in the earlier "Samhain" articles.² It was the most expensive production by the Abbey up to 1906 costing £30 to produce.

In "KINCORA" the wood of Clontarf:

"instead of the orthodox wood scene of dozens of trees with every leaf stippled onto them, it was just a pattern of boles of trees with a leaf design applied in one colour, the whole giving a rhythmic effect of greens and grays."

(CARSWELL, 1985 pg170)

while the King's Great Hall was:

"shown by the hanging of vivid green curtains (with) shields embossed with designs of gold upon the walls and heavy moulding over the doors"

(O'CASEY, 1949 pg152)

¹ The term "REPRESENTATION" is used instead of "REALISTIC" (which is more suitable for describing literary forms) as it is more applicable in describing stage sets. GORELIK in "NEW THEATRES FOR OLD" describes representational stage sets as "any stage form having the ideal of reproducing or duplicating real life." (pg490)

Representational manner of 19th century known as TROMPE L'OEIL i.e trying to represent the true by the true "as defined in "TWENTIETH CENTURY STAGE DECORATION" by FUERST & HUME pg2

While the term "NON-REPRESENTATIONAL" refers to suggestive design.

² "KINCORA" written by Lady Gregory was concerned with Brian Brú and the Battle of Clontarf

and Brian's tent at Clontarf was suggested by:"

"..a great orange tent (which) filled the background, with figures standing out against it in green, red and grey."

The set was one of simplicity and suggestion. a total of five colours were used - green, grey, orange, red and gold, rich, royal colours which in the method they were use, created a dramatic atmosphere reflecting the content of the text.

It was the son of Lady Gregory Robert Gregory who designed the set for "KINCORA". He designed for all his mother's plays, for many of Yeat's, for Synge's "DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS" (January 1910) and for Hyde's "THE NATIVITY PLAY" (January 1911) before being killed in action during World War One.

His set for "THE SHADOWY WATERS" by Yeats, made the whole stage:

"the sloping deck of a gallery, blue and dim, the sails and dresses were green and the ornaments all of copper"

(O'CASEY, 1949 pg152/153)

The great bronze gates which he designed for "ONE BAILE'S STRAND" (by Yeat's) were thought so successful that they were used in "THE GLITTERING GATE", "THE COUNTESS KATHLEEN, DEIRDRE and DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS" (O'CASEY, 1949 pg108).

Gregory was able to translate on to the stage Yeat's theories of scenic design and his sets, might well have inspired young Irish writers, which was the hope of Yeats, but his death in 1916 laid rest to that. Sean O'Casey said on hearing of Gregory's death.

"Ireland may have lost in Robert Gregory an Irish and more colourful Gordon Craig"

(O'CASEY. 1949 pg152)

Yeats also attempted to pursue this idea of non-representational staging with the introduction in 1911 of a set of screens designed by Gordon Craig to be adapted as the settings for numerous plays. Cream in colour, they were meant to be arranged and re-arranged and with the aid of lighting to suggest castle, cottage, wood or moor but especially, the background of any play of "poetic inspiration"" and they were a recent invention in 1910.

A move from realism was again attempted by an Englishman Nugent Monck during that same year of 1911. Yeats had brought Monck over to teach at the Abbey School of Acting and when the "First Company" as they were called, went off on the Abbey's first American tour, Monck was placed in charge of productions using second rank players and pupils as his actors and actresses.

Among his first productions were a series of morality plays such as "THE INTERLUDE OF YOUTH" and "THE SECOND SHEPHERD" performed in November 1911. For these productions Monck changed the appearance of the stage by extending the floor outwards and into the auditorium with a stairway on each side while upstage centre he built a curtained recess on a higher level. This type of stage was and is known as "AN APRON STAGE"³

This and the fact that most of the characters made their exits and entrances by the steps, created a sense of community between actors and audiences.

None of the attempts at non-representationalism were favoured by the critics or public. After the production of "KINCORA" (mentioned earlier) a dissatisfied critic advised that the group (the Abbey):

³According to the Oxford English Dictionary "APRON" is "THE EXTENSION OF THE STAGE IN FRONT OF CURTAIN"ie. AN APRON STAGE. Attempts to find out when it became known as such have failed.

"should drop all new methods and take a point of appealing to the man in the street by copying what had been found successful in the ordinary theatre."

(CARSWELL, 1949 pg151)

On January 5th 1911 a week before the first production of "THE HOUR GLASS" (see Fig.1) by Yeats in which Craig's screens would appear, Joseph Holloway in his theatre column for The Evening Telegraph wondered if:

"the crude looking structure that minimized the proscenium opening and destroyed the look of the arch from the front when the lights went up."

(COLE, 1952 pg38)

was part of the Craig set.

The screens were only used intermittently after their first appearance in 1911, because of the discouraging reaction of the audiences and critics. Also, the opportunities to use them grew fewer and fewer as the theatres repertoire began to establish itself firmly in the realm of naturalism and representationalism.

After Monck's short experience in Dublin, he returned to England to set up his own theatre. He continued to receive much moral support from W.B. Yeats, however an English critic of the time reflected not only the opinion of the English audiences but also those of the Irish, when he wrote in the London Mail of 22nd October 1921.

"It will take Mr Nugent Monck and Mr W.B. Yeats all their time and a little over to lure us back to a revival of the "Apron" Theatre of Elizabethan days. Their Norwich experiment is interesting, as a bit of harmless antiquated crankery. But when Mr Yeats tries to persuade us that the thing should be brought back into general use on the ground that the audience ought to be in close contact with the actors, he cannot realise what he is asking."

(COLE, 1953 pg54)

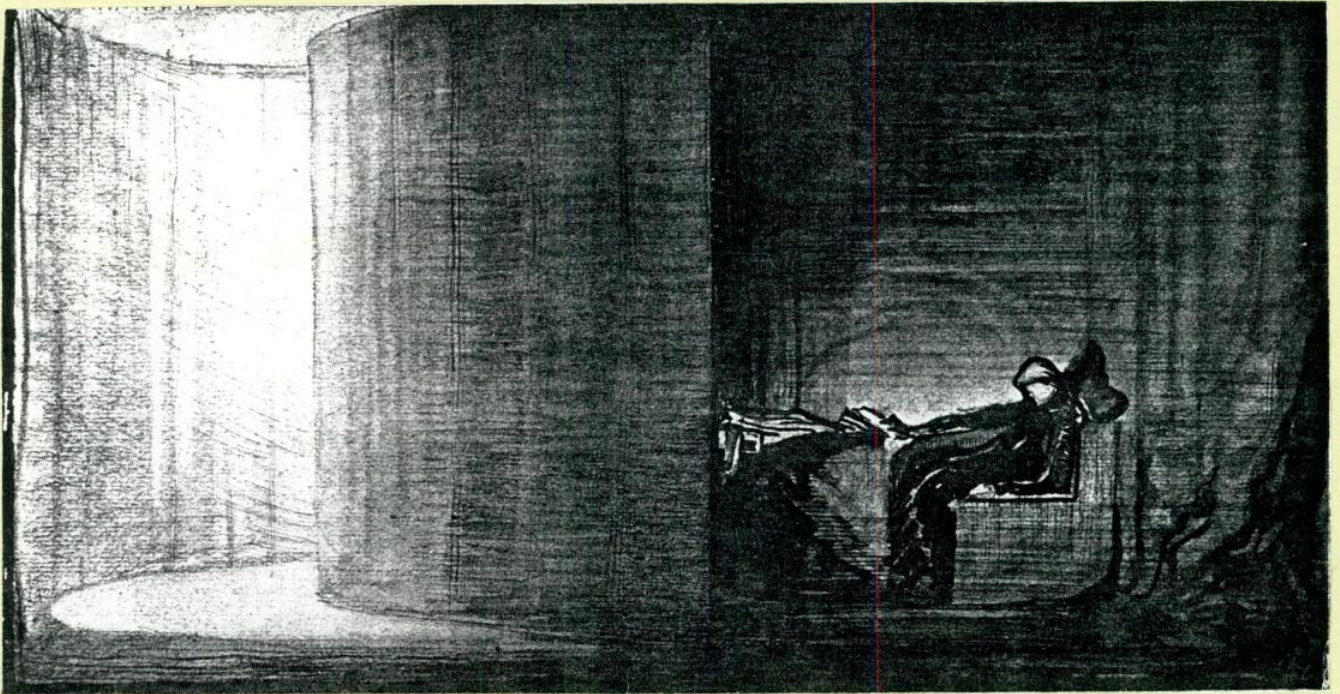


PLATE 1: Watercolour by Gordon Craig, setting for W. B Yeats
"The Hour Glass" 1911, from "PLAYS FOR AN IRISH THEATRE"

The audiences and critics of the time were raised on representationalism in the stage sets presented. They grew accustomed to and preferred the realistic method of staging which became characteristic of the Abbey style during the early years, despite Yeats efforts to introduce non-representationalism. Realism took hold due to the fact that the majority of productions presented required it in their sets. As pointed out, for instance, by Alan Cole in his thesis on stage craft in Dublin during 1910 thirteen new productions were staged, ten of these were realistic in nature. (COLE, 1953 pg40)

As a result the public could not fully appreciate Yeats' objectives in using a non-representational approach. In using this style Yeats hoped to isolate the actor so that his voice and movements had particular significance while at the same time providing a stage set that was expressive in itself, (under lining its importance), yet did not distract the attention of the audience from the players.

It is suggested by Ellis-Fermor that the efforts of Yeats to adopt non-realism in production failed due to the fact that the Abbey stage was a proscenium arch,⁴ rather than an apron stage and this picture frame effect was created, an effect that, on the playwright, would have been unconsciously persuasive in the use of the realistic approach. (ELLIS-FERMOR, 1939 pg 74)⁵

Whatever the reason it is true to say that the audience which regularly attended the theatre wanted realism and not experimental expressionism or non-representationalism. This can be seen in the reaction to the staging and setting of Sean O'Casey's "THE SILVER TASSIE". The play failed twice to be a commercial success both in August of 1935 and September 1951. The play needed expressionist handling only in the second act (a battle-

⁴ The OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY defines "PROSCENIUM ARCH" as "part of theatre stage in front of drop or curtain, especially with the enclosing arch."

⁵ According to Ellis-Fermor, Synge is known to have watched the effect of this picture frame on his early plays and in the face of his observations to have entirely recast the first act of "THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD" (ELLIS-FERMOR, 1939 pg74)

field in France) yet even this was too much for the audience and while O'Casey's earlier "peasant plays" were greeted with huge public praise, "THE SILVER TASSIE" was not, due to the experimental approach of the second act. The Abbey audience was attracted by plays which they easily understood.

The work of the playwright, Dion Boucicault, which had been popular since the mid-nineteenth century continued to "draw the crowds", because audiences of the time could easily understand them.

Traditional in style Boucicault's plays which included his famous Irish plays, "ARRAH NA POGUE", (which was originally produced in Dublin on November 7th, 1864), "THE COLLEEN BAWN" (1860) and "THE SHAUGHHRAN", appealed to the Irish audiences. Richard Pine wrote in 1978:

"As MacLíammóir has stressed in "THEATRE IN IRELAND" the kitchen seldom intruded on the drawing room in the plays staged in eighteenth and nineteenth century Ireland and Boucicault alone represented country life in a style acceptable to the audiences already accustomed to melodrama."

(PINE, 1978 pg3)

Boucicault's traditional, realistic style sought equally traditional, realistic stage sets and the popularity of his work reflects the popularity of representational works.

This was not true of Dublin theatre audiences in general. While Yeats struggled and failed to introduce non-representational stage ideas to Abbey audiences, the Gate Theatre, a few years later experienced success with such methods. Perhaps this was because Edwards and MacLíammóir avoided realism in their designs from the beginning and it was upon plays of an experimental nature, produced before non-representational sets, that The Gate Theatre founded its reputation. The audiences which attended its productions did not expect to see a specific type of play, while the Abbey audience did.

CONQUEROR

The Russian Ballet influenced MacLíammóir and was probably responsible for his interest in non-representational staging. He expressed this interest in "ALL FOR HECUBA" in which he wrote:

"could not a street scene be suggested by a sloping ramp, a solid wall, a lamp post and a black space, a woman's room by a gigantic bed, a lustrous festoon of drapery, a hanging lamp: a moonlit garden by darkness and a green stone fountain."

(MACLIAMMOIR, 1946 pg126)

The ballet invited non-representational settings like these. It is a non-representational art where movements are symbols rather than imitations. It also invites simplicity in setting, in order to allow the dancers to move without hindrance. The dancers are of prime importance, as their movements and not their speech narrate the story.

Edwards and MacLíammóir believed the actors and actresses to be of profound importance. They and not the set, became the most relevant objects upon the stage. Non-representational stage settings sympathised with this idea, as all the irrelevancies of realism were avoided.

The permanent set a method used in the 17th century where the stage is never cleared, even when the locality is supposed to change, was another method adopted by MacLíammóir and his set for "HAMLET" which was staged in February 1932, utilised this idea (see Fig.2).

As discussed in "THE GATE THEATRE", the stage held three rostrums at the back and wings with three sets of steps leading up to them and behind was a bare "cyclorama".⁶ With this set the task of suggestion was carried nearly to its limits, as a wooden frame against the cyclorama was intended to represent a window

⁶ CYCLORAMA - " A circular panorama, a curved background in stage and cinematograph set used to give impression of sky distance and for lighting effect" - OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY



PLATE 2: Michael Mac Lámhóir in "HAMLET" staged in 1932

and a swinging lantern with appropriate sound effects was intended to represent the scene of a shipwreck. It called on the audience to use its imagination, creating an interaction between the audience and the action on stage.

The Gate Theatre's most successful sets were those which were to combine the spatial and permanent methods.⁷ These pleased the audience with their pictorial beauty and satisfied Edwards as they allowed the emphasis to be concentrated on the actor.

One play where this combination was used was in the set of the production of "PEER GYNT" by ISBEN during October 1928. Two sets of black steps were used, their position interchangeable and with the addition of several pieces of detail scenery, a great variety of scenes was effected (see Fig. 3)

The stage was painted a blue-grey colour and was flooded with light, thus achieving an illusion of shadowless and infinite sky. The two sets of steps when placed back to back formed a sort of pyramid with the two top steps as the apex. This formation silhouetted against the sky served for the mountain scenes. Visually they gave a perfect suggestion of a peak and structurally they allowed figures climbing them to be thrown into the postures of ascending and descending great heights.

The valley scenes were played on the stage level, and the steps when divided formed a valley.

Constantine Curran's review of "PEER GYNT" in "THE IRISH STATESMAN", remarked that:

⁷Type of non-representational staging that developed from bareness of "getting rid of all irrelevances" the other being "TRIPTYCH". It was stationary, like triptych but more widely applicable, making more demands upon audiences imagination, where the actor becomes like a prop.

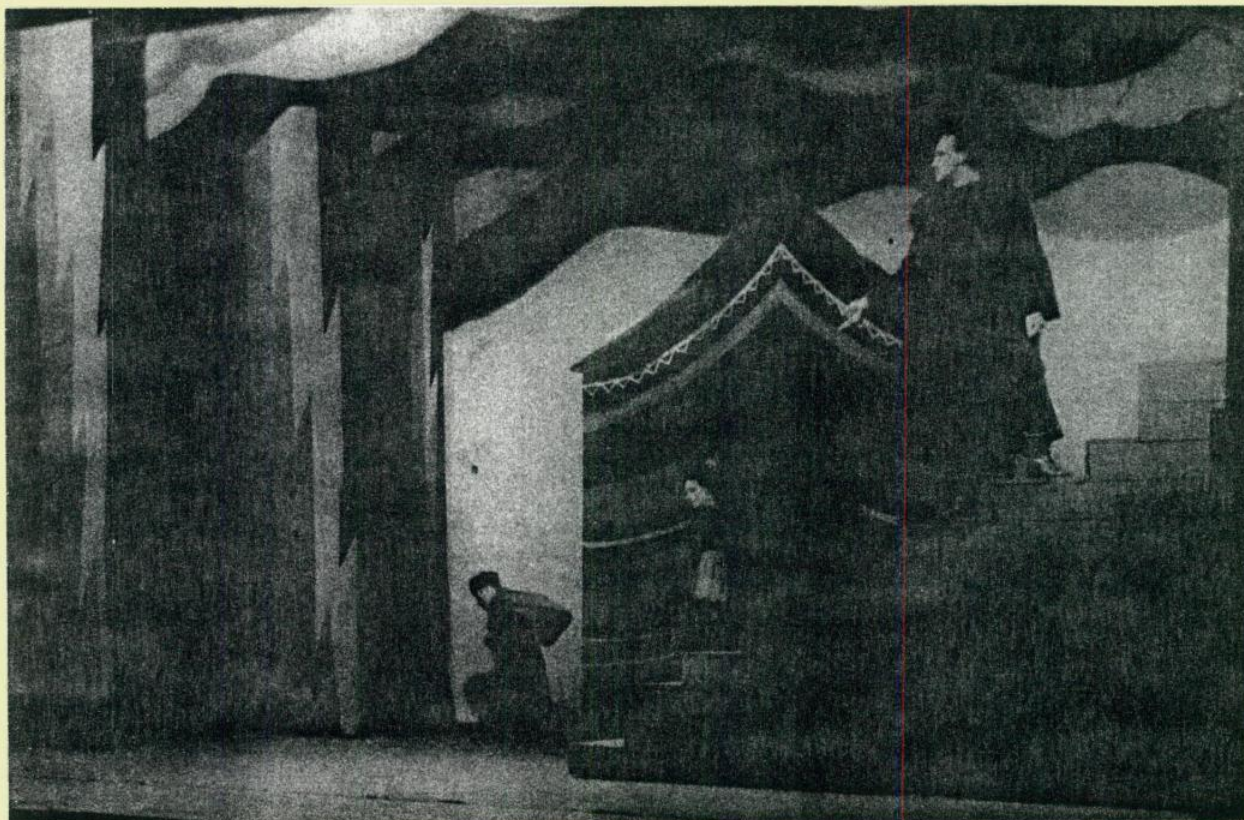


PLATE 3: Scene from "PEER GYNT" by Ibsen, produced by The Gate Theatre in 1928



"the freshness of the mountain farms, the dark encounters of the night, the grotesque horror of the trolls' hall within the hill...filled with the vileness of weeping things were treated in stage scenes of great skill."

(PINE, 1978 pg2)

The set while still a "permanent" cue, was able to adapt to the various locality changes, by the movement of these two sets of steps. An impressive stage set was therefore created with minimum stage props or alteration.

The importance of the set seemed to have become more recognized during the 1920's when the programmes of Abbey productions began to consistently note the work of the scenic designers. This also coincided with the arrival to the Abbey of D Travers Smith (Mrs Lennox Robinson).

Her first production and probably her most noteworthy was the set for "EMPEROR JONES" performed for the first time on January 24th 1927. For this set she placed different coloured curtains, balanced with weights so that they could be swung and held in place. Among them was placed the necessary "built stuff" a theatrical term applied to large props requiring carpentry in the making, which in this case, were simply in the form of a great box of a throne and a platform.

When the curtains were swung and held in position, they represented another time, another place, with the aid of the suggestive power of lighting.

D. Travers Smith was inspirational in her methods to other designers but it was only with the arrival of Tania Moisewitsch to the Abbey in 1935 that a policy of creating an entirely new set for every production was employed.

For years sets were disassembled, disguised with paint and re-arranged in order to be used in different productions (a method

still undertaken by amateur productions). The green curtain used in Yeats' "THE HOUR GLASS" in May 1903 for instance, was used again in "THE SHADOWY WATERS" in January 1904 and numerous other productions:

**"because if we find a good scene we repeat it
in other plays".**

(YEATS. W B, 1905 pg10)

The arrival of Moisewitsch marked a new importance in the role of set design. Working in conjunction with Hugh Hunt (see Fig.4+5), the producer at the Abbey during this time, all the elements of production i.e., lighting, sets, music and acting were co-ordinated and Meisewitsch's artistry made possible impressive productions such as "NOAH" by Andre Obey, "THE SHADOWEY WATERS" and "HASSA" by James E Flecker.

In the Gate Theatre at this time the set assumed a larger importance than ever before, as the emphasis shifted slightly away from the actor when Molly McEwen became a scenic artist in 1939. Cole suggests that this was due to the fact that the standard of acting declined. (COLE, 1953, pg34)

This was also the period when lighting took on a new importance, playing an important if not indispensable role in all non-representational and permanently staged work. It was depended upon as much as were the scenic artists paints. Day and night were determined by the use of different lights in the same way the locality in which the scene was being played was changed as the direction of light switched from one part of the stage set to another.

This is generally still true today. Rarely is the actual structure of the stage set changed during a performance as modifications like lighting are used to indicate scene changes.

For example, in "A COMEDY OF ERRORS" produced by the Abbey in March 1993, the cleverly designed set enabled the use of lighting



PLATE 4: Tania Moisewitsch, stage designer
at the Abbey Theatre from 1935-1939

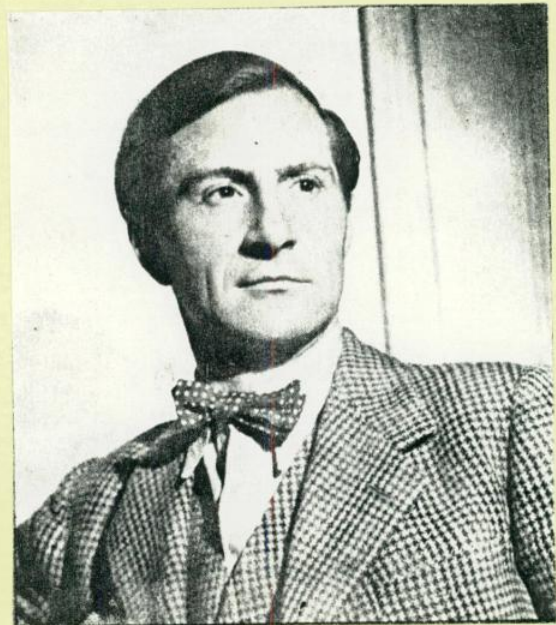


PLATE 5: Hugh Hunt,
producer of plays at the
Abbey for many years.

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LXXV
PART II
1945

to concentrate on different areas of the set, creating a different locality a different scene, be it a convent, an apartment, a hotel.

The same is true for "A MIDSUMMER NIGHTS DREAM" performed at the Gate in July 1993. Again the actual set was not altered but clever use of lighting and modern technology such as in the use of inflatable structures changed the locality from a city street to a wood, to a Dukes palace.

In "FAMINE" produced by the Abbey in October 1993, the set remained structurally intact. Minimal lighting and props were enforced, the audience was left to imagine that the actors were performing in a derelict dwellings, by the ditch of a field in a town and so on.

So far, this chapter has traced the evolution of set design up to the 1940s. It is within these first decades of the twentieth century that preset methods, styles and policies were formed and became established.

The Abbey Theatre was founded with the aim of producing Irish plays and this policy continued into the 1940's and 1950's. However, during this period, the Abbey:

"was gradually reduced to a state of compliant mediocrity."

(O'TOOLE, 1994 pg8)

Ernest Blythe who became managing director of the theatre in 1941 enforced stringent policies which only resulted in the deterioration in quality of Abbey production. For instance, Blythe imposed a ban, allowing only actors fluent in Irish, whatever their capabilities, to perform on the Abbey stage. Plays such as Behan's "THE HOSTAGE", John B Keane's "SIVE" and Tom Murphy's "A WHISTLE IN THE DARK" were rejected.

Unfortunately, the plays produced at the Abbey during this time, called for the familiar cottage or farmhouse interior in their sets and most were undistinguished.

One exception was "NICHOLAS FLAMEL" by Seamus O'Sullivan which was staged in November 1948. The play tells the story of Flamel's bargain with the Devil. There was no attempt to reproduce the alchemist's study or the Tower of St. Jacques in a realistic manner. The play is made up of four short scenes and quick changes were necessary. Dark curtains and a yellow flat paint with shelves, bottles and crucibles suggested the laboratory, a box-like structure cut out to resemble a tower and set against a cyclorama which was lit up by deep blue floods suggested the Tower of St. Jacques.

The production was therefore, quick-paced, the performances were kept light of mood in accordance with the fantasy.

The Gate Theatre also continued with the vision and subsequent policies it was founded on. The theatre seldom attempted to represent the "real by the real" and its repertoire continued to represent this, with productions also staged at the Gaiety Theatre⁸.

The Gate Theatre was plagued by financial worries until in 1969 it received an annual government subsidy grant.

Blythe continued to remain in complete control in the Abbey until 1967 and was on the board of directors up to 1972. Of this period, Fintan O'Toole remarked:

**"an extraordinary mark of the descent of a
radical and inventive theatre into political and
theatrical conservatism of the worst kind"**

(O'TOOLE, 1989 pg1)

Stage set and design reflected this "descent into conservatism" and the experimentation of Yeats seems to have died, with him and little information on set design is recorded of the Blythe era.

⁸Such productions included "DANCING SHADOW" and "WHERE STARS WALK" by MacLiammóir, Shaw's "CAESAR AND CLEOPATRA", "THE OLD LADY SAYS NO!" by Denis Johnston and "HARLEQUINADE", "MORNING BECOMES ELECTRA" by O'Neill, as well as § "HAMLET, IN MODERN DRESS"

However, there were a few encouraging movements concerning the area of set design. Several exhibitions of set design were held for both the Abbey and Gate theatres,

In July of 1967 an exhibition of drawings and models recording stage design at the Abbey Theatre was held in the Peacock Theatre. Spanning nearly seventy years of design, it included models, watercolours, photographs and even woodcuts from artists such as Jack B Yeats, Robert Gregory and Edward Gordon Craig. Unfortunately few illustrations were obtainable.

To make the golden jubilee of the Edwards-MacLiammóir partnership and of the Gate Theatre an exhibition entitled "ALL FOR HECUBA" was held in the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art. Dublin from 4th October to the 2nd of November 1978. The exhibition included photographs of performances, working drawings and costume illustrations, but again, few illustrations were obtainable.

However, while the fact that little is recorded visually of the contents of the exhibitions, the very fact that they were organised is encouraging and one wonders why such an exhibition has not been organised in more recent times, especially since today, while the role of the set designer is not fully recognised by the public, his position within theatre has improved.

This chapter has traced the evolution of set design, concentrating on the first forty years of the twentieth century it is within this period that modern ideas, policies and methods were formed while little changed in the years that followed. The next chapter attempts to discuss the actual role of the set designer today, the processes involved in designing for theatre and the modern methods used.

CHAPTER II

DESIGN IN PRACTICE

The previous chapter dealt with the period when current attitudes, trends and ideas about theatre and set design in Ireland were formed, by tracing the path theatre took up to the present day. At this point it is necessary to determine exactly what theatre is and define the role of set design.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines theatre as a "building or outdoor area for dramatic performance" and the "writing and production of plays". It is a basic definition and does not describe the essence of theatre - theatre is just not that simple.

Theatre is one of the most adaptable and flexible of the arts, It is a collaboration of ideas, talents and creativity, in the hope of arriving at a unity of expression that people can relate to and understand. It is the one art form which combines the medium of literature of dance, music, painting and acting, in order to convey a message. This combination of the talents of interpreters i.e., actors, dancers, singers and directors with the creators, i.e., playwrights, artists and composers is the challenge faced by the theatre and good theatre is achieved when there is mutual understanding between the two.

In order to obtain this "mutual understanding", compromise is all important. Dialogue is crucial and without it a production would be lost as the various elements which are needed to combine and merge to create the theatrical experience would simply flounder in isolation. Frank Conway in an interview described how:

"dialogue is very important just to ensure that you are both (director and designer) making the same production..Everybody should be going towards the same goal and I would compromise hugely my own work in order, finally, that it is integrated that there is continuity, a unity."

(CONWAY, 1994)

This dialogue and compromise is, therefore evident when the set design of a production creates the balance between text, actor and situation.

This however, has not always been the process, which has been used. While today, the designer is involved in the production from its conception through rehearsal to the last performance, working side by side with the director, the "set designer" or "scenic artist" as he was known as back in the beginning of the twentieth century, usually trained as a painter, providing a background and was totally uninvolved with the rest of the production. Charles Elson, describes how:

"at the beginning of the century work was done by a scenic artist who had only a rough knowledge of setting of stage and was solely concerned with painting as his training consisted of an apprenticeship in a scenic studio."

(BURDICK, 1974 pg48)

Someone would order a sky, a forest or a castle. Scene painters were paid by the square yard and sky was the cheapest, while architecture was the most expensive. Schouvaloff writes of the time:

"The same sky, the same forest, the same castle would be used again and again. Sets were only an almost irrelevant background, only illustrations which sometimes strove for historical accuracy, but symbolised nothing."

(SCHOUVALOFF, 1987 pg14)

While this has since ceased to be the norm' in established companies, amateur productions still re-use old sets and props.

Today the distinction between the designer and the director is breaking down. No longer is it the case that the designer sets up the background while the director is responsible for all other aspects of production. A director needs to be able to design and a designer needs to be able to direct because, as Monica Frawley points out:

"until the first day of rehearsal when you are conceptualising and within the rehearsal you are both covering the same area"

(FRAWLEY, 1993)

The visual element in a production does not just mean the background as it was thought to have done back at the beginning of the century and earlier. Even though Yeats wanted to try new ideas, he believed:

"..one should be content to suggest a scene upon a canvas whose vertical flatness one accepts and uses, as the decorator of pottery accepts the roundness of a bowl or jug."

(YEATS. W B, 1904, pg10)

However, acting is as much visual as the set is, the combination of set and acting is what the visual incorporates and therefore what the designer as well as the director is responsible for. The designer must take the movement of the actor into consideration and the actor must look at home within the set.

Set design is as Conway put it:

"a manipulation of space..how you define that space. If you think about defining the dynamics of the play/production - the way actors move from "A" to "B" and how they are going to relate to each other and to the audience."

(CONWAY, 1994)

A good set design arrives at the right space and the truthful space for the play. It does not contradict the overall message of the play, it enhances it. Design is part of what makes people watching a performance understand and feel and so ask themselves questions and provide some answers.

"No opera design ever succeeds unless it expresses the music, or any play design, that contradicts the style of the words."

(GOODWIN, 1989 pg10)

This quote from an essay written by Peter Hall in "BRITISH THEATRE DESIGN" sums up what set design is all about. Conway also believes it to be:

"an arrival at the right space, the truthful space for the play."

(CONWAY,1994)

The set should support every mood of that play, adapt to every moment without inhibiting the movement of the actors, it should not tell the story, that is left to the performers and it should not if it is a good design, overshadow the rest of the production. A set needs to be produced in harmony with the text, with the story. Garry Hynes, the outgoing artistic director of the Abbey Theatre defines set design as:

"creating the world of the play..so it is a living space. It is not the recreation of a dead space. A design is nothing to do with the past, nothing to do with when the play was written, it is to do with the performance of the play today so that it is alive."

(HYNES,1993)

When asked about set design and if audiences recognise the work that is put into the area of production, Frank Conway gave a reply which on reflection is very valid. He believes audiences should not notice and comment on the set or costumes in particular. He especially believes a production has failed if audiences recognise or notice the design above anything with what they are seeing and if its effecting them emotionally in some way then that is the best possible reaction." But, he goes on to say, "if they are noticing and saying "Oh, they (the performers) look nice...theatre is not working as one expression of truth for people to identify with" and that is essentially what theatre is- "an expression of truth for people to identify with." (CONWAY, 1994)

So the task of designing for a play is not as straight-forward as one might think. The process includes a lot of dialogue,

compromise and insight. Nobody within the production team should be out on their own and not in tune with what the production is about. David Putnam says that when he is producing a film he just makes sure everybody is making the same film because he says:

"if you have a director, a designer, a camera-man, a leading actor that are all 5% away from what the vision or the intention is, then the production fails."

(CONWAY, 1994)

The ideal or organic way to design a set is if the designer works with the director and actors in rehearsal weeks before anything is designed. The designer could therefore work in conjunction with the actors visualising their needs alongside the needs of the visual imagery of the play.

However, this never happens in reality and the design work is usually complete or near completion before the play goes to rehearsal. However as I have mentioned above, the director and designer work closely together. A director usually contacts the designer who reads the text of the production and has a response to it and the whole process of conceptualising begins between the director and the designer. Both have their own response and talk in order "to weave a path toward each other". (CONWAY,1994)

Garry Hynes explains how in "FAMINE":

"we (HYNES AND CONWAY) talked and talked and talked whether it was formal or informal talks on thoughts,ideas or opinions, anything and everything is included but at a certain point Frank (CONWAY) would go away and start to model..and by that time, as well I will have indicated to him anything specific that is required in order to let the action of the play happen."

(HYNES, 1993)



PLATE 6: An example of a model set. This particular model set by Brian Collins was for a production of Synge's "RIDER'S TO THE SEA".

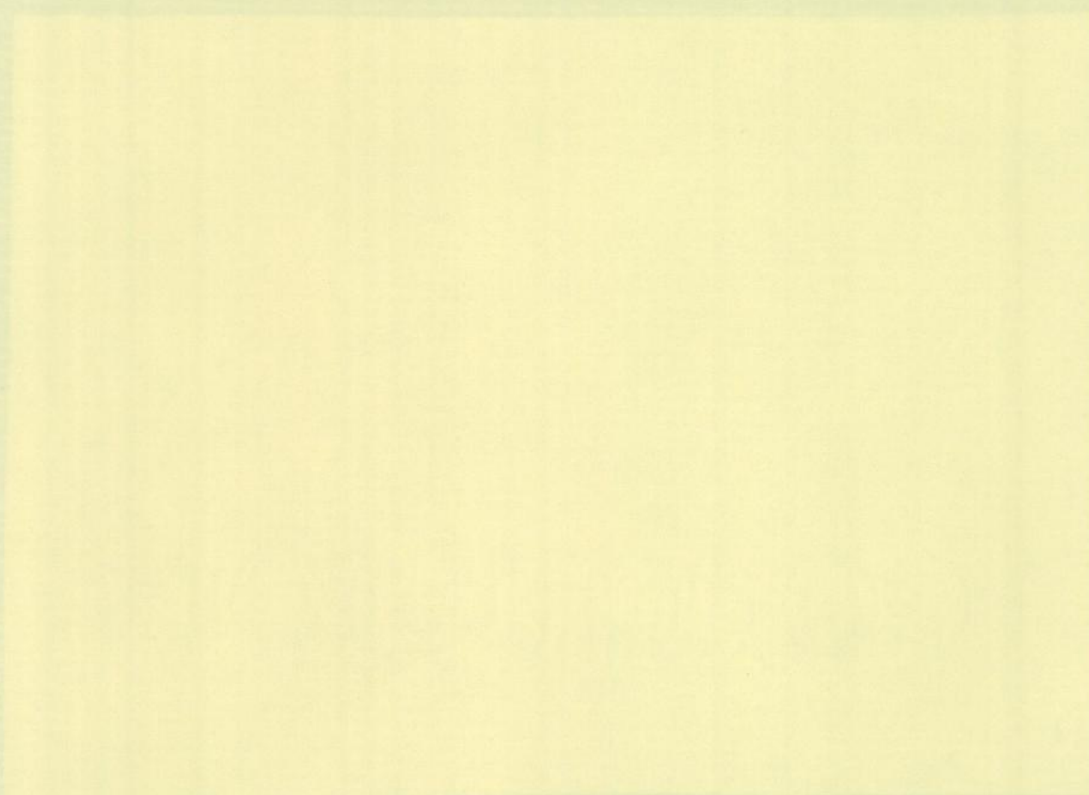




ILLUSTRATION 1: "The Relief Committee" scene from FAMINE which shows the stone circle used in the set.



But all this happens before the first rehearsal and both Frawley and Conway agreed that the design is usually near completion at this stage.

Once the collaboration has been established, the research has to begin in order to start on the design work. The designer reads the text a few times, disregarding the first page which usually has a description of the set by the playwright. Quick sketches are made in order to get a visual picture of the actors movements, place on stage and so on.

"If it is a restoration piece, for instance, anything relevant - the work of painters, poets, architects, the social conditions of the time would be looked at."

(FRAWLEY, 1993)

Frawley also remarked on how she would never go to see a production by another company of the play she would be about to start work on because:

"for one thing, it would influence you too much..and it is not always possible if you are working on a new play which is great."

(FRAWLEY, 1993)

So, in order to research a play, she visits bookshops in order to look around, read and hopes something she sees will spark of ideas.

Equally, a designer would of course, go to libraries, read and look at anything relevant in order to gather as much information, not just visual information though, but anything which would be helpful in the design itself.

This would have been the process Assheton Gordon, set designer and Sue Yelland costume designer would have gone through for the production of 'A DOLL'S HOUSE' by Henrik Ibsen which was performed at the Gate Theatre during October 1993. The play set in the late 19th century deals with the position of women in the



ILLUSTRATION 2: A scene from A DOLL'S HOUSE showing right hand of stage.





ILLUSTRATION 3: A scene from A DOLLS HOUSE showing left hand side of stage.

society of the time, how they are judged harshly by this male-dominated society which has little understanding or concern for their thoughts or feelings.

The set was a reproduction/representational piece. Blue, cream and brown were the dominant colours, a sombre and conservative colour scheme reflective of the time. There was a cluttered feeling to the stage set which was reflective of the period in which the play was set. The action of the production takes place in the comfortable, middle class drawing room of the couple involved. It is the only set needed in the play as there are no location changes only time of day changes which the use of lights adequately portrays and so the realistic set fits the requirements of the play.

It is in direct contrast to Frank Conway's design for Tom Murphy's "FAMINE" which was staged in the Abbey Theatre during the same period in 1993. An arduous process went into the designing of the set, resulting in a totally different type of set, form the one mentioned above. A minimalist approach was used, but as Frank Conway describes:

"there was a very long process that led to that and it was very tricky. I had gone way off track, on a whole different thing altogether. at one point (there was) this food mountain on the stage with all this corn, with the idea of this corn being in the country and enough food for people to eat but they did not have it, so there was this barbed wire mesh across."

He remembers:

"struggling with it all the time and thinking it's not working".

He just read the play over and over and wrote down the story..

"and as I wrote, I realised what I had done completely wrong".

(CONWAY, 1994)

The end result was a stage set which basically consisted of this circle of stones and it tied in beautifully with the text.

The idea for the stone circle came from childhood days spent in a bleak area in the West of Ireland where decay and destruction were ever present:

"all the walls, ponds, ditches and lanes built by my Grandfather's father eradicated, rubbed out."

(Abbey Publication, 1993)

And yet, stone circles of our ancient past have survived for thousands of years. In an interview and in the play-programme of "FAMINE", Conway explained further, how these stone circles whether they are the remains of old Celtic graves such as court-cairns and passage graves, or of forts and towers which transcend culture and generation, represent:

"fragments of a powerful and mythical past, of a sense of a culture and community where ritual thrived and the sense of the spiritual was ever present."

(Abbey Productions, 1993)

It is this sense of ritual and spiritual which he believes is lost from the world of theatre.

The image created by Frank Conway linked in completely with the atmosphere of the text and the stone circle of the set was in a sense his "homage" to the Famine and its victims, but also to famine victims everywhere, both past and present, of social, artistic and nutritional famine, which was the whole essence of the play.

The playwright Tom Murphy in discussing the play said:

"when the actual writing started, consciously or unconsciously, the thought was emerging that the absence of food, the cause of famine, is only one aspect of famine.."

and he also asks the question,

"what about the other poverty's that attend famine?..There is also a poverty of thought and expression."

(Abbey Publication, 1993)

So, while a play like "FAMINE" may have been written about a period in the last century, it reflects different aspects of life today and relates to different parts of the world, and that is what makes it a good play and an interesting production.

As well as being a "ritual" and "spiritual" Celtic symbol, the stone circle lent itself very well to the requirements of the play. Being practically the only object on the stage, apart from a constant burning candle upstage centre. There were twelve different scene location changes which were announced by the use of a projected title onto a black backdrop. Of this Conway remarked:

"even though people thought it alienating, we felt that they (the titles) were important.."

(CONWAY, 1994)

In one scene, "THE QUEEN DIES", the central character John Connor kills his wife, but because the audience sees this title projected onto the stage at the beginning of the scene, they:

"know she is going to die and therefore, watch the scene very, very differently and that was why we did it that way, just so people could see the overall message of the play and not just get caught up in the emotion of it."

(CONWAY, 1994)

This indeed was the case. While the audience was quite shocked at the violence of the scene, it was prepared for it and therefore did not lose track of the overall message.

It is interesting to note that a different opinion was voiced by a Dublin based actor in an informal conversation. This actor believed that the set did not work at all and was a bad design, since in his opinion, the actors had to work around the stone circle

which held a predominant position in the centre of the stage, while the action of the play was forced to each side of the structure.

While this may be true in some of the scenes, notably in "THE QUEEN IS DEAD" scene, most of the action took place in the centre of it and this writer does not feel that it hindered the work of the actors at all.

The imagination and understanding of the audience was called upon, just as it had been for the set of "HAMLET" in 1932, in this minimal, non-representational approach, as the basic structure of the stone circle remained intact yet the action moved from the "Conor" family dwelling place to a field, a ditch, a road, to the nearby town and a town hall interior. This approach constantly called on each member of that audience to add his or her own imagination to the image before them. The technology used to project the scene titles kept people aware that even though this was a play of an event that took place over a hundred years ago, it is being staged today and has relevance to society today, as people are still suffering from different kinds of famine.

On a lighter note, The Gate Theatre produced "A MIDSUMMER NIGHTS DREAM" earlier in July of 1993. Peter Brook in his book, "THE EMPTY SPACE" voices an opinion about Shakespeare in his discussion on "deadly theatre" (i.e. bad theatre) which many others, including this writer, would be somewhat reluctant to say aloud let alone print.

"Nowhere does the Deadly Theatre install itself so securely, so comfortably and so slyly as in the works of William Shakespeare. We see his plays done by good actors in what seems like the proper way: they look lively and colourful, there is music and everyone is all dressed up, just as they are supposed to be in the best of classical theatres. Yet secretly we find it excruciatingly boring.."

(BROOK, 1968 pg12)



ILLUSTRATION 4: Duke's palace scene from A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

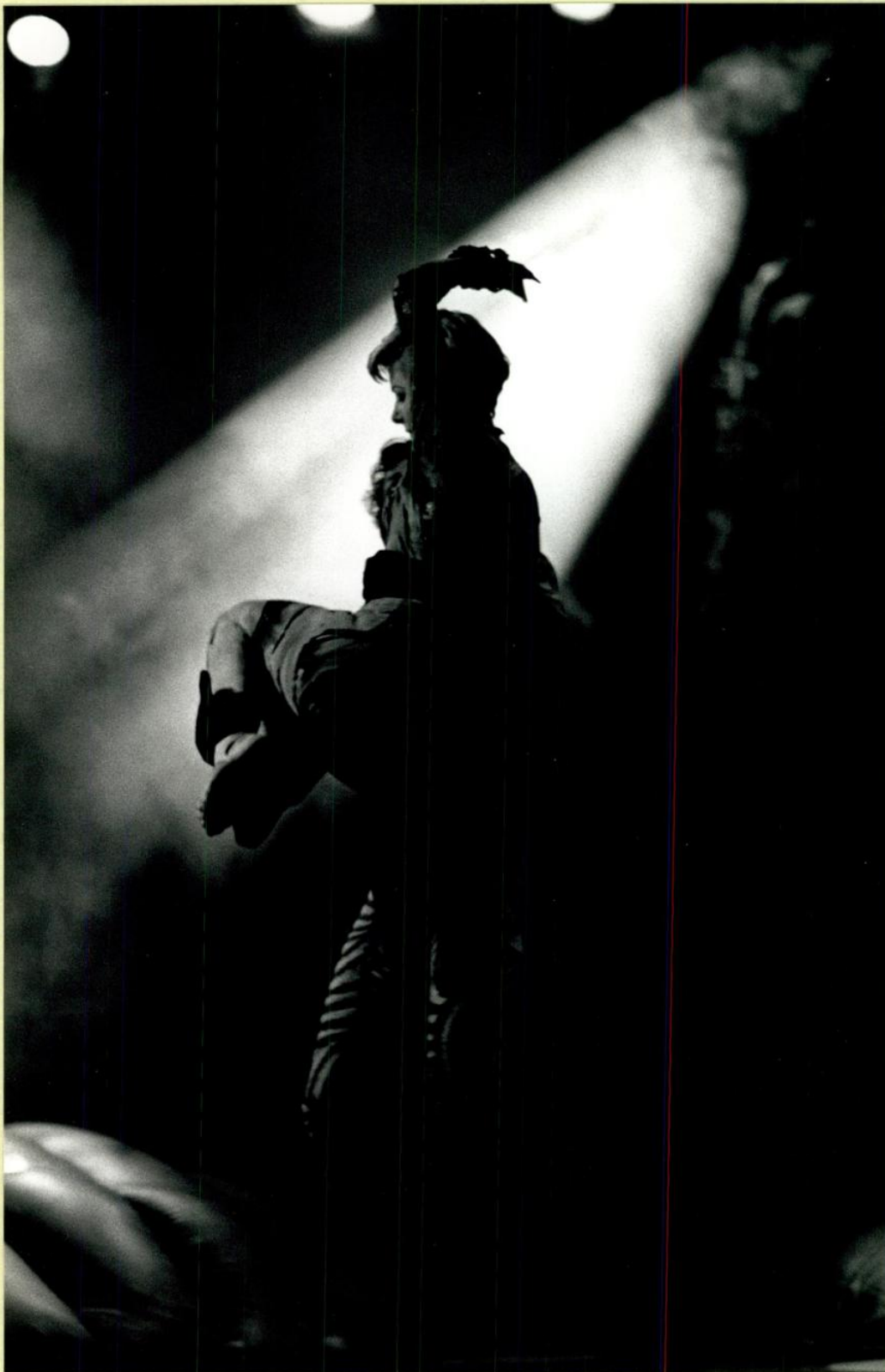
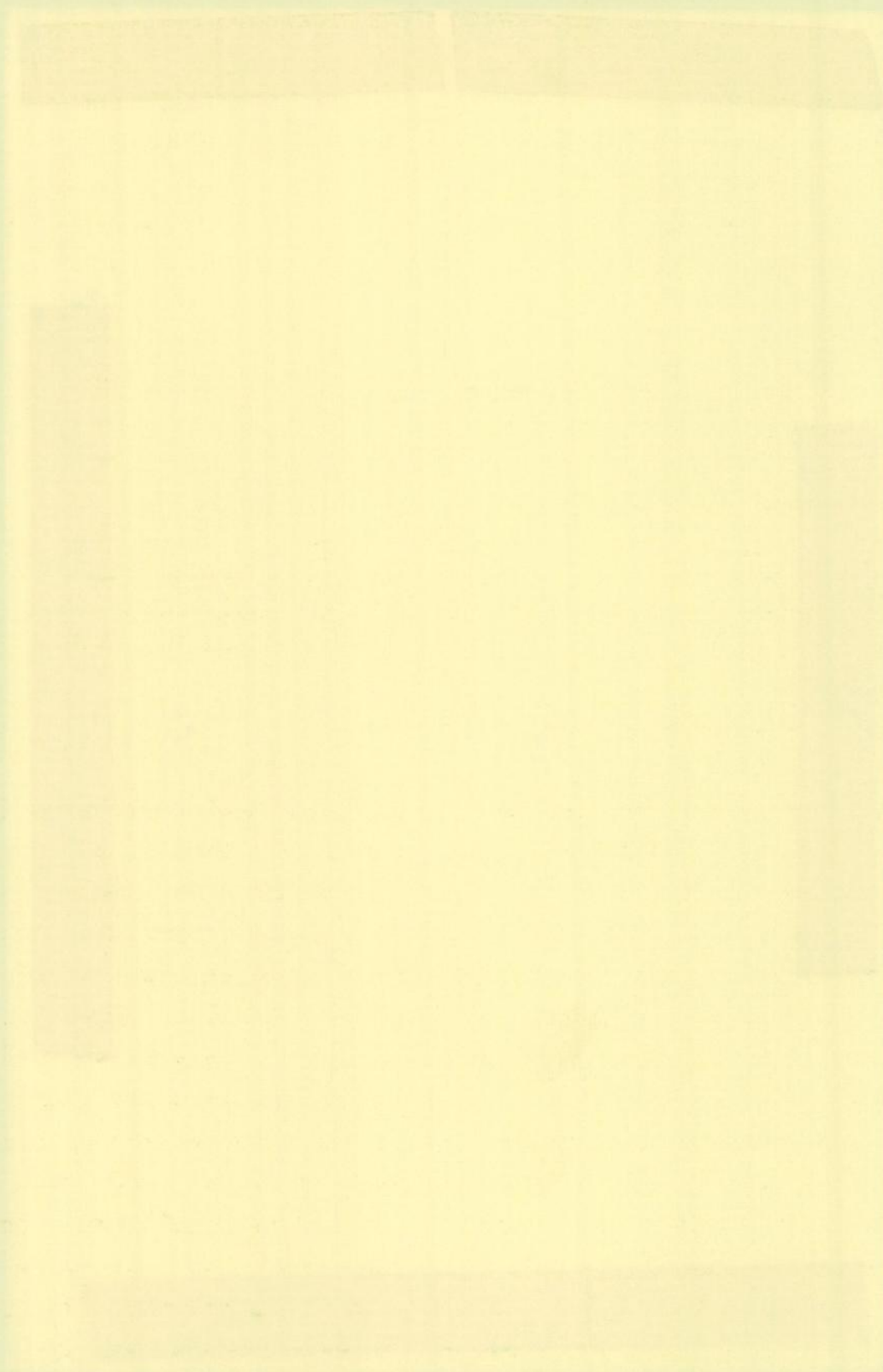


ILLUSTRATION 5: The characters Oberon and Titania in a scene from A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM



However, this production of "A MIDSUMMER NIGHTS DREAM" was neither boring nor hard to understand. Alternative in its approach the production was a mix of contemporary images and magical qualities that conjured up a wonderful result, earning it a standing ovation when it finally, though regrettably came to an end.

Alexander Schovaloff remarks in "SET AND COSTUME DESIGN FOR BALLET AND THEATRE" that:

"the actor..is always remembered by the part he played through the costumes he wore..The costume provides the outward character while the set places the character into a defined memorable space."

(SCHOUVALOFF, pg13)

This was certainly reflected in this play.

The opening scene was very stark, archaic and authoritarian in presentation. Two high-backed white chairs stood on a black platform in the centre "up-stage" with black stairs leading does from each side. The only other colour was that present in the red banner which hung behind the chairs. both male and female characters wore regimented, military style outfits. Hippolyta, Hermia and Helena wore conservative, dark-coloured suits while the men wore military attire. All the scenes set in the Duke's palace were acted in this setting, on stark contrast to the forest scenes which were energetic and lively in action, music and costume. Colourfully printed, "body-stockings-clad" fairies danced around in equally colourful boot runners and wild hairstyles. Oranges, yellows, blues, greens and reds, danced around the stage. In accordance with the views of Charles Elson who writes:

"the ambience of any setting must be conceived in light that is inherent to the total design."

(BURDRICK, 1974 pg52)

dramatic and vividly flamboyant lighting enhanced this action and created magical atmospheres using blues and purples.

Again, the set was of a permanent non-representational style. clever use of inflatable structures transformed the stage from the stern world of the Duke's palace of Thesus and Hippolyta to the bewitching fairy-land of Oberon and Titania - highlighting the increasingly important contribution of modern technology to the world of theatre.

The action of the play was not confined to the dimensions of the stage. On several occasions the performers entered or exited from the auditorium and even sat alongside the audience thus involving the audience as Nugent Monck had hoped to when he re-introduced the "apron-stage" to the Abbey audience earlier in the century, but with more success and acceptance from the public.

Another production staged at the Gate Theatre in February 1994 and which was equally as impressive, was the Galway theatre "DRUID'S" production of "AT THE BLACK PIG'S DYKE". Written by Vincent Wood, it has been described by Mic Moroney in The Sunday Times as a:

"rural drama rumbling violence..."

(MORONEY, 1994)

Spanning two generations, it begins with a performance by "The Mummers":

"those ominous traditional straddling players with their costumes of straw and their ritual enactment's of past battles.."

(MORONEY, 1994)

who stumble across the dead bodies of "Lizzie Boles" and her married daughter "Sarah" and the play then travels back in time, tracing the course of events which led to this slaughter.

It takes time for the audience to figure out the story line. as David Nolan writes:

"..much is asked of the audience in terms of sorting out the various symbolism's of generation changes,

traditions and wilful murders, for this to be an easy night in the theatre."

(NOLAN, 1994)

But why should theatre be an easy nights entertainment? It should also be thought provoking and this production is definitely thought-provoking and the visual aspect is as thought provoking as the text.

The combination of set and costume, results in stunning image and Monica Frawley won the "Time Out London Awards 1993" for her efforts in designing this visually appealing combination.

The stage-set again a permanent, non-representational set, which also had a realistic element to it, was painted a soft, cool, blue-grey colour as were the few, unadorned props - a table, a couple of chairs, a bench, bunker and baby's cot - all of which were placed against the wall of the set. This left the stage free for the "hoolies" and performances of the mummers and the table and chairs were moved to the centre stage by the actors themselves for the domestic scenes.

In contrast to this monochrome set, the untidy costumes of the mummers in particular, were strong, solid colours, mostly green, red and navy. These costumes included wonderful straw masks, each one with different features (see Fig.7) reflecting the personalities of their wearers, "Miss Funny" and "Tom Fool" provided most of the laughs (see Fig.8), but even these had sinister undertones, which were eerily reflected by their uneasy, disturbingly painted white faces and strong, contrasting black and red make-up.

The imagery is strong and the mummers are an impressive sight on stage, yet their masks while on the surface are quite innocent, are faceless but not expressionless and this creates an almost ghoulish and macabre presence - a faceless terror which roams the area, perhaps.



PLATE 7: The Mummers
in a scene from "AT THE
BLACK PIG'S DYKE"



PLATE 8: The characters Lizzie Boles and Sarah in a scene from
AT THE BLACK PIG'S DYKE

PLATE 9: The characters Tom Fool and Miss Funny in AT THE BLACK PIG'S DYKE

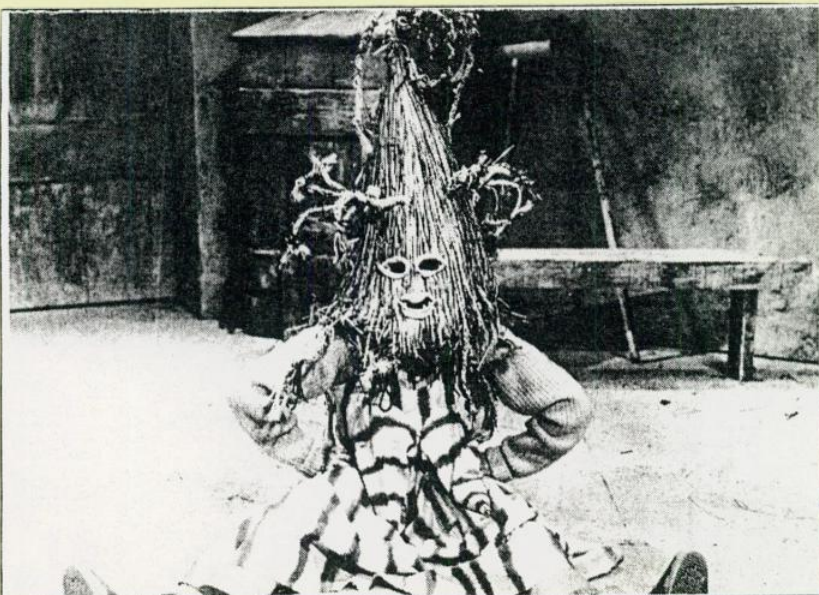
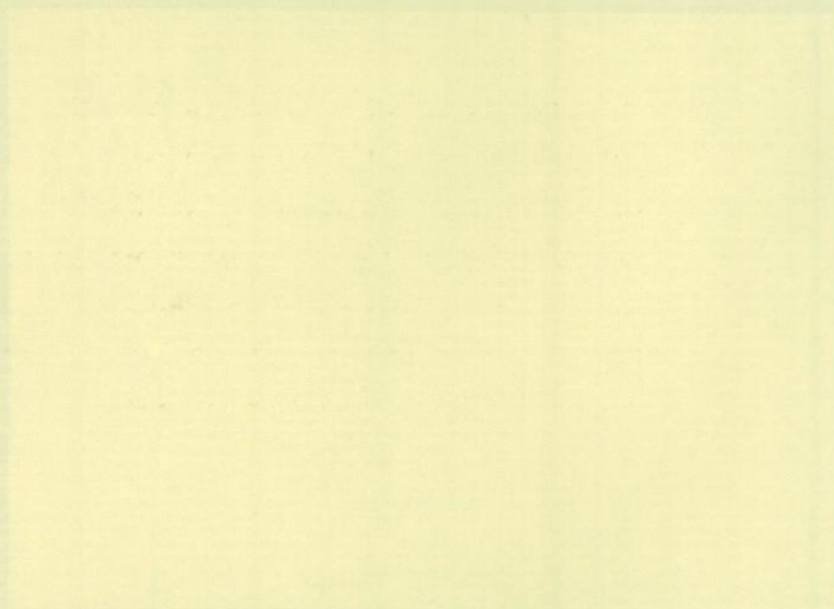
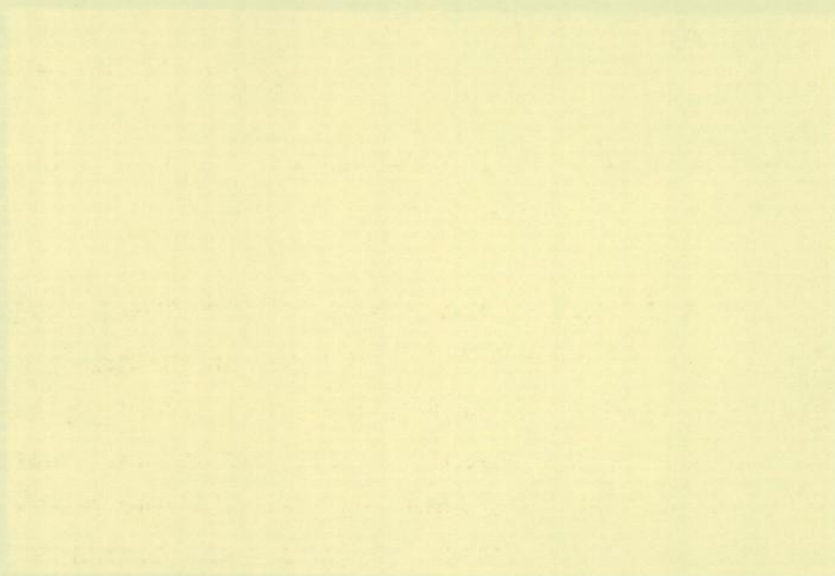


PLATE 10: Miss
Funny in AT THE BLACK
PIG'S DYKE



While the imagery is strong and evocative, it does not overshadow the other aspect involved i.e. the word. The language of the play is strong, and so is the storyline which because of its complicated nature is primary in the minds of the audience. So while Mic Moloney may feel that:

"this ambitious, multi-layered show is just less than convincing.."

(MOLONEY, 1994)

this writer believes that, though the story line was complicated, the production was stunning

The main reason "FAMINE", "A MIDSUMMER NIGHTS DREAM" and "AT THE BLACK PIGS DYKE" were successful in their approach and presentation was because though different in concept, content and actual methods of staging, each of these productions managed to form a relationship with the audience, through the whole visually emotive experience they created. Theatre only begins to exist in front of an audience and to produce good theatre:

"the ideal for a director and designer is to work together to engage the audiences individual imaginations, enabling performers to create from that audience one united response.."

(O'BRIEN, 1989 Pg203)

These productions achieved this with great expertise and success.

The importance of set design and the process which is worked through in order to bring a design from conception to reality has been traced. The necessity of the set designer has been highlighted and the discussion which now needs to be entered upon is, how, despite its importance within a production, is design viewed by the public and why is it viewed in this way? The third and final chapter deals with this.

COMMISSION

CHAPTER III

SCRIPT VERSUS IMAGE

The evolution of set design to its current position within theatre, the role of the designer today and the methods used to bring a design from idea to reality have all been discussed in the preceding chapters. This chapter will, therefore concentrate on the importance of the image in relation to the text or script, within contemporary theatre and discuss what should be done in the future to improve people's awareness of what they see in theatre.

Education, as always is the key to the improvement of any situation where there is a lack of understanding or awareness. However, at the present time, the education system has failed to teach people of the wonders of the visual image within theatre, yet it has not been negligent in its duty to the "written word".

During my final year in Second-Level education I remember being taken with the rest of my class to see William Shakespeare's "OTHELLO" in the Tivoli Theatre and on a separate occasion, Sean O'Casey's "JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK" in a small theatre outside Dublin. At the time I was studying these two plays for my Leaving Certificate English exam and it was in this context that the rest of the class and myself were brought.

At the time, I did not query it, but on reflection, I wonder why we were not brought to the theatre for other reasons. My school had an extremely good music/drama department. Equally, the art department was of a notably high standard, a standard which was common knowledge throughout the town. We dabbled in ceramics, textile art, pottery, sculpture and fashion projects, yet never in the area of theatre design. However, every alternate year, both the music and art departments collaborated to create a musical production, yet no class during my five years there was ever brought to a live theatrical performance to study the art of the stage in order to enhance these productions.

This to my knowledge, is not confined to my experience. It is reflective of schools in general and education in particular. This

scenario highlights the attitudes toward theatre - the script, the "written word" is seen as all important.

In theatre the work of the playwright, i.e. the script, is held in such reverence that it over-shadows all the other elements which transform the script into a production.

Is it right to uphold this way of thinking? Is the script the only truly creative aspect of theatre while the other aspects (acting, directing and of course designing) are only interpretative?

Lee Simonson believes it is, when he writes:

"the development of scene-designing as an art must wait upon the arrival in sufficient numbers of dramatic poets, capable of interpreting life profoundly. Until they appear the scene designer..can do little more than mark time."
(SIMONSON, 1932 pg107)

Surely the script is only one important element of the theatre? Gordon Craig, back at the beginning of the century recognised that:

"the art of the theatre is neither acting nor the play, it is not scene nor dance but it consists of all the elements of which these things are composed. Yet today the widespread tendency is to consider the theatre as something which is placed at the service of the script."

(GORDON-CRAIG, 1957 pg113)

This widespread tendency is still present today. People still believe that the script is all important and that theatre is just a tool used to express the message of the text.

The truth is that all elements of theatrical production are creative and nobody has the right to put any of them in an uncreative category. All facets of the theatre are interdependent, there is no single facet, such as the script, that is solely creative and all the others merely interpretative. Surely it is easy to think of the dramatic process beginning with the writing of a play, but before

the dramatist can write a play for the theatre, the theatre has to be there.

The dramatist's script grows out of the whole apparatus of the theatre as it is available in his own day. It grows out of the living, individual talents available in that theatre. Otherwise, what would distinguish a script from any other printed literature? Technically considered, the value of a good play script lies in the fact that it functions on the stage - a good script is stage worthy or it is not a good script, and the author of a good script knows his way around a stage either by experiment, insight or experience, for the moment the story appears in the theatre it becomes subject to the laws of the theatrical world. For instance, the placing of props and what kind of props, the use of lighting, how strong it should be and where it is to shine to, as well as the movement of the actors, must be taken into consideration when the script is being written.

The script does rally the forces of production and perhaps the fact that it is not transient like other forms in theatre is the reason for its current revered position. Yet theatre has managed to flourish for centuries with the most primitive of scripts, or with no script at all. Sheldon Cheney in "THE THEATRE" documents how:

"in past times there were eras when story and poetry weighed heaviest, others when spectacles and trick effects alone satisfied the audiences.."
(CHENEY, 1928 pg35)

Therefore, it must be apparent that theatre is not just another literary based medium of expression. the director, the actor and the designer work on the basis of the material given them by the dramatist, but this does not lessen their creativity. No art is created out of thin air. Every artist uses the cultural heritage which has accumulated in his particular field. Great artists have created their finest masterpieces by using the work of their predecessors. Shakespeare, for instance wrote Hamlet on the framework of Scandinavian saga, while in more recent times Peter

Greenaway's "PROSPERO'S BOOKS" a masterpiece of modern film was based on Shakespeare's "THE TEMPEST".⁹

A playwright interprets the past, the present, his own experiences in life, thoughts and feelings when writing a script, therefore it cannot be said that his work is solely creative while the other elements of theatre are interpretative. The whole significance of stage production is not the transferring of a story to the stage without altering it. The story is not more than an important ingredient of something which on the stage becomes more than a story, something which turns into a ceremony, that composite of many art forms which we call theatre.

There is a responsibility on the community to change. No artist will take his creation into a community which he feels will not be interested. Likewise as Allen suggests:

"no community that does not believe in the importance of art will itself create an artist of stature."

(ALLEN, 1983 pg301)

How can we expect new and exciting innovations in the area of set design if it is not recognised as an art in itself and thus, acclaimed as the "written word" is? When asked who Garry Hynes, Monica Frawley and Frank Conway were, a student studying for an MA in Drama in U.C.D knew who Garry Hynes was, yet knew nothing about Frawley and Conway, reinforcing the argument that the importance of set design is not acknowledged (KELLY, 1994).

Charles Elson notes that in America:

"..In the last fifty years, acceptance and recognition of this discipline (set/stage design) is reflected in the number of courses available"

(BURDICK. 1974 pg48)

⁹The "Scandinavian Saga" is preserved in the vaults of the Danish scholar Saxo Grammaticus and revised before Shakespeare by Belleforest and Thomas Kyd

However, in Ireland there are no courses available to teach this discipline and so again, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that there is very little acceptance and recognition of set design or of the visual arts in general, in this country. It was a conclusion also drawn in a Scandinavian Design Report in the Sixties:

"The report noted modern Ireland's achievements in literature and drama but pointed to the absence of visual awareness."

(TURPIN, 1982 pg92)

Little has changed, if anything we have regressed. Conway, in an interview describes how:

"ten, no fifteen years ago I was head of design here (in the Abbey) and I had two full time designers, a full time scenic artist and two trainee people in the design department. That just went, instead of it growing, developing or passing on skills and talents, it just disappeared."

(CONWAY, 1994)

Why is there this lack of visual awareness in Irish society? In an article in "THE CRANEBAG" John Turpin puts forward a suggestion which explains our cultural and visual lack of creativity and awareness. In towns and cities, the visual arts are stimulated through educational means whether by schools or art groups. However, Ireland does not have a consistent history of "urban settlement" and this:

"absence of a thorough going urban experience (as in Ireland) may help to account for a certain lack of development in the arts of design."

(TURPIN, 1982 pg93)

Attempts were made during the nineteenth century and early 1920's through exhibitions such as those in 1853, 1865 and 1907 to instil in people an awareness of matters visual and cultural. However the ordinary Irish person during the 19th century had as his main objective, the struggle to survive, so it is not surprising that:

**"economically depressed and intellectually isolated,
the world of fine crafts was an alien one."**

(TURPIN, 1982 pg95)

The middle class which emerged towards the end of the 19th century received little or no education on the arts. So when in 1922 this new class attained political and economic power, there was an obvious apathy. this continued as the ideology of the Thirties stressed the supreme value of the poor but proud country people and while music and bardic song fitted into this ideology, the visual arts did not because of its political and social associations.¹⁰

As a result of this and the lack of ability or interest of successive governments to solve this problem, this apathy and absence of proper understanding still exists today. Irish people still have not learned to accept Ireland's visual heritage regardless of its source or political associations. The resulting situation is one of a lack of a visually critical appreciation concerning both the Irish and foreign arts among the Irish people. This appreciation can only be instilled if there is a more general visual awareness in Irish homes and schools. Within the secondary system this has hardly even begun.

A reformation is needed within the education system. children need to be made aware of the visual arts including set design at an early age. Monica Frawley believes that:

**"you need to educate..you start this education from
the age of two or three, by bringing kids to plays, to
pantomime and so on..so that by the time they
become adults, they will keep us on our toes."**

(FRAWLEY, 1993)

Garry Hynes agrees that there is an imbalance in attitudes toward the literary arts and the visual arts. She points out that:

¹⁰"The culturation of the visual arts was associated with a colonial culture and both were rejected simultaneously" (TURPIN, 1982 pg92)

"We have a long way to go to catch up in our visual tradition as opposed to our literary tradition...there needs to be a better aesthetic education, helping young people to greater access to the arts."

(HYNES, 1993)

This education needs to start at primary school stage, but needs to be followed up by proper third-level courses. Designers need to be cultivated and encouraged. Set designers in particular need a knowledge that spans many different disciplines if he or she is to be a good set designer. As Schouvaloff remarks,. a designer needs:

"an encyclopaedic knowledge of art, of architecture, of social history and a practical knowledge of how a set is built, how a costume is made, how materials "behave", how lighting works, how this whole effect will look on stage.."

(SCHOUVALOFF, 1987 pg13)

How can a designer achieve this without proper education? Equally, how can the audience appreciate this without the same education? The audience is perhaps one of the most important elements in the world of the theatre. As John Allen writes:

"For although it is possible though highly unsatisfactory, for a dramatist to write a play without any thought of ultimate performance, it is simply not within the bounds of the way these things happen that an actor should act without an audience."

(ALLEN, 1983)

Education has an important role to play in changing existing attitudes to the visual arts, but Theatre companies themselves have a responsibility not only to set design but theatre in general. Theatre can take place wherever there is a space for actors and audiences to meet. A tradition of specially designed or renovated auditoriums has formed. The assumption reinforced by two hundred years, has been that theatrical performance properly

belongs in a building specially constructed for that purpose. Conventional buildings are supposed to extend potential of theatre design because they possess ideal atmospheres for sound, technological effects and so on.

However, in practice these buildings confine theatre, as they are artistically inflexible. Monica Frawley and Frank Conway had strong opinions on this subject when interviewed. Monica Frawley noted how:

"architects who design buildings for theatre never seem to ask people in the theatre..it is insanity. The Abbey is one of the worst spaces to perform in, or design for.."

(FRAWLEY, 1994)

While Conway described how a recent production of "HAMLET":

"was an eye opener because there was just no set or money - nothing, yet we had to create the world of the play. We toured around the country and we were setting up theatres wherever we went, we were going from industrial warehouses to barns. It was probably the most educational thing I have ever done and I loved it."

(CONWAY, 1994)

Theatre should be presented like this more often, performances should be staged anywhere it is viable for an audience to watch - on the street in a park, in a warehouse or barn and it would be interesting to see how designers would design sets for those different locations as they would have to take many things into consideration which would not have to be considered when designing for a conventional stage. Likewise, constraints imposed by conventional theatre spaces could be forgotten when designing for unconventional and varied spaces.

But other changes can be made within existing theatre houses. Frawley in a conversation with Patrick Maeson, the newly appointed Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre, discussed how:

"complacent, comfortable seating does not work. It may work for cinema because you are very much alone while watching, but in the theatre it is an experience that is shared."

(FRAWLEY, 1993)

Comfortable seating does not work and only helps to reinforce the idea that theatre is a middle-class, elitist entertainment. A rock-concert for instance, with everybody standing in immediate contact with each other, creates an atmosphere and generates an excitement which is lacking in seated auditoriums.

A critic of the late 18th century predicted this complacency due to comfortable seating. Allen records how in 1782 when a new theatre was built for the "Comedie Francaise" providing seats for those who had previously stood in the "parterre" or pit:

"a critic complained that this resulted in lethargy. Close contact between stage and pit was broken - The almost incredible enthusiasm of the old days gave place to calm and silent disapproval."

(ALLEN, 1983 pg157)

Perhaps a return to Elizabethan theatre is needed. During this period the largest part of the audience stood around three sides of the stage, this area was known as the pit. We now expect an audience to sit quietly and attentively except when they laugh. However, during the 18th century, for all the rough behaviour, audiences were so keenly aware of the work of the actor that they would applaud a finely delivered speech or a well-executed piece of acting, equally a poor performance would receive a jeering from the theatre-goer.

There needs to be a whole new injection of life in to the Theatre. Attitudes need to change and then hopefully, it will cease to be regarded as a middle class institution. Monica Frawley expresses how she finds:

**"the lack of moving forward, the isolation from
other art movements depressing.."**
(FRAWLEY, 1994)

But of course, this can only be achieved through educational means, because until this happens there will be no improvements, no new, exciting innovations and theatre will stagnate and the vision of Yeats, Mac Lámhóir and Edwards of creating a new, exuberant Irish theatre and the set designs to enhance it, will be lost.

CONCLUSION

I began researching this thesis with little knowledge of theatre and with the opinion that set design in the Irish theatre was not fully appreciated by the general public or within the theatrical institutions themselves. This was confirmed by my own analysis of what little information was available and from discussions with such set designers as Monica Frawley and Frank Conway, as well as directors such as Garry Hynes.

Theatre is possible, the most visual populist form apart from television in this country and yet, while information on the literary aspect of the theatre is readily available, there is a startling lack of information on the visual imagery provided by the set designer. This lack of information is a reflection of the general lack of appreciation of this art form.

Set design is an art form, but it is a transient one and this may be one reason for its current, unacknowledged position, yet it is interesting to note that other areas of the art world are experimenting with this idea of transience and are being lauded because of it.

Through this thesis I have become much more aware of the actual role of set design and the work of the set designer within a production. A set design is not a background and the designer does not work in isolation. Collaboration is the key to a successful production and the quality of theatre design depends largely on the designers relationship with the director. Both the director and the designer are simultaneously creator and interpreter. Their task is to interpret the text and from it, the designer must create his/her own three dimensional image which is in tune with what the director is looking for and which fixes the performance in the memory of the audience.

A great knowledge is needed to achieve this. The designer must be familiar with a variety of subjects within the arts such as architecture, costume, painting, literature and technological elements such as lighting. This was highlighted in the study of

four conceptually and visually diverse productions by the Abbey and the Gate Theatre.

The Irish Theatre as it is known today was founded by men of vision who were not afraid to experiment and whose aim was to create an imaginative, thought-provoking environment. However, Irish theatre has failed to continue with the ideology it was founded upon. The boundaries pushed by men such as Yeats, Mac Lámhóir and Edwards have been pushed no further.

There are people within the world of theatre who are trying to push theatre forward. People like Frawley, Conway and Hynes, the former artistic director of the Abbey theatre, are working towards a new standard in contemporary theatre and are looking outside Ireland in order to achieve this. Both Conway and Hynes have worked in English theatre and all three have mentioned the approach of German theatre, which is as visual in its concepts as inspirational.

However, until the members of the Irish society are educated to realise the importance of set design and until the problem of the general lack of visual awareness in Ireland is tackled, the boundaries in theatre today will never be pushed any further. Frawley explains how she hopes:

"theatre will move upwards, towards a new expression of a theatre..it should not be an archaic form stuck in the Victorian era, theatre is something that moves and changes all the time and the vision should be changing all the time too."

(FRAWLEY, 1993)

In order for the vision to change, risks have to be taken and experimentation must be encouraged. Garry Hynes believes:

"we need a new vision in Irish theatre. Where it is going to come from, what it is going to be, I have no idea.."

(HYNES, 1993)

A new vision is indeed what Irish theatre needs. At the beginning of this decade Fintan O'Toole predicted that the Nineties would be:

**"an exciting, if also a somewhat dizzying time for
Irish theatre"**

(O'TOOLE,1990)

However, over three years later, this prediction has not been realised and Irish theatre has become a middle-class, rather conservative entertainment and not the avant-garde, expressionist art form Yeats or MacLíammóir envisaged.

Theatre is a combination of the literary and the visual. Therefore, any education which will hopefully be provided in the future has to reinforce the fact that there needs to be a balance within theatre. While there needs to be an improvement in perception of what design is, it should be remembered that the art of the theatre is an art which combines many different artistic expressions and one should not overshadow the other. A harmony needs to be created with neither the text transcending the image, nor the image transcending the text. Hopefully with education in the future an equilibrium will be achieved.

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