



**National College Of Art and Design; Faculty of  
Design, Department of Visual Communications**

**"The Posters of the Abbey Theatre (1970- 1997)"**

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## Introduction:

Much has been written on the history of Ireland's National Theatre; on its origins and the political circumstances under which it was established. These writings recount "The glorious days of the great National resurgence" ( Reid, 1964, p. 515).

They examine the identity of the Abbey Theatre and the historical situations which promoted its respected values of traditionalism and nationalism. In contrast to these, what this study hopes to provide is an examination of a previously undocumented area of the history of Ireland's National Theatre. It investigates the more recent years of its existence and within this, examines the theatre posters produced by this establishment from 1970 to 1997. It hopes to give an insight into the public identity of the Abbey Theatre, as expressed through its advertising designs. This study also attempts to provide a comprehensive visual documentation of the theatrical poster as realised through the last three decades of its existence within Dublin's Abbey Theatre.

As a result of there being no previous writing's on the posters of the Abbey Theatre, this study contains few references and a limited bibliography. The content of this study is based extensively on my own personal examination and documentation of the theatre poster. A large part of the research for this study involved the locating and recording, sorting and categorising of the numerous posters produced by the Abbey over the last three decades. The majority of posters were found within the un-catalogued archives of the Abbey theatre itself. Further references such as the posters from the Olympia Theatre were located in Dublin's newly established National Theatre Archive. Other examples cropped up unexpectedly over the course of this study, in cafes, the houses of friends, and on the walls of old Dublin pubs. As many of these posters could not be removed from their original settings, after locating the relevant material, each poster was then photographed and dated, with the help of the Abbey Theatres' archivist Mairead Delaney.

The amount of posters located and documented in the course of research for this study reaches almost one hundred, a vast quantity which initially appeared to provide me with a somewhat intimidating and apparently eclectic collection of images and styles; a haphazard assortment of uncataloged designs.

In order to sort through the extensive visual research I firstly arranged the posters in chronological order, according to their date of production. From this arrangement, it was then possible to trace certain recurring trends appearing intermittently over the last thirty years and to examine the development of the theatre poster from its original form of the letterpress playbill to its modern realisation today. The designs illustrated within this study are not representative of all designs of the Abbey Theatre, but have been selected as appropriate represen-

tations of the larger currents and design techniques evident over the period under examination.

This study of the posters of the Abbey Theatre contains three chapters, each examining specific tendencies realised within the designs.

The first chapter looks at the nature of the typographic theatre poster following its development from the traditional typographic layout of the original Abbey theatre letterpress playbill, to its present contemporary form.

The second chapter investigates the image based designs of produced in the 1970s and 1980s focusing on the most prominent features and treatments within this area.

The third chapter looks at the most recent Abbey Theatre designs, focusing on the posters produced within the last two years, 1996 and 1997. It illustrates a significant change in design technique realised during this period and documents the emergence of the more commercial theatre poster realised in the last few years of this study.



## Chapter 1:

### Development of the typographical poster.

The posters of the Abbey Theatre, dating from 1979 to 1997 represent a significant change from the designs previous to this time. The year 1970 marks the sudden eradication of the long-running, letterpress playbill. Since the theatre's establishment in 1904 right up until 1970 the letterpress playbill has remained the exclusive medium for the public advertisements of the Abbey Theatre. The earliest example collected within this study dates back to 1916 and illustrates the original layout of the Abbey Theatre playbill. (fig. 1)

The only pictorial element included within the playbill is the theatre's logo.

This long-running emblem of the Abbey Theatre was commissioned by the theatre's co-founder, William Butler Yeats, at the time of the theatre's establishment in 1904.

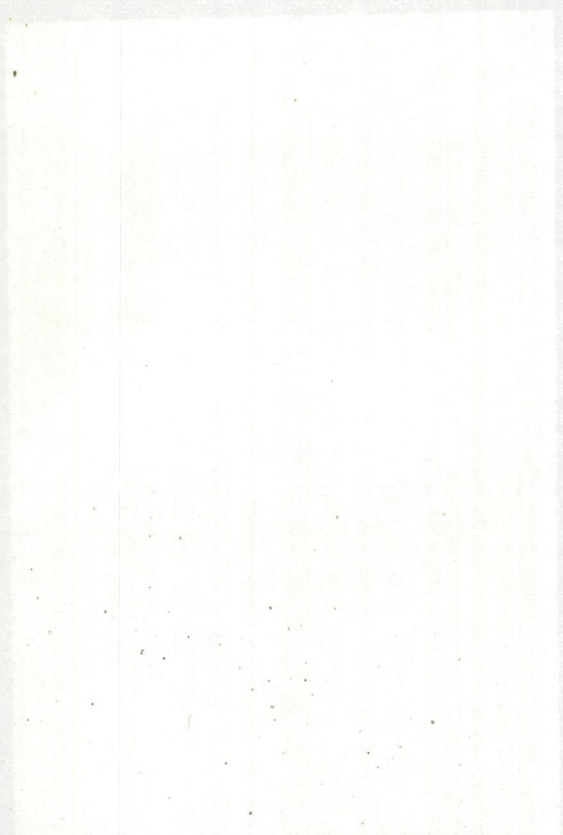
It is the work of an Irish artist, Elinor Monsell, and represents Queen Maeve, the heroic queen of ancient Irish legend. The dog is the Irish Wolfhound. In the background there is a raying sun which is also said to be a symbol of Ireland.

This traditional image forms a large part of the design within this letterpress format, the remaining area given to the purely functional informational text. More than one play is advertised within the theatrical playbill and a great amount of information is given to the viewer. The time of each performance is stated and the prices of seats are also given. During the period of this poster's production, the playbill was posted haphazardly around the city, onto walls and fences and also personally delivered to the houses of wealthy theatre goers. The liberal distribution of the very early Abbey playbills has resulted in the loss of almost all advertisements from this time. This particular playbill illustrated (fig. 1) owes its survival to the very date of its production. Due to it being the Easter week of 1916 the Easter Rising prevented these plays from being staged and thus this poster remains within the archives of the Abbey Theatre.

From this initial format of the Abbey Theatre playbill, slight modifications were given to the layout during the following years, but the overall design has remained remarkably



fig. 1 Easter Week Playbill 1916



unchanged over its sixty years of existence within the Abbey Theatre. The playbill did evolve towards a smaller size and was then printed onto a more durable card rather than newsprint. This ensured that the theatre bill would be hung rather than stuck onto walls.

The playbill produced by the Abbey Theatre in 1924 (fig. 2) provides an example of these modifications, also illustrating how little the actual content of the playbill has changed over eight years. The typographical elements are still positioned in the same way with the large inclusion of the logo slotted into the top left corner. The playbill printed twelve years later advertising the play *The passing Day*, (fig. 3) appears as almost an exact reproduction of this format. The only change is the inclusion of one colour. These two advertisements of 1924 and 1936 represent the standard Abbey Theatre playbill. The layout, size and form of these two examples indicate the nature of all posters from this time until 1970.

Apparently the economic attractions of letterpress printing ensured the long-running existence of this form of advertising within the Abbey. The standardisation of the layout and the limited use of colour and pictorial elements further lowered the cost of their production. The long-running use of the letterpress printing method within the history of the Abbey Theatre advertising echoes the advertising policies of most Irish theatres over the same period of time.

The Olympia Theatre, also located in Dublin's city centre is an example of another theatre whose advertising was clearly realised under economic constraints. It too used the letterpress method of production until the early 1970s.

The advertisements produced by the Olympia Theatre dating 1943 (fig. 4 and 5) display immediate similarities to the standard playbill of the Abbey

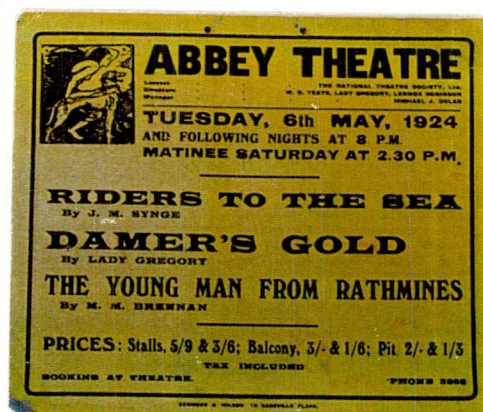


fig. 2 Abbey Theatre Playbill 1924

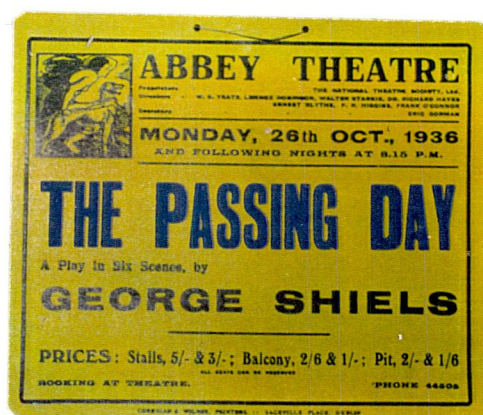


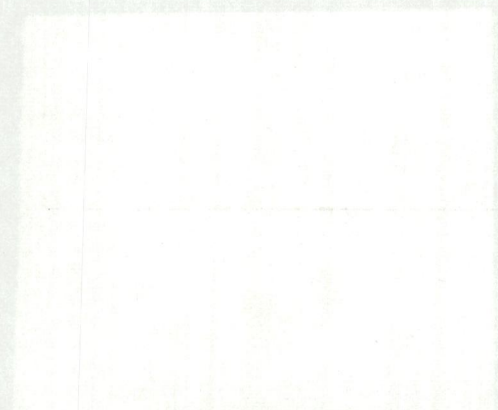
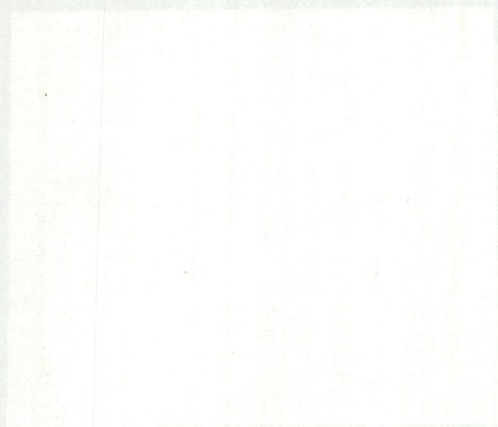
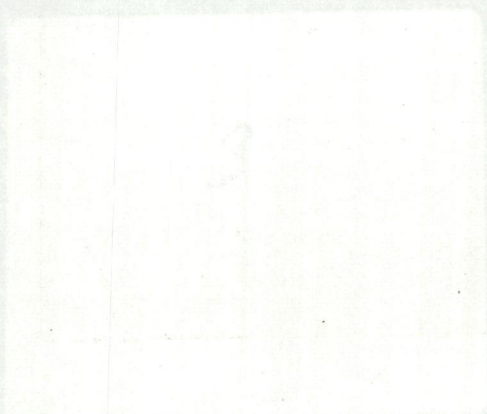
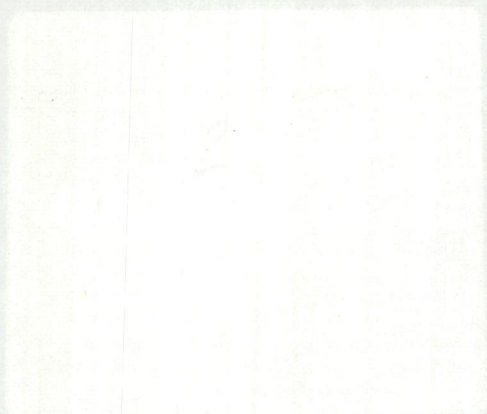
fig. 3 Abbey Theatre Playbill 1936



fig. 4 Olympia Theatre Playbill 1943



fig. 5 Olympia Theatre Playbill 1943



Theatre.

The only elements included are the informational text and the theatre logo.. Only one colour is used and all elements are retained within a surrounding frame.

But in contrast to the Abbey Theatres continued use of this basic traditional letterpress format are the later designs of the Olympia Theatre dating 1959, ( fig. 6, 7, 8, and 9).

These posters still remain under the confines of the letterpress printing method but the different treatment given to these designs produces a 'standard' Olympia poster which is evidently more dramatic, eye catching and memorable than those of the Abbey Theatre produced at this time. The very same informational elements are retained but greater emphasis is given to certain features. The name of the theatre and the names of the plays are greatly enlarged. The poster advertising the play *GiGi*, (fig. 7) illustrates how by dramatically enlarging specific areas of text the communicative qualities of the letterpress design are immediately enhanced. The inclusion of the abstract element of a simple band of a strong flat colour, marks a distinct departure from the basic properties of the traditional theatrical playbill. It introduces a distinctive contemporary identity to the advertisements of the Olympia Theatre, still unrecognised within the unchanging traditional format of the Abbey Theatres designs at this time.

Further experimentations in typography are found within the Olympia Theatres letterpress posters. Produced in 1963, the poster advertising the play *The Man in the Green Coat*, (fig. 10) shows a command of the typographi-

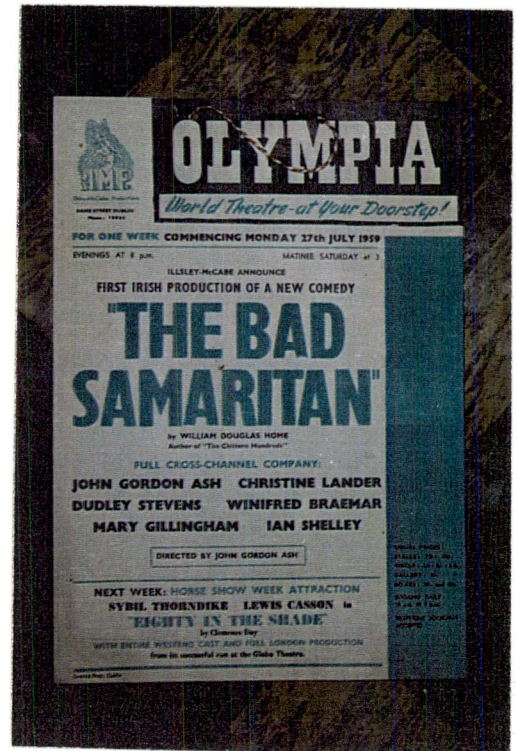
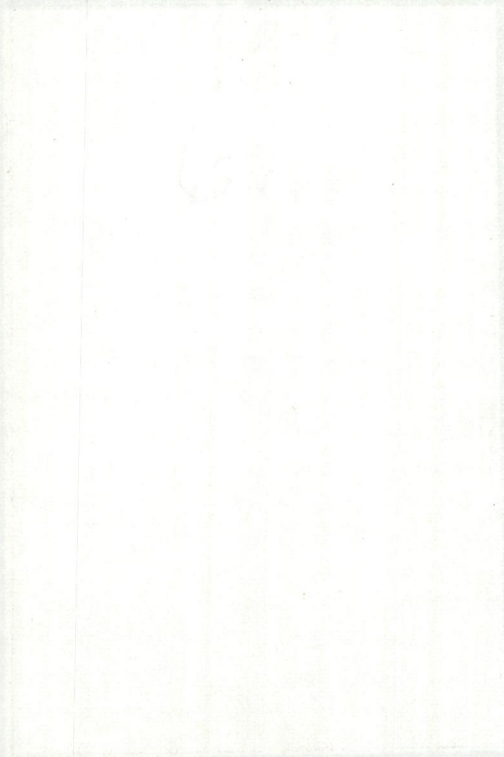


fig. 6 Olympia Theatre poster 1959



fig. 7 Olympia Theatre poster 1959



cal elements far superior to the early basic letterpress format.

The Abbey Theatre in contrast to the Olympia shows no evolvement or development whatsoever within its long use of the letterpress printing method. As a result Abbey Theatre advertisements until 1970 establish a traditional and historical, if not distinctive public identity.

The dramatic shift from this traditional, historic visual persona of the Abbey effected in 1970, is not initially realised through major typographic advancements, but rather through the total eradication of the purely typographic poster and the establishment of the image based, illustrational and decorative poster design.

The first two decades representing the shift from letterpress printing to computer aided design (the 1970s and the 1980s) provide a vast variety of styles and images in remarkable contrast to the Abbey Theatres previous public identity. Not until 1988 is it possible to trace the appearance of the modern Abbey poster design showing developments in typographic form similar to those developments realised within the posters of the Olympia Theatre.

From the late 1980s to 1996, the typographic poster reappears intermittently within the designs of the Abbey Theatre. Again, not until this time have the basic elements of the original letterpress playbill; text and logo design, reappeared as the exclusive elements used to advertise the productions of the Abbey Theatre.

The Russian poster, appearing in 1988 provides the first example of the contemporary poster

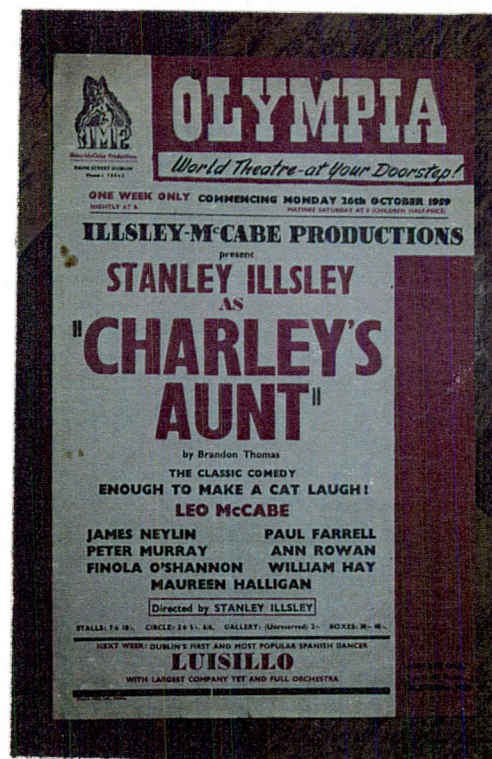
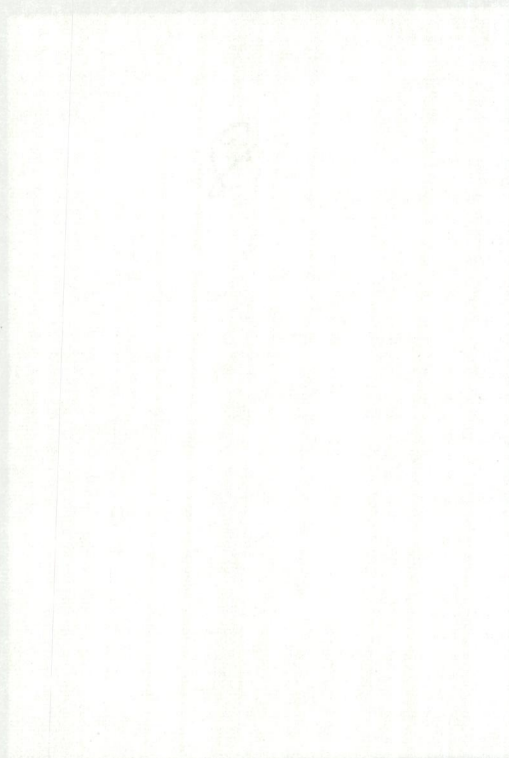
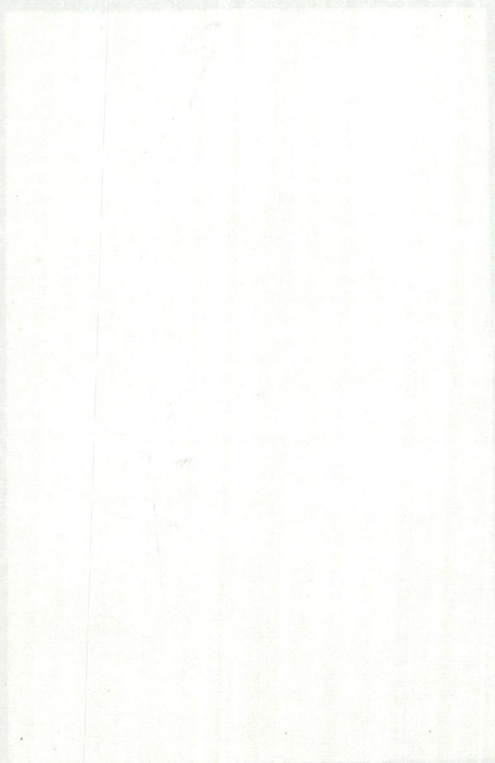


fig. 8 Olympia Theatre poster 1959



fig. 9 Olympia Theatre poster 1959



design employing only the elements of typography and the theatres logo to advertise the play, (fig. 11)

This poster was produced in Dublin by the Abbey Theatre but was used to advertise the theatres production of the play, *The Field*, written by John B. Keane, staged during the Abbey's 1998 tour of Russia. Hence all text is, of course, in Russian except for the small inclusion of the name; the Abbey Theatre. Here the imagery used makes no attempt to illustrate the nature of the play. The design simply takes the basic elements first realised within the Abbey letterpress bill and refashions and rearranges these. The logo is enlarged to cover over half of the overall design and the text is limited to simply stating the name of the play the playwright and its date of production. Through the grand enlargement of the pictorial logo a strong visual focus is provided within the design. The effect is contemporary yet retains the traditional and national identity of the Abbey theatre through the emphasis given to its, historical logo design. Like the original playbill this poster straightforwardly imparts information and simply uses the Abbey Theatre's emblem to establish the theatres identity.

Similar to this poster is a design produced in 1994 advertising the play *The Well of the Saints*, by J.M Synge. (fig. 12). Again, the two elements involved are typography and the Abbey Theatre logo. This poster represents one within a series of almost identical posters produced in 1994 to commemorate the ninetieth year of the Abbey Theatre. The only change within the series serving to distinguish one poster from the other is a subtle

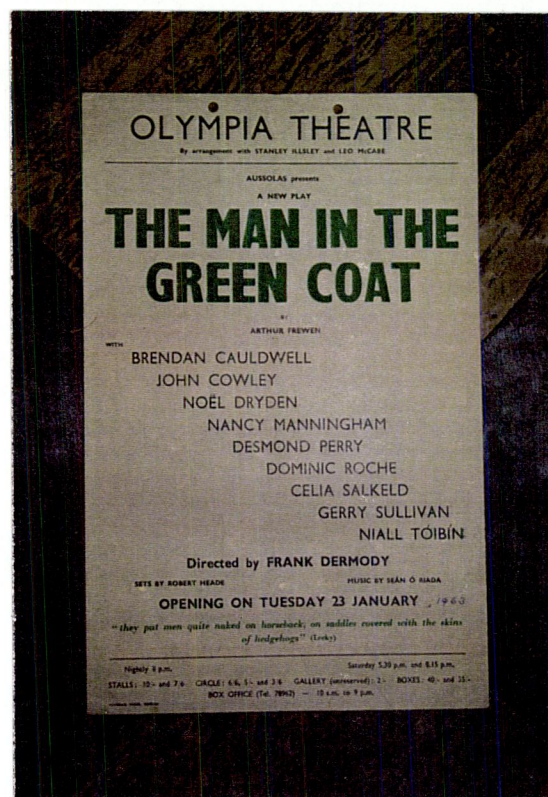


fig. 10 Olympia Theatre poster 1963

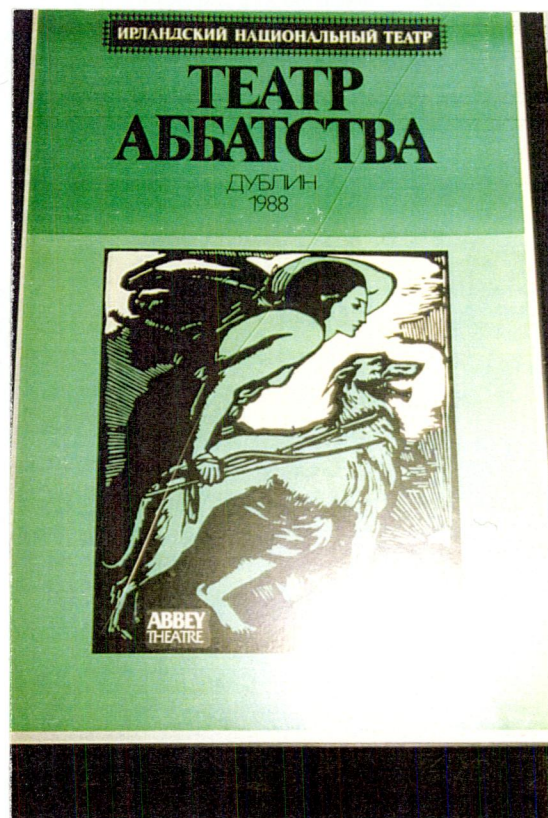
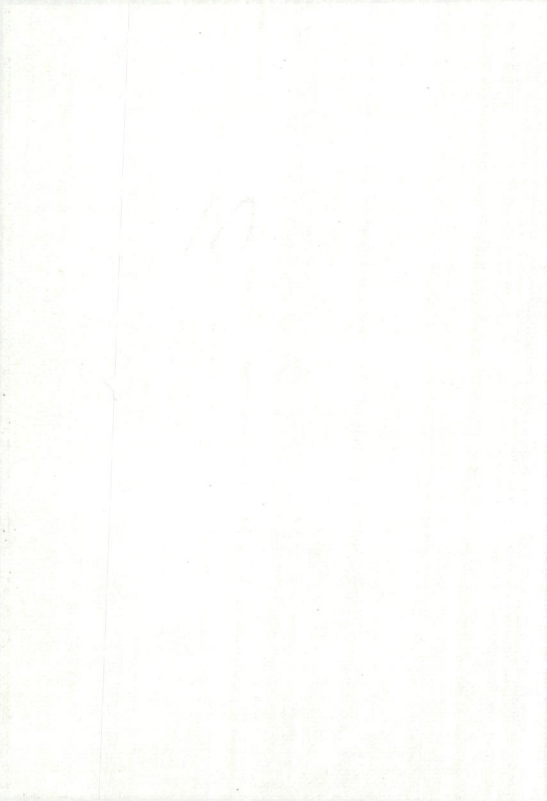


fig. 11 Russian poster 1988



alteration of the background . In comparing this poster to the series of designs produced in 1959 by the Olympia theatre, some similarities can be seen in the treatment of the typographic layout. Like the Olympia posters, a running band of colour, in this case, black, is employed within the design effectively creating a sense of 'branding' through a simple graphic device. The name of the play and the name of the theatre are again significantly enlarged. The background design is an enlargement of the theatres logo.

This poster, (fig. 12) like the Russian poster (fig. 11) simply identifies the Abbey Theatre through the traditional pictorial emblem of the theatre. In order to commemorate the establishment of the Abbey Theatre, this poster of 1994 appears to look back to its identity as realised through the theatres long-running letterpress playbill. The typestyle has evidently changed from the wood-cut letter form, yet within the use of new styles a link with the past is indicted through the classical old style serif capitals used in the name of the play. This example of a contemporary typographic poster, appears to, in its absence of any secondary, decorative elements, reinvent the playbill within modern printing methods. Its modified layout conforms to the need for the modern poster to convey information directly and quickly, this power not recognised within the cluttered layout of the original Abbey Theatre playbill.

In contrast to this example of a contemporary refashioning of the playbill is the poster which advertises *The Murphy Initiative*, produced in 1991 by the Abbey Theatre (fig. 13) This poster is not purely typographic but, due

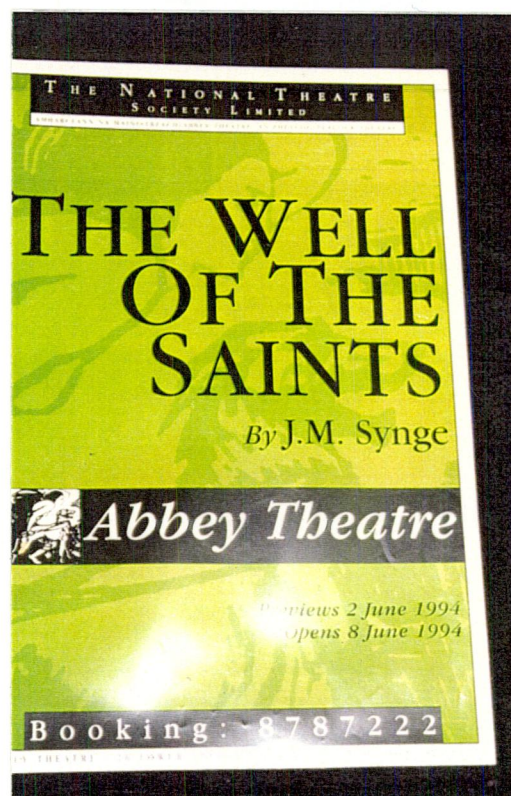


fig. 12 *Well of the Saints* 1994



fig. 13 *The Murphy Initiative* 1991



to its immediate relationship with the typographic style and form of the original letterpress playbill, has been included within this section. This poster, rather than refashioning the elements taken from the letterpress bill, (the logo and type) simply reproduces them. The theatre logo and the theatres name appear as an exact reproduction of their part in the Abbey Theatre playbill dating 1916 (fig. 1). The varying typestyles used throughout the poster directly reflect the eclectic typographic form and cluttered layout of the original playbill. In this poster, the only element in difference to the original Abbey playbill is in the inclusion of an illustrated image. This image is based on the American flag and through clever use of colour and specific imagery (the dollar sign) effectively illustrates the nature of the play through a very simple graphic form. Through the inclusion of this image, the poster *The Murphy Initiative* whilst recreating a past identity, also gives visual validity to the content of its message. By doing this, the design takes the role of the original Abbey playbill a step further. In its basic typographic form, the role of the letterpress bill has been described as "merely as intermediary link between the content of the message and the recipient". (Barnicoat, 1972, p.90)

In this modern reproduction of the letterpress playbill, not only does the poster impart information, but also gives the viewer an insight into the theme of the performance.

Also produced in 1991 by the Abbey Theatre is the poster advertising the play *The Power of Darkness* by John McGahern. (fig. 14). This poster eschews decoration entirely and is a rare example of a contemporary typographic poster produced by the Abbey Theatre without any secondary decoration at all. In this case, the effectiveness of the design lies in its absence of optical forms. Rather than referring to the identity of the Abbey Theatre (the theatre logo is dropped and only the word 'Abbey' is used in the text), this poster takes the title of the play; *The Power of Darkness*, and creates within the design, the atmosphere and tension this title suggests. It cleverly exploits the dramatic visual impact of the modern poster devoid of imagery or decoration. It is literally, an illustration of the power of darkness. The poster draws the viewer in, luring the viewer to explore the power of darkness. Through pure typography, the content is defined pictorially.

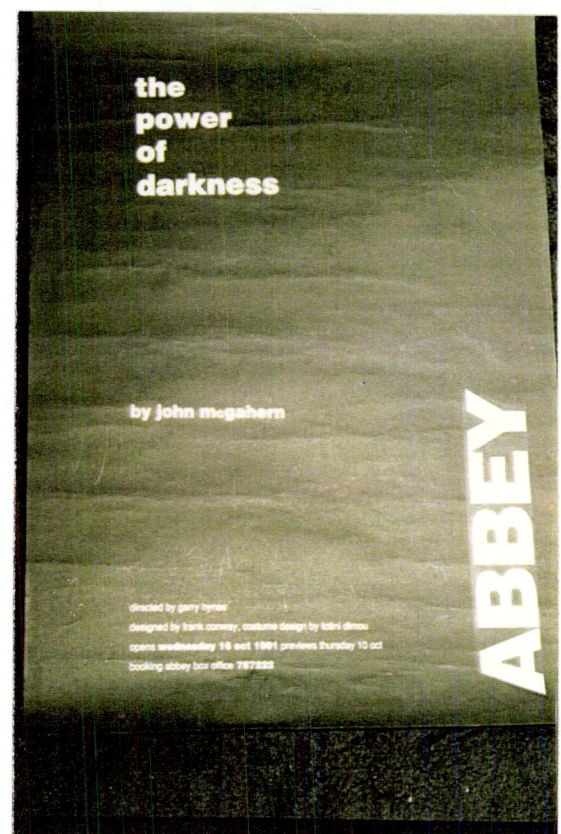
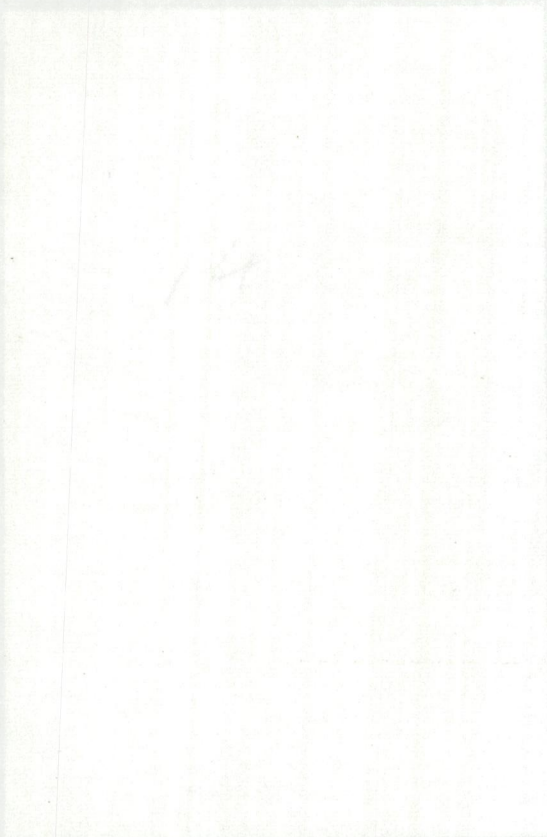


fig. 14 *The Power of Darkness* 1991



Another example of this style of defining content by means of printing text is the more recent poster by the Abbey Theatre advertising the play *Translations* by Brian Friel, dating 1996 (fig. 15). Whereas the poster advertising the *Power of Darkness* (fig. 14) uses a plain non serif typestyle to emphasise the simplicity of the design, this very recent typographic poster (fig. 15) takes a more decorative and stylistic approach in the arrangement of the typographic material. It introduces the contemporary style of layering typography, a typographic trend which has been notably influenced by modern graphic designers such as William Carson and Neville Brody.

This design organises the elements within a certain 'modern' layout, displaying the power of 'new' typography to pictorially depict the nature of theatre entertainment. The treatment given to the design creates, I feel, a sense of revealing; of uncovering and unearthing the relevant text. The colours graduate from the dark green background to the white most prominent text, this treatment adding a certain depth to the design. The typography creates a pictorial image laden with the theatrical atmosphere of story-telling.

Also produced in 1996 is another typographic design with similar atmospheric qualities. The poster advertising, *The Invisible Mending Company*, by Philip Davison. (fig. 16) provides another example of a contemporary typographic design produced by the Abbey Theatre. Again the style of layering text is employed to create a pictorial representation of the poster's content.

In this example the style appears to derive from the constructivist movement in design. The

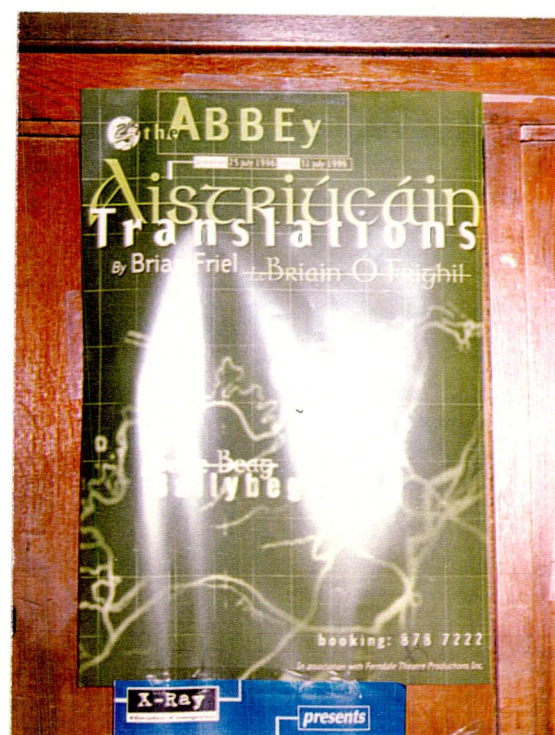


fig. 15 *Translations* 1996

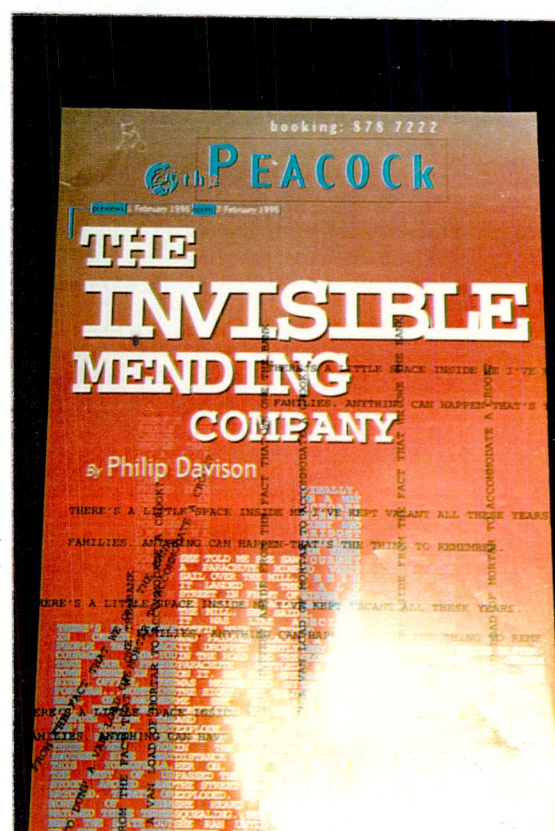


fig 16 *The Invisible Mending Company* 1996

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16

text forms a completely abstract image. It is taken out of horizontal alignment and placed somewhat erratically on the page. Each line of text runs into another obscuring its legibility, but serving to conjure up an image of ideas and thoughts integrating with one another. Again I feel that an atmosphere of story telling is conveyed. The text, through its arrangement appears to illustrate the idea of a persons wandering thoughts, of an insight into one persons thinking.

These most recent typographical designs (fig. 15 and 16) serve to illustrate a recognition of new developments and ideas in typography evident over the last few years of this study. The posters illustrated within this section are not representative of every typographic poster produced by the Abbey Theatre to date, but have been selected to provide an insight into the general nature of development of typographic design within this study. They illustrate both the continual influence of the traditional typographic playbill on the modern Abbey Theatre poster and the influence of contemporary typographic trends on the realisation of the modern typographical theatre poster.

## Chapter 2:

### The image-based Abbey Theatre posters of the 1970s and 1980s.

In contrast to the previous chapter, this section attempts to examine the great variety of image based designs produced by the Abbey Theatre over the first two decades of this study. It attempts to follow the shift from the playbill advertisement to the decorative, illustrated theatre poster and hopes to provide a comprehensive documentation of the Abbey poster designs found within the the 1970s and 1980s. Through focusing on these two decades this section attempts to investigate the period of time which was highlighted in the previous chapter as showing almost no evidence at all of the typographic poster design. The designs produced within these two decades provide a vast display of imagery; a some what haphazard and eclectic formation of styles and trends which highlight the extent to which a dramatic departure has been taken from the 'standardised' long-running letterpress advertisement.

Although the poster designs produced by the Abbey theatre within the 1970's and 1980s vary greatly in style by placing the posters of this period into chronological order it has been possible to trace a certain 'development' over the years. The following illustrations have been selected to represent what I feel to be a gradual evolution towards the more graphic Abbey Theatre poster designs of the 1980's. I have selected five designs to illustrate this evolution, each containing a figurative representation.

The first design, advertising the play, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, was produced in 1975 (fig. 17) and provides an example of the initial format of the Abbey poster which immediately followed the eradication of the letterpress playbill. Only a small amount of posters produced within the early 1970s were located in the research for this study but from the limited amount of material gathered I feel that this poster (fig. 17) gives a fair indication of the general style of the Abbey designs produced in the early 1970's. This poster displays a subtle, still relatively undeveloped illustrational format. Some of the typography is still carefully hand rendered at and the illustration is quite intricate and lacking graphic form. The colours used are unobtrusive and still relatively



fig. 17 *The Vicar of Wakefield* 1975



limited. The Abbey Theatre posters produced in the early 1970's are, I feel, quite old-fashioned in appearance and are not particularly dramatic nor atmospheric.

In contrast to the poster *The Vicar of Wakefield* (fig. 17) is the design advertising the play *The Servant of Two Masters* produced only three years later by the Abbey Theatre. This Design dating 1978 (fig. 18) illustrates a definite stronger illustrational style. This example effectively gives an insight to a significant development over the late 1970s towards a more graphic layout of the Abbey's poster designs. This poster (fig. 18) shows how over a period of three years, the use of colour has become more experimental and the general changes in illustrational treatment have led to a stronger visual focus within the poster design.

The hand drawn illustration remains the prominent feature of the Abbey Theatre posters produced over the 1970s although there have been some experimentation with mediums such as collage in the late 1970s.

The poster advertising the play, '*Not I* footfalls play', (fig. 19) provides another more recent example of hand drawn illustration produced in 1981 by the Abbey Theatre. A further change in illustrational style can be seen. The image appears to be more sophisticated and even more graphic than the earlier illustrations. The more recent treatment uses solid blocks of colour and high contrasts between light and dark, these elements combining to form a more dynamic and arresting image. The qualities represented in this design (fig. 19) are I feel reflective of a general movement in the late 1970's toward the more dynamic poster

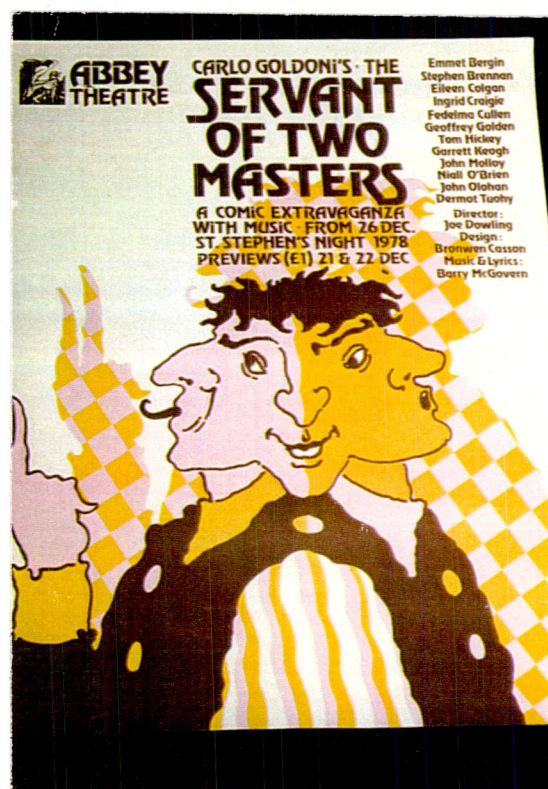


fig. 18 *The Servant of Two Masters*

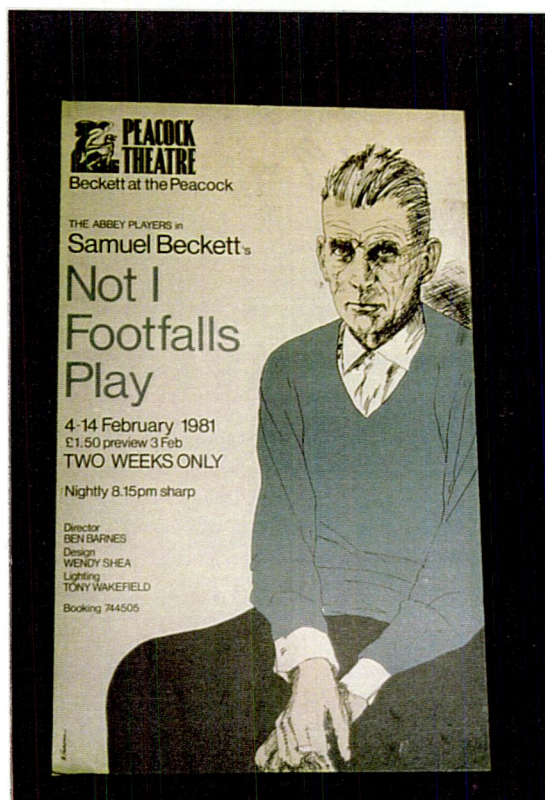


fig. 19 *Not I Footfalls Play* 1981



BOND  
SWEET-BR

designs produced within the 1980s. The differing format of the Abbey posters of the 1980's provide evidence that over the course of time the exclusive use of hand-drawn illustrations gives way to the employment of a vast variety of mediums, such as photography photomontage, collage and wood-cut images.

The next illustration dates to 1985 and gives an indication as to the change in style effected over the designs produced by the Abbey Theatre over the 1980s. (fig. 20) It advertises the play, *The Execution* and employs both photomontage and hand-drawn elements in the design. Again the resulting effect is quite sophisticated and certainly shows a more contemporary realisation of the human form. The final poster I have chosen to illustrate this evolvement towards a more graphic form is the poster dating 1988 advertising the play *A Trinity of Two* (fig. 21) Again the medium of photography has been used. The figurative element has become even more dramatic through strong light and dark contrasts. The resulting design is certainly more eye-catching than the Abbey Theatre poster produced in 1974 *The Vicar of Wakefield* ( fig. 17) and when compared to this early design, the poster dating 1988 *A Trinity of Two* (fig. 21) proves to have moved significantly toward an altogether more dramatic graphic realisation of the modern theatre poster.

The Abbey Theatre posters of the 1980's have, to a much greater extent than the posters of the 1970's or 1990's been clearly influenced by major movements in the history of art. The two most significant influences evident over this decade are expressionism and surrealism.

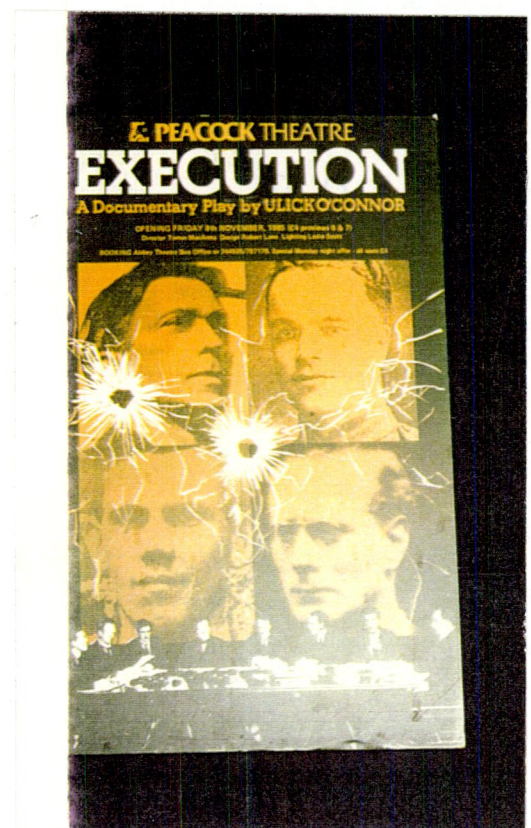


fig. 20 *Execution* 1995

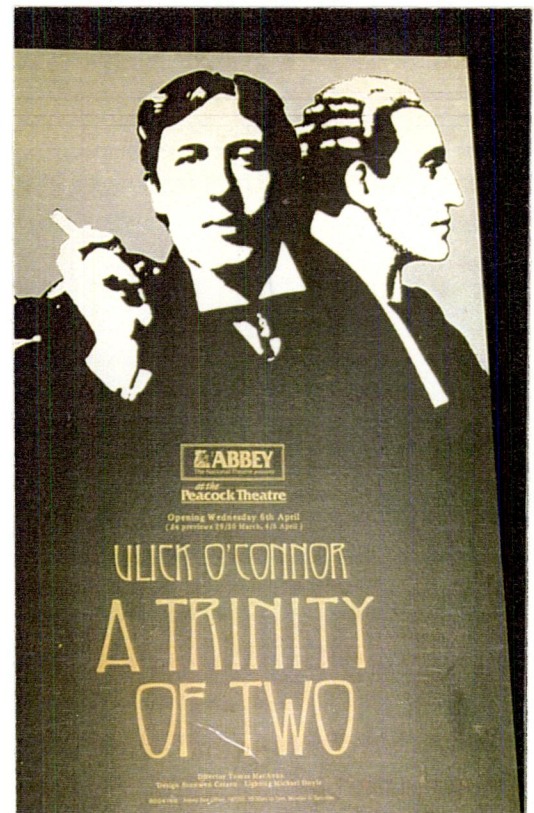
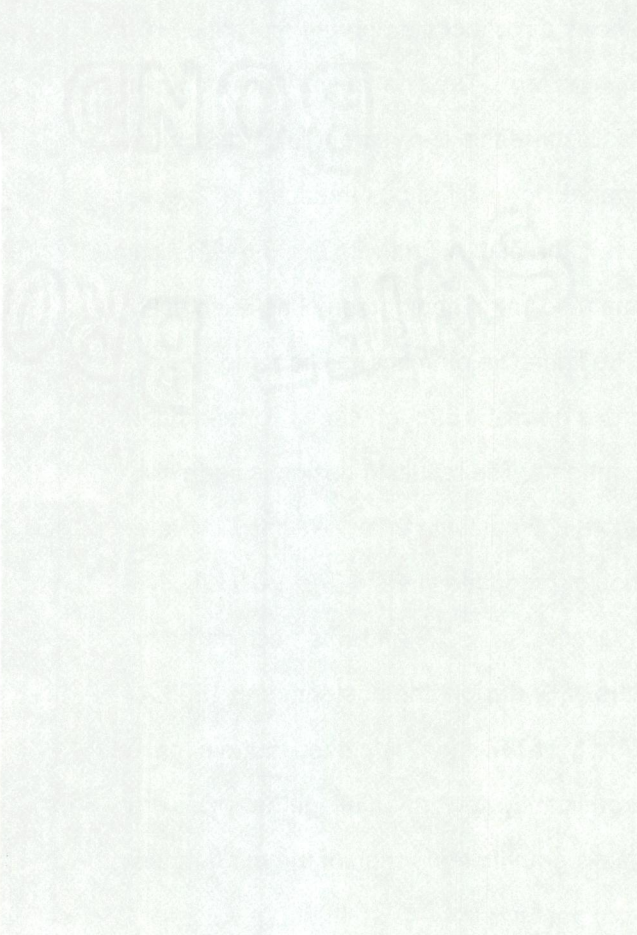


fig. 21 *A Trinity of Two* 1988



## Expressionism in theatre posters:

The dramatic realisations of the theatre poster produced by the Abbey in the 1980s appear to show many of the devices first established in the early twentieth century by expressionist painters such as Edward Munch and Vincent Van Gogh. Strong emotional forms and bright contrasting colours feature significantly within the Abbey Theatre posters of the 1980s. By highlighting some posters displaying these elements a great insight can be given to the nature of the Abbey Theatre designs produced at this time.

The poster produced in 1981 advertising the play *Night and Day* by Tom Hoppard (fig. 22) is the earliest poster I found to display an expressionist style. The move from hand-drawn illustrations to the wood-cut image in the 1980s results in an instantly more graphic and expressive representation of the human form. The recognisable expressionist devices of strong colours, and an exaggerated use of light and dark can be seen within this design. The face is directly looking at the viewer, a technique often used in expressionist painting which appears to heighten the emotional strength of the figurative image. When translated into the medium of advertising, this technique creates an almost hypnotic quality within the design. The illustration directly confronts the viewer, almost luring the viewer in. The result is eye-catching, dynamic and appears to capture the dramatic, intense atmosphere of the theatre.

Similar to this poster is the advertisement for the play *Souper Sullivan* produced in 1985 ( fig. 23 ). Again the expressionist devices

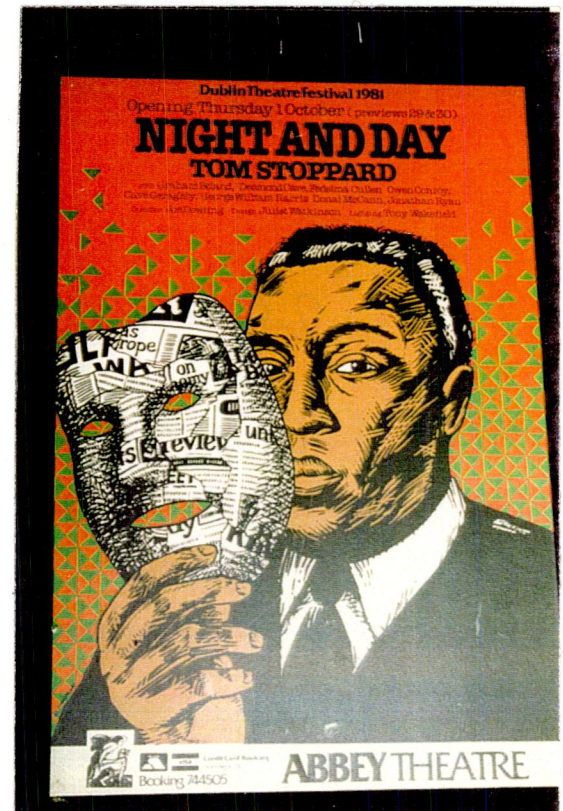


fig. 22 *Night and Day* 1981

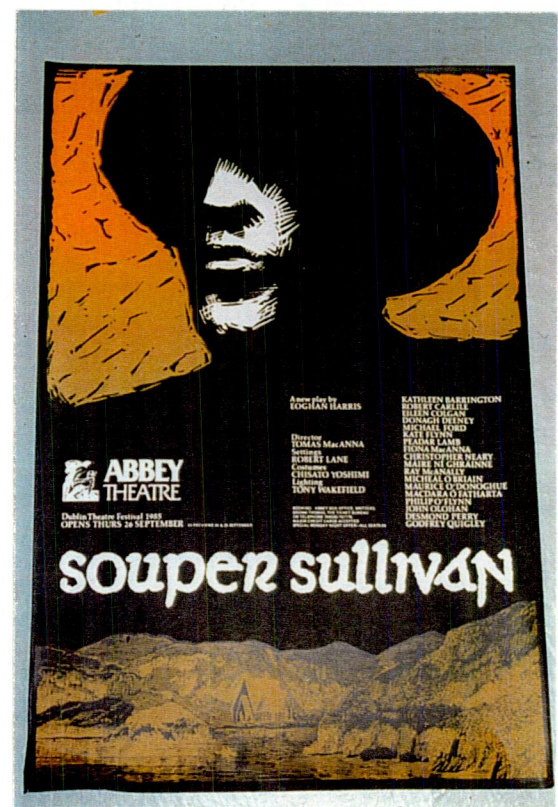
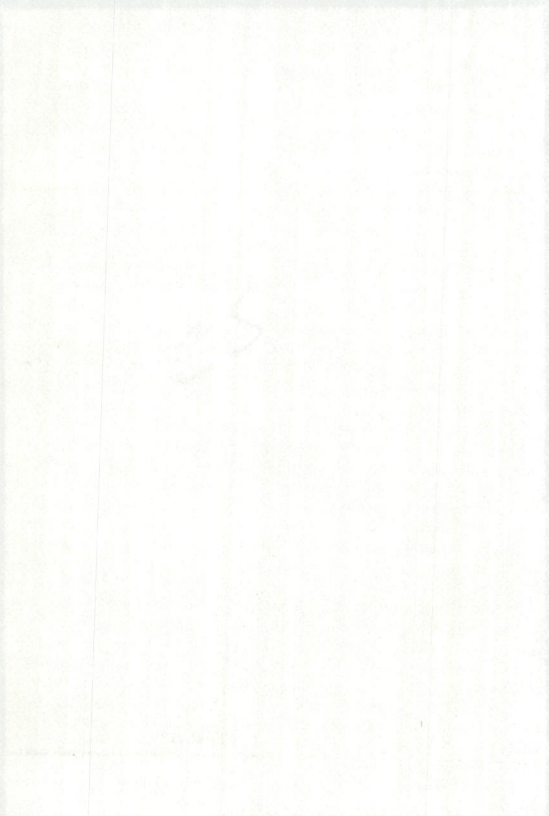


fig. 23 *Souper Sullivan* 1985



of simple bold forms and strong contrasting colours are used to create a dramatic and arresting image. The graphic form is similarly realised through the medium of lino-cut, this poster showing how the use of coarse crude lines and strong light and dark contrasts effectively heightens the emotional content of the theatrical design.

The poster advertising the play, *Memoirs of a Midget* was produced by the Abbey Theatre in 1988 (fig. 24) and provides an example of expressionist style this time realised through a dynamic hand drawn illustration. This poster, I feel, is an extremely effective transformation of expressionism into the form of the theatre poster. This poster creates a powerful emotional focus for the viewer which I feel, through its use of solid deep colours and dramatic light and dark contrasts, immediately reflects the intense atmosphere of the stage. The emotional content of the play, insinuated by the title, *Memoirs of a Midget* is captured perfectly in the design.

The final poster I have chosen to illustrate as showing expressionist form was produced in 1989 by the Abbey Theatre and advertises the play *Howling Moons* (fig. 25). The strong angular lines and highly contrasting colours of this illustration are strikingly similar to the style of the Die Brücke movement in expressionist poster design. The strong graphic form and highly emotional content of *Howling Moons* typifies the basic element of force within expressionist style.

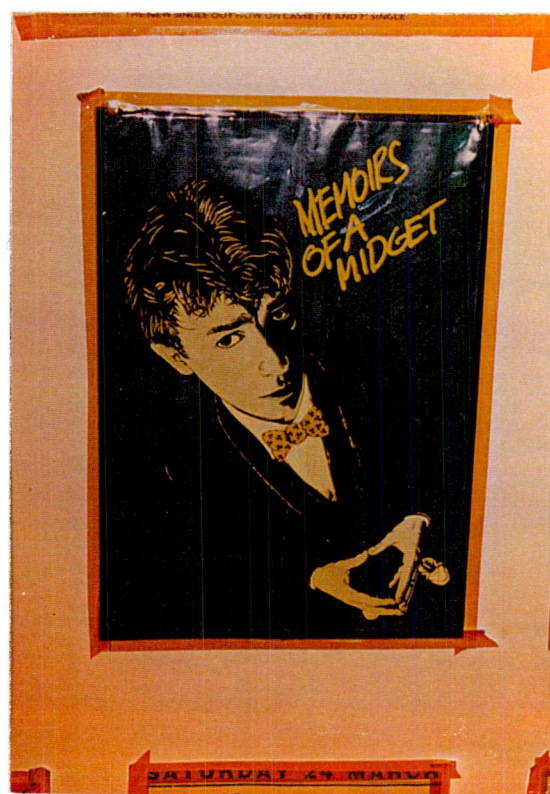


fig. 24 *Memoirs of a Midget* 1988



fig 25 *Howling Moons* 1989

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### Surrealism in theatre posters:

Produced in 1982 by the Abbey Theatre the poster advertising the play the *Silver Dollar Boys* (fig. 26 ) provides one example of how the macabre and sinister imagery released through surrealist paintings has been applied to the theatre advertisement. The resulting image is dramatic, this effect again achieved to some extent through the use of the staring eye directly confronting the viewer. This design uses various elements juxtapositioned to create an image which appears at first obscure, but effectively introduces the element of surprise to the design by placing realistic elements into an unlikely association with each other.

The poster produced a year later by the Abbey Theatre, dating 1983 (fig. 27) advertising the play *The Great Hunger* again shows evidence of a sinister representation of surrealist style. The masked face of the figure in this design creates a nightmarish atmosphere. It appears that when a surreal image is created through the contemporary medium of photography the element of shock is even greater. The photographic image brings the depicted form even closer to reality. The effect of this treatment can be really quite frightening, as this poster illustrates.

A slightly less shocking but equally sinister image is produced in 1984 by the Abbey Theatre (fig. 28 ). This poster advertising the play *Auld Dacency* contains strong similarities with the paintings of Salvador Dali, in its finely hand crafted sophisticated style.

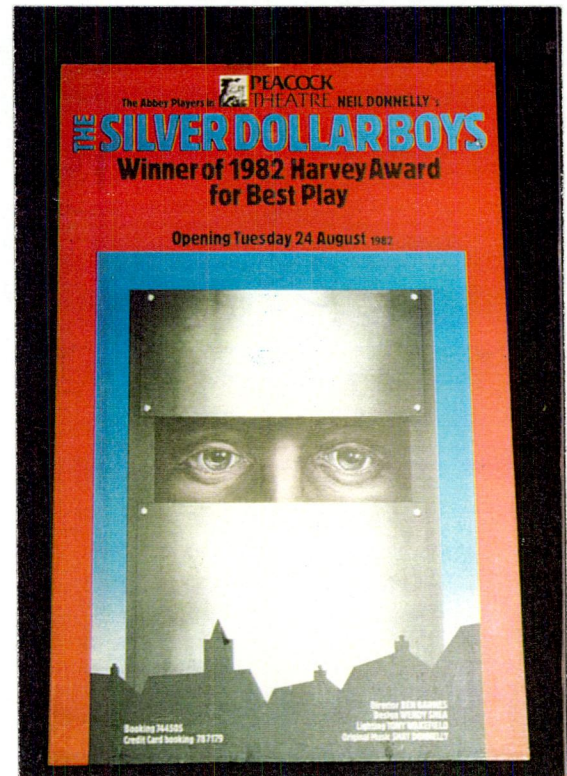


fig 26 *The Silver Dollar Boys* 1982

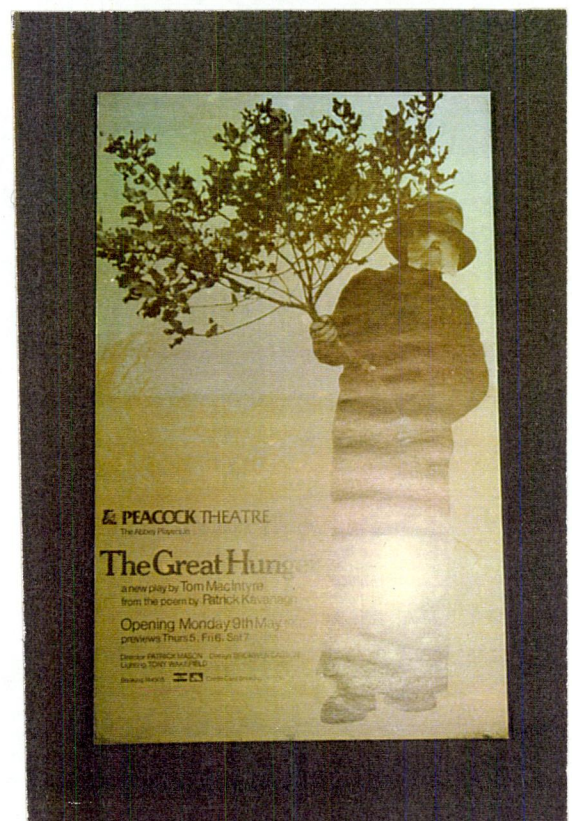
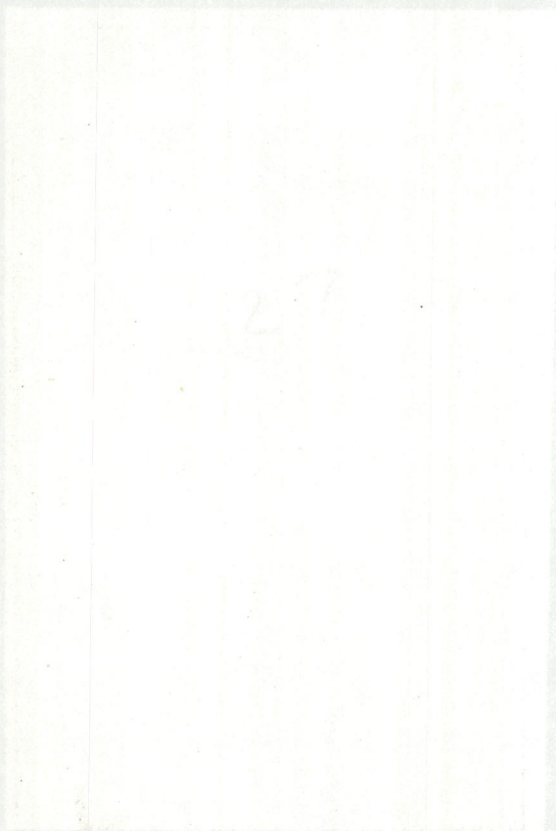


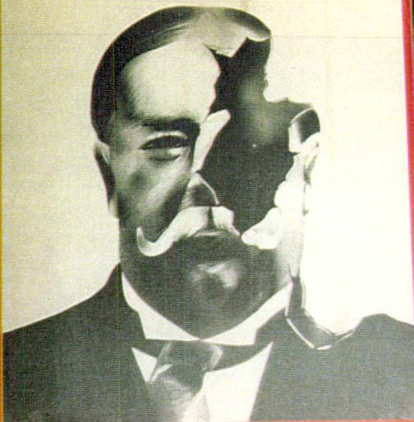
fig. 27 *The Great Hunger* 1983



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Lastly, to illustrate how the atmospheric qualities of the stage have been effectively illustrated in the surrealist theatre poster is the poster produced in 1970 by the Abbey Theatre advertising the play, *Tagam an Godot* (fig. 30). This poster borrows the composition-  
al elements of dramatic lighting and long cast shadows used by surrealist painters such as Dé Chirico and Dali, and displays the capability of these elements, when placed within the theatre poster, to create an intense and dramatic design.



**PEACOCK THEATRE** THE ARBY PLAYERS  
**Auld Dacency**  
 A NEW PLAY BY RICHARD J. BYRNE  
 Opening Thurs 15 November 984 (£4 previews 13 & 14)  
 Director BEN BARNES Design WEAD SHEA Lighting LESLIE SCOTT  
 BOOKING: 784 655 78779 Accents, Jaws and American Gargues accepted Nightly on 8.15pm  
 Special Monday Night Offer All Seats £4

On Other Theatres 6 November 1989

**THE ABBEY**  
The National Theatre

Opens Tuesday, 3rd October, 1989  
Performances: 28th, 30th September and 2nd October

A NEW PLAY BY  
**TOM MURPHY**

**TOO LATE FOR LOGIC**

JOHN H. MULLER  
BRIAN AND ANNE WALSH

Jim Bruton  
Des Cowe  
Deirdre Donnelly  
Tony Doyle  
Kate Flynn

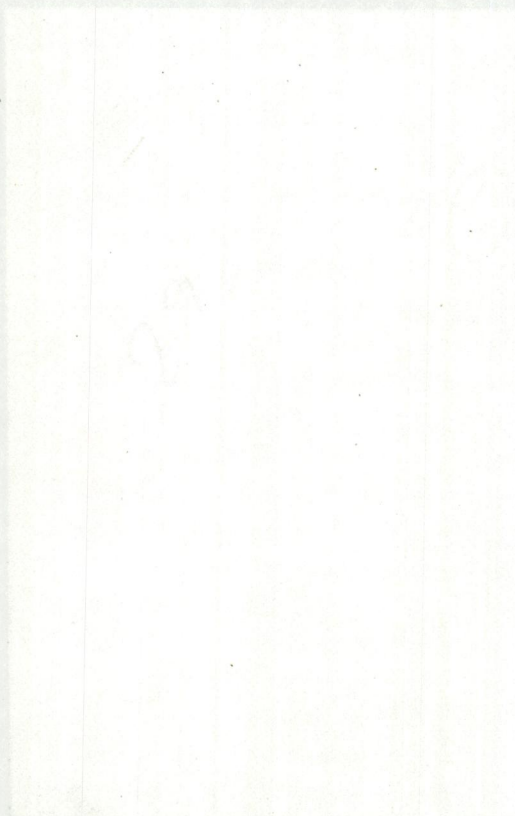
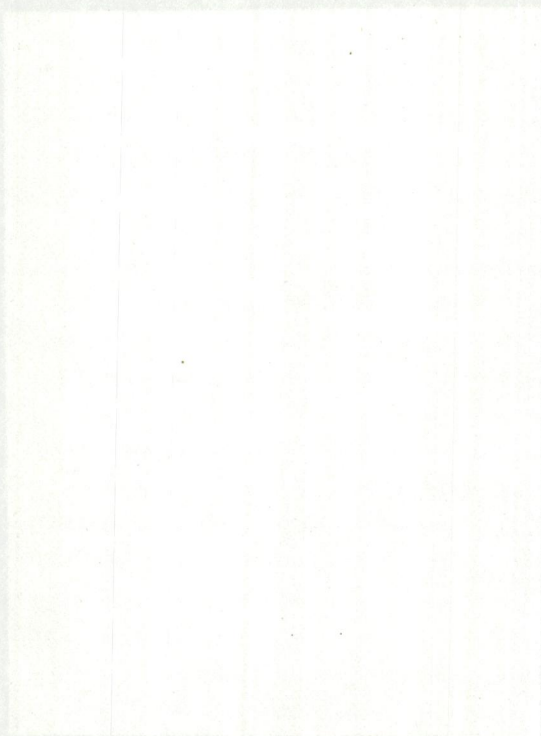
Michelle Forbes  
Darragh Kelly  
Doreen Keogh  
Garrett Keogh

Pat Laffan  
Brid Ni Neachtain  
Goffrey Quigley  
Gabrielle Reedy

Bookings from 10.00  
Tony Wakefield

Booking Abbey Box Office 787222

23



## Playwright in theatre posters:

Also of note is the intermittent appearance of the Irish playwright within the image based designs of the Abbey Theatre.

The playwright Samuel Beckett appears as the only decorative element in the previously illustrated poster produced in 1981 advertising the play *Not I* / *Footfalls* play, (fig. 19). The other playwrights which have been depicted within the designs of the Abbey Theatre are, James Joyce, Hugh Leonard and Brendan Behan. (fig. 31, 32, 33 and 34) The first appearance of the playwright dates to 1979. The most recent appearance of the playwright image was produced only last year.

The posters illustrated here show how this image has been given many different treatments over the course of this study, yet in each case the playwright remains the central focus of the design. The intermittent appearance of the playwright image over the entire course of this study leads me to consider it's significance within the identity of the Abbey Theatre. Each of the writers Behan, Joyce, Leonard and Beckett are greatly respected for their literary contributions to the Irish Theatre. I feel that these posters designs show a recurring appraisal of the identity of the classic highly renowned Irish playwright and serve to visually link their identities with the identity of the Abbey Theatre.

In 1904 William Butler Yeats, a co-founder of the Abbey Theatre stated that he intended to bring the great legacies of Irish culture to the Nation. It appears that this is exactly what these posters do. Rather than illustrating the emotional and dramatic qualities of the stage these posters simply bring the identity of the

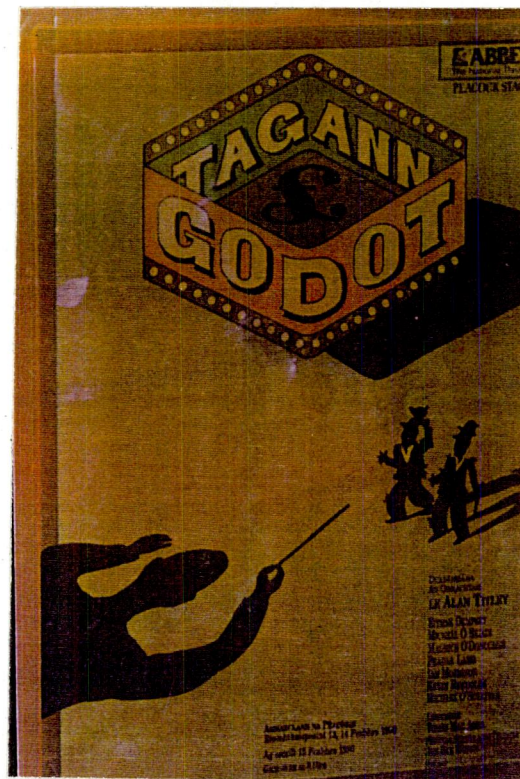


fig. 30 Tagann an Godot 1990

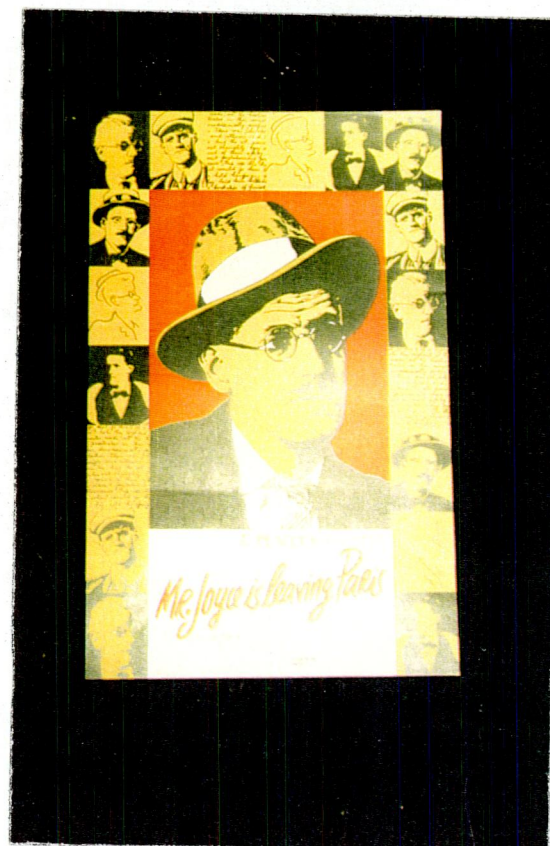
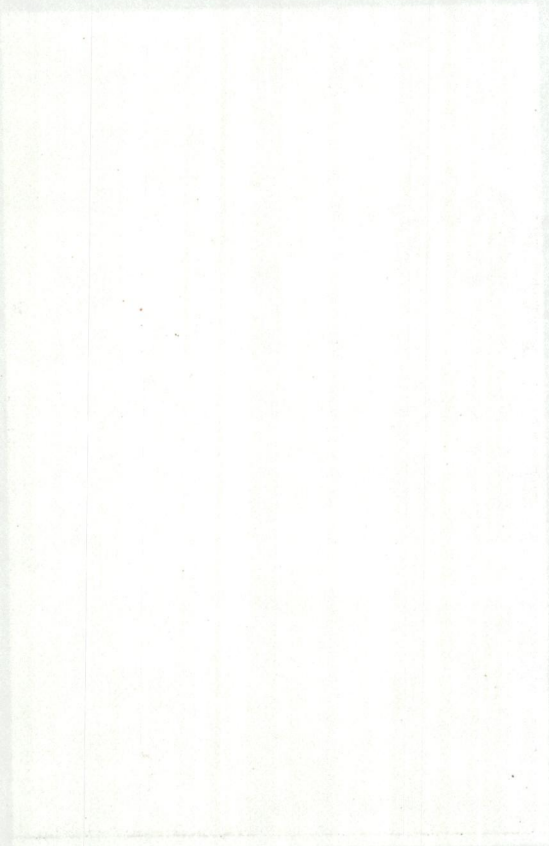


fig. 31 Mr. Joyce is Leaving Paris 1982



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writer to the attention of the viewer and simply use this device to market the nature of the play itself.

There has been no evidence of a visual representation of the celebrated Irish actor within the Abbey Theatre poster designs. World renowned Irish actors such as Siobhan McKenna, Cyril Cusack and Colm Meaney have regularly performed at the Abbey, personalities whose names and faces would surely attract an audience if included in poster designs. Strangely the Abbey Theatre posters have totally avoided any 'star-billing' of actors, a device used regularly in theatre advertising and more prominently in cinema advertisements.

It appears that, within the designs of the Abbey Theatre, it is the playwright, rather the actor who is the star of the show.

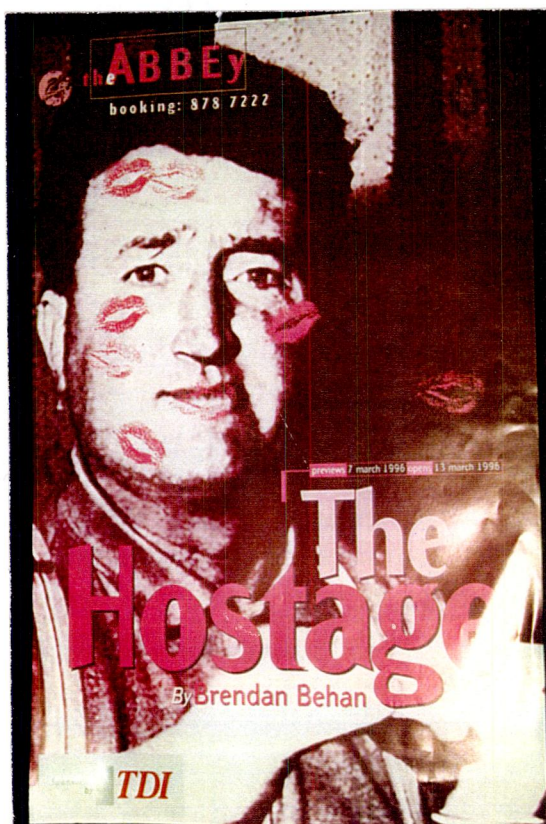


fig. 34 *The Hostage* 1996

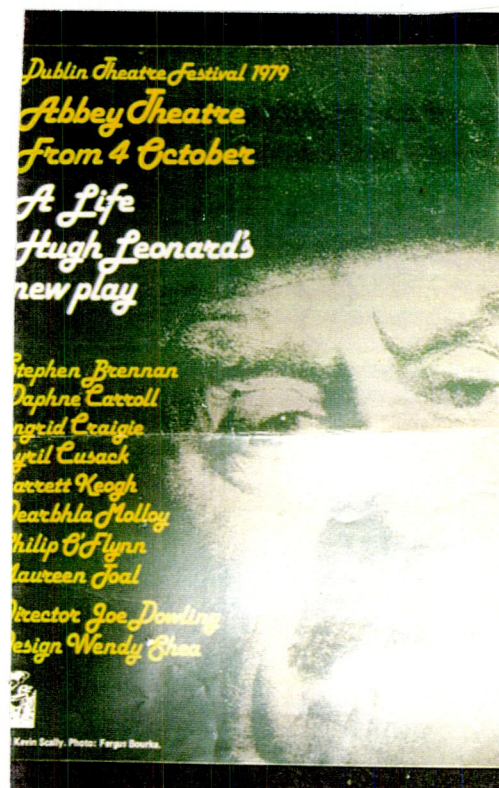


fig. 32 *A Life* 1979

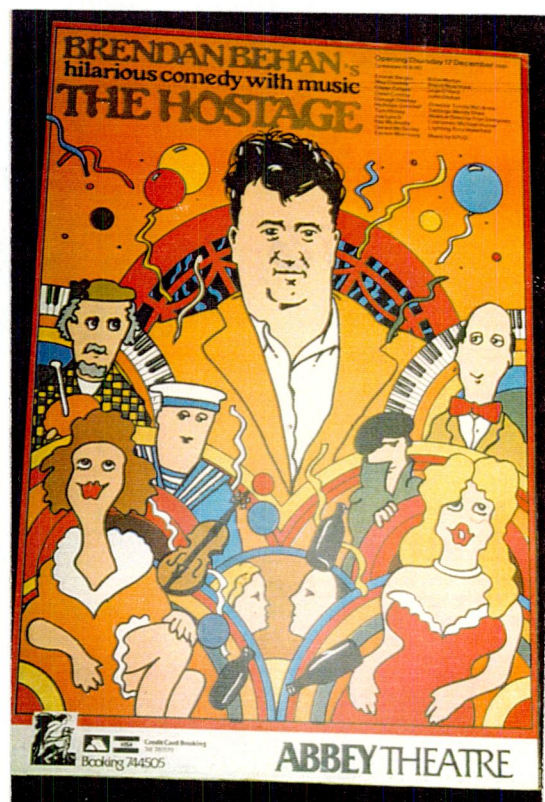


fig. 33 *The Hostage* 1981

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### Chapter 3:

#### The image based designs of the 1990s.

In the sections previous to this consideration has been given to certain recurring styles and techniques which have appeared intermittently over the course of this study. As yet, the posters produced by the Abbey Theatre during the 1990s have not featured prominently. This section hopes to provide an insight to the nature of the Abbey Theatres image-based designs as realised within the last decade of this study. The images I have selected to represent this period date from 1995 to the present year, 1997.

It was outlined previously that the posters of the 1970s and 1980s, when placed in chronological order appeared to jump dramatically from one style to another.

In contrast to this, what immediately struck me when viewing the posters of the 1990s in chronological order was the evidence of a certain 'uniformity' within the designs of this time. Each poster is of course different to the next, but it appears that within each image based design produced from 1995 to 1997, certain recurring design elements can be traced. A notable feature which runs through every image based design produced in 1995, 1996 and 1997 is the utilisation of the human form in each poster.

The examples I have provided within this section (fig. 35– 42 ) all show consistent evidence of this feature, ranging in form from the classic, sophisticated image of the bronzed statue seen in the *Macbeth* poster (fig. 36) to the gigantic portrait of a baby's face as seen in the most recent advertisement for the Abbey Theatre – *The Importance of being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde. (fig. 42) What is essentially being provided by the inclusion of the human form in these advertisements is a strong visual and emotional focus for the viewer. The human figure directly confronts its audience, thus achieving an instant contact and immediate relationship with the casual passerby. Each design recognises the strength of this feature when used as a means of visual communication.

Without exception, all Abbey poster designs produced in 1995, 1996 and 1997 have portrayed their central image through the medium of photography.

There appears to be a certain uniformity within the realisation of the photographic image over the designs of the 1990s. Strong light and dark contrasts are used and the element of colour is significantly limited; the image is portrayed either through black and white photography or with the inclusion of only one or two colours.

Another notable deviation from designs previous to the 1990s is the absence of a considerable amount of information from the poster. Details such as cast listings have been completely removed. The text within recent poster designs of the Abbey announces simply the title of the play, the name of the playwright and the date production.

The new style of the recent Abbey Theatre designs has been realised through a number of changes in the overall structure and layout of specific elements. These changes can be recognised initially in the poster design dating November 1995 produced by the Abbey Theatre to advertise the play *The Only True History of Lizzie Finn* (fig.35). The most immediate evidence of change apparent within this design is in the treatment given to the text. An entirely new typestyle is introduced. This new typestyle is quite flamboyant, and certainly extremely 'modern' in appearance; quite different to any style used in the poster designs of the 1970s and 1980s. Certain modern graphic devices are introduced into the layout of the text.

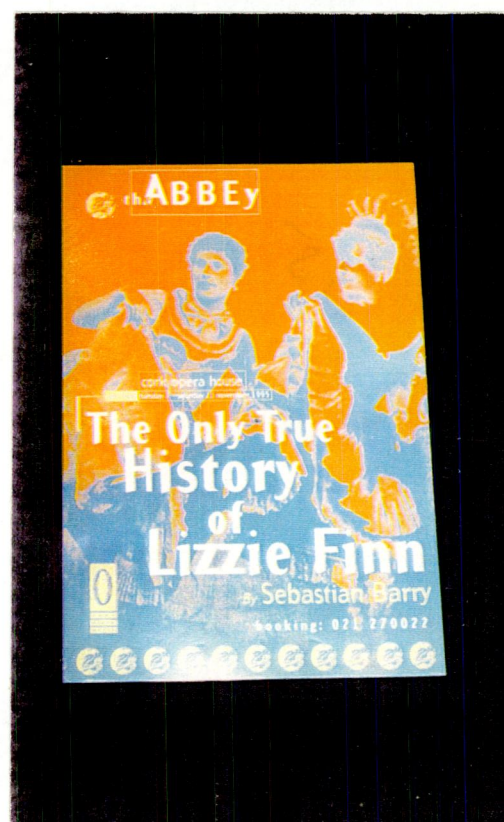


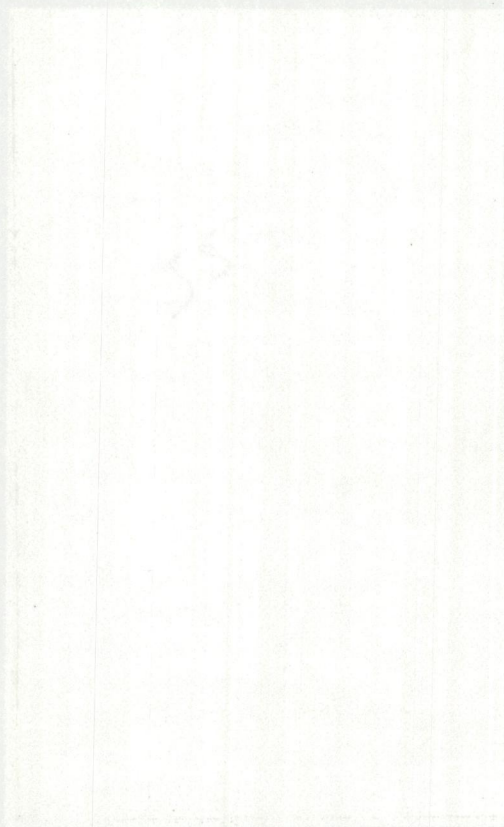
fig. 35 *The Only True History of Lizzie Finn* 1995

These include the 'framing' of the the theatres name and the placement of some text into 'boxes' of colour. Also, the treatment of the theatres logo has changed within this design. The logo is now placed within a circular frame and is reduced considerably in size.

The following posters produced by the Abbey Theatre, *Macbeth* dating January 1996 (fig. 36). *The Hostage*, dating March 1996 (fig. 37) *Philadelphia here I come!*, dating April 1996 (fig. 38) and *Six Characters in search of an Author* (fig. 39) also dating April 1996, illustrate how the distinctive typographic style and specific graphic devices initially realised in 1995 have persisted without any evidence of change over a period of six months.

As a means to illustrate the extent of difference in style and layout between the most recent Abbey poster designs and the designs of the 1970s and 1980s, I have reproduced within this section two early Abbey Theatre designs. (fig. 42,43). These early Abbey posters advertise the plays *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare, and *The Hostage*, by Brendan Behan, and date to respectively 1971 and 1981. Both of these posters advertise plays which have also been performed by the Abbey in 1996. As a result it is possible to compare these early poster designs (fig. 43 and 44) to two specific poster designs produced in 1996 *MacBeth* (fig. 36) and *The Hostage* (fig. 37) which advertise the very same plays.

It is interesting to note that both poster advertising *The Hostage* use the image of the playwright Behan as the central focus of the designs whereas the poster dating to 1971 advertising *MacBeth* (fig. 43) uses very different imagery to the poster dating 1996 (fig. 36)



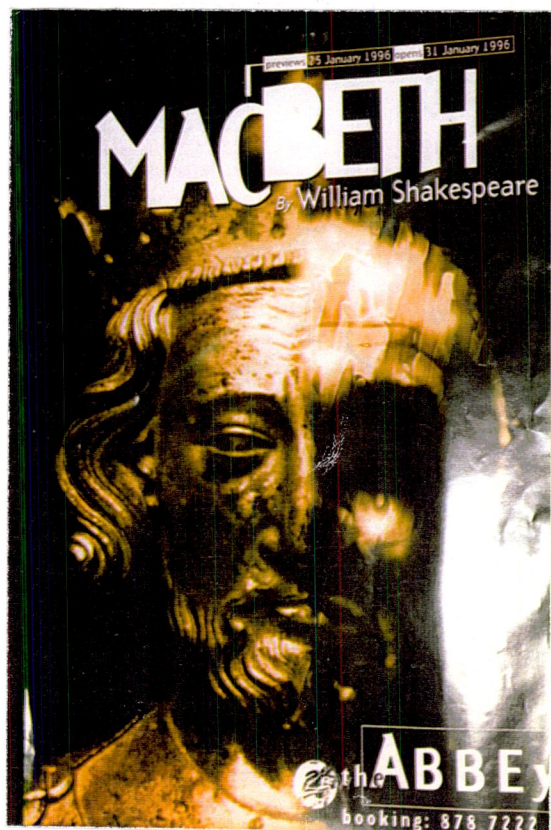


fig. 36 MacBeth 1996

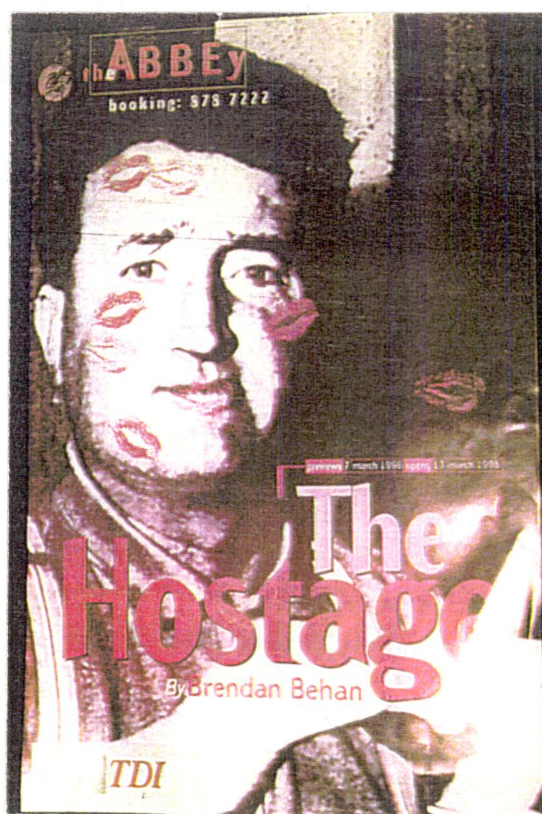


fig. 37 The Hostage 1996

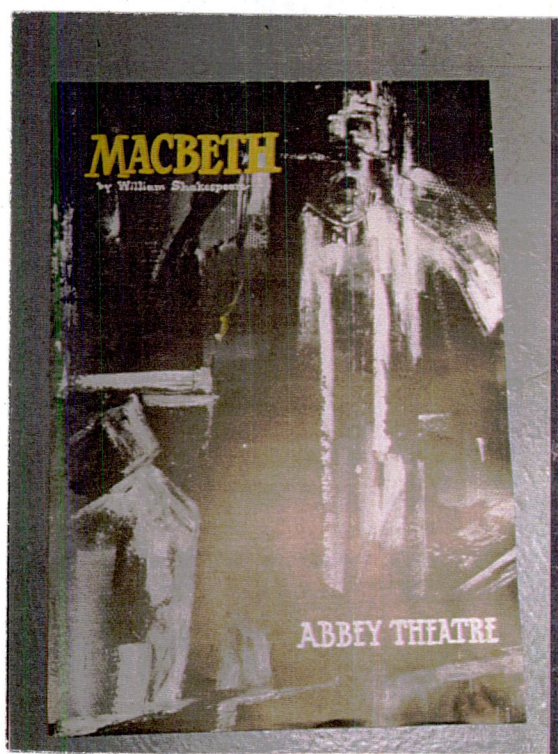


fig. 43 MacBeth 1971

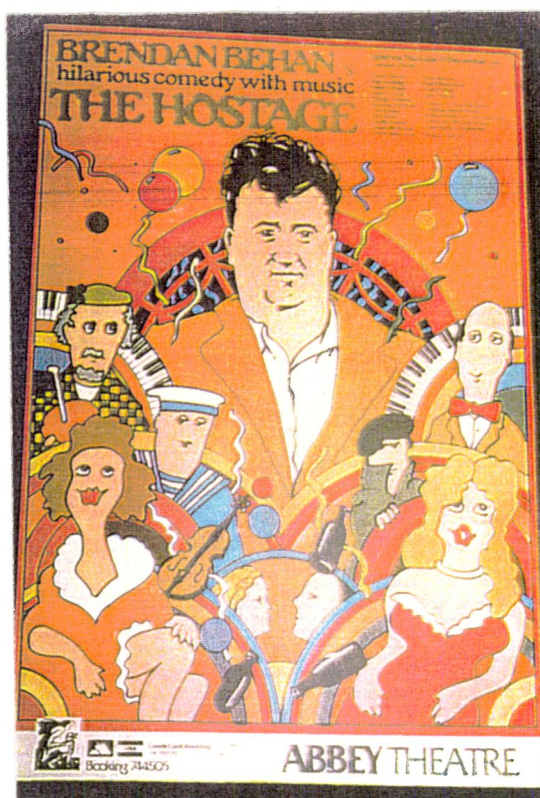
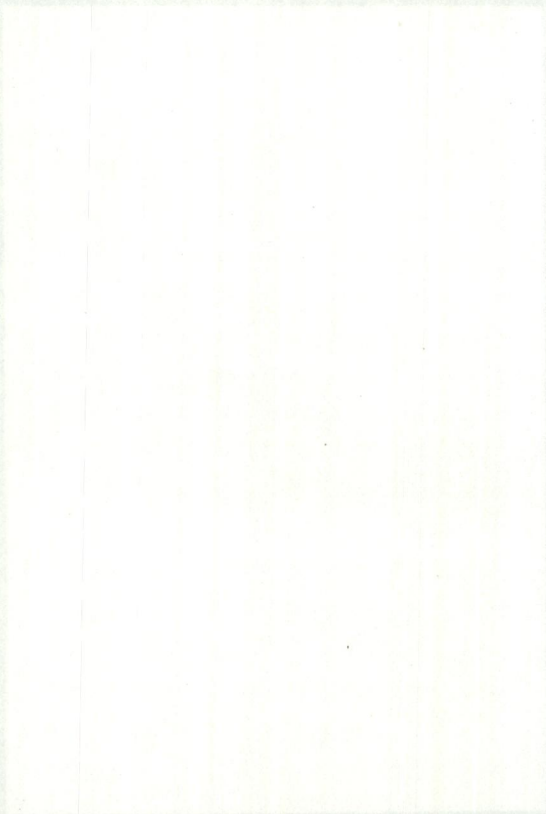


fig. 44 The Hostage 1981



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advertising the same play. What appears within the two early posters (fig. 43 and 44) is painterly displays of an image considered relevant to the play advertised. Their illustrational styles reveal the predominance of the highly decorative poster design during the 1970s and 1980s. Both early posters display a certain individualism in expression. Yet, when compared to the most recent designs 're-advertising' the same plays, it appears that the more contemporary form of the recent designs is decidedly more distinctive and eye-catching than the early painterly representations of *MacBeth* (fig. 43) and *The Hostage* (fig. 44).

The Abbey poster design has become in the 1990s more commercial, showing similarities in treatment to the magazine advertisement. I feel that in this visual comparison the evident recent changes in style and layout has led towards the realisation of a popular mainstream commercial advertisement. The designs produced within the early months of 1996 provide the viewer with an uncomplicated format, docile, rapid and without surprises. It appears that the initial change in style over the 1990s has produced a format 'made palatable for mass consumption'. (Barnicoat, 1972, p.184)

The changes at this time indicate that the designs have been formulated 'to speak to the unprofessional audience in a popular way.' (Barnicoat, 1972, p.183)

It may seem that these last quotations appear quite out of character when referring to the designs produced by a National Theatre whose artistic policies have been previously outlined as founded upon Yeats original intention,

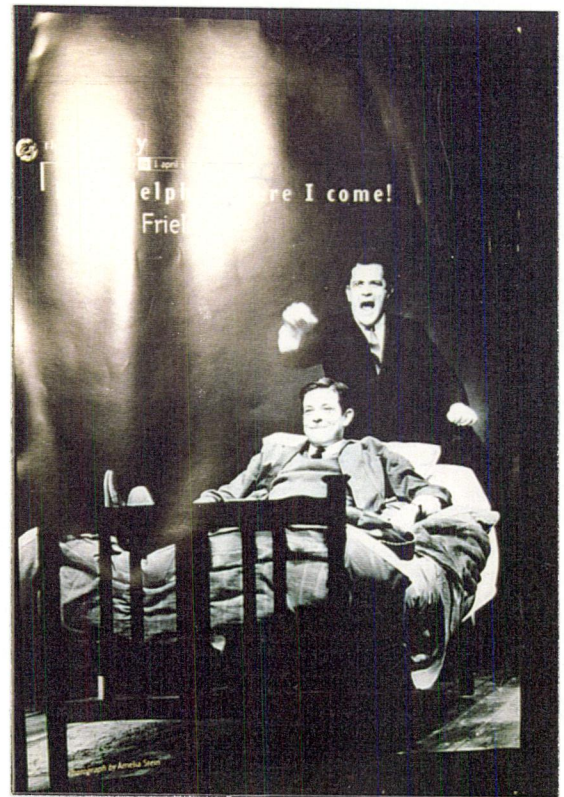


fig. 38 Philadelphia Here I Come! 1996

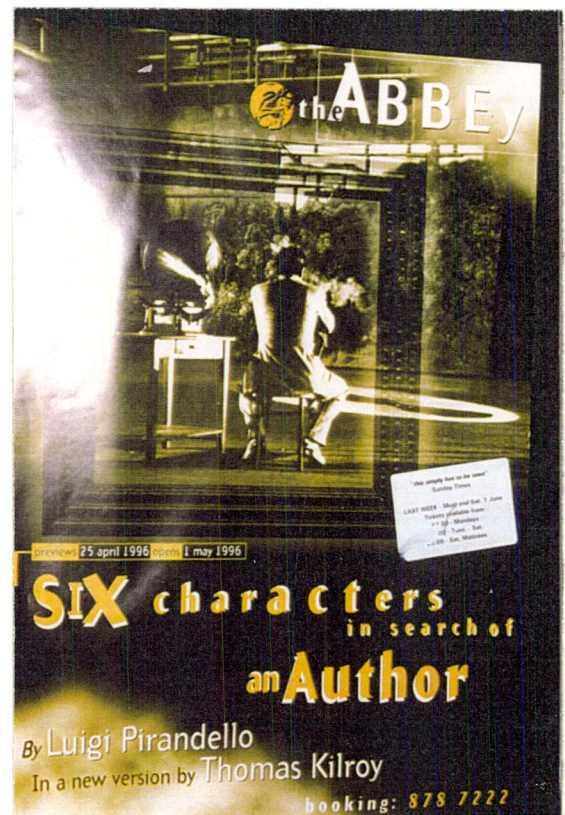


fig. 39 Six Characters in Search of an Author 1996



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'to create an exclusive theatre capable of generating a bond among chosen spirits, a mystery almost for leisure and lettered people'. (P120. Writing Ireland)

Yet it seems that they follow some views given more recently to the identity and position of the Abbey Theatre within today's society, which may prove to indicate this need for change which has been recognised evidently in succession of the year when these views were put forward.

In a report of the Arts Council Theatre Review of 1995, the present Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre, James Flannery, outlined his concern that,

'Whereas in the past, even the recent past, the existence of a core-theatre going audience of some numbers could be assumed, it can be taken for granted no longer. We are currently faced with the disappearance of that core audience. We take little comfort from the fact that we are not alone. Theatre in Dublin would appear to be in a crisis.' (Flannery, p. 168, 1995)

Further opinion given as to the faltering identity of the Abbey Theatre within Ireland's modern society were indicated by Alec Reid within a review of Dramatic Literature and the theatrical arts, published in 1964.

"In the past the Abbey lived dangerously finding itself in a dangerous world, but the passions and reactions then generated were bound to pass as we settled down to an ordered existence. We have won our revolution, resolved our civil war, established ourselves as a prosperous expanding state. What place can then be for heroes and heroics in a non heroic world. What have the Anglo-Irish aristocrats, Yeats and Lady Gregory to offer our new middle class democracy". (Reid, 1964, p 513)

It appears within these comments, that the modern Irish society has little left in common with the origins of the Abbey Theatre, that the values of nationalism and traditionalism have lost their prominence in the now established prosperous and expanding state. The apparent disappearance of the Abbey's core-going theatre audience indicates the repercussions of this change in society toward the well-being of the Abbey Theatre. Thus it seems that within the last few years of this study, it has certainly become necessary to address the unprofessional audience. It appears that the recent Abbey Theatre posters have been made palatable for mass consumption and that this recent change in design style addresses the modern 'mainstream' consumer rather than the now apparently insignificant elite, literary-minded audience. 'In the modern literary economy, standardisation and mass consumption presents financial opportunity.' (Barnadacco, p. 10, 1995)

The realisation of this 'uniformity' within the previously discussed recent posters of the Abbey (fig. 35-39) may to some extent, present, 'a threat to the values of 'artistic individualism and classical ideas about heroism and storytelling itself.' (Barnadacco, p. 10, 1995) But in light of the previously outlined words of Alec Reid, "What place can there be for heroes and heroics in a non-heroic world". (Reid, 1964, p. 513)

It appears that the mainstream format of these designs directly reflect the circumstances under which they have been produced. Following the designs dating from November 1995 to April 1996, the posters advertising the plays, '*She Stoops to Folly*,' (fig. 40) produced in October 1996 serve to illustrate the nature of a very recent evolution of the Abbey Theatre poster towards a more simplified 'modernist' format. The advertisement for *She Stoops to Folly*, (fig. 40) marks the introduction of the Universe typeface into the most recent designs of the Abbey Theatre. The poster advertising *The Marriage of Figaro* (fig. 41) appears to take a step further towards simplifying the elements within the design. Again the Universe typestyle is used and only two differing type sizes are employed within this design. A solid band of colour is introduced, a simple graphic device which effectively 'modernises' the appearance of this poster design.

The most recent poster produced by the Abbey Theatre within the period of this study is the poster advertising the play, *The Importance of being Earnest*, (fig. 42). This poster was produced in December 1997. It is extremely graphic in form, again employing the device of a solid band of colour and the Universe typeface. The element of comic and the absurd is introduced in its pictorial element, the large baby's face also giving a light-hearted insight into the nature of the play. The photographic image is so much stronger and more dynamic than it's realisation in the posters previous to this. This most recent Abbey Theatre poster is dramatic, eye-catching and memorable. It demands attention from the view-



fig. 40 *She Stoops to Folly* 1996

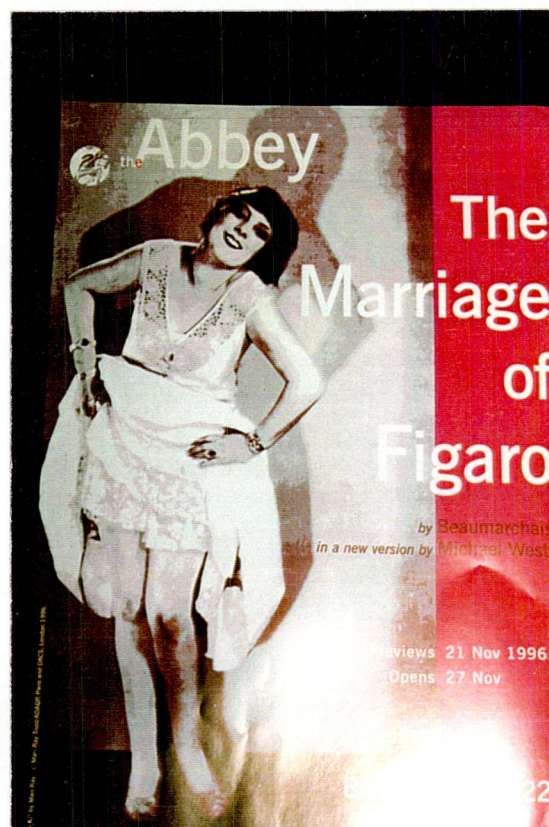


fig. 41 *The Marriage of Figaro* 1996



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er. The identity of the Abbey Theatre realised through this most recent poster design is certainly more distinctive than the docile, unsurprising identity of the earlier poster designs produced in the last decade of this study. In it's extreme modernist appearance it seems that any immediate elements of tradition have been totally eradicated.

This poster still boasts of belonging to an establishment rich with literary legacies by its retaining of the original pictorial Abbey Theatre logo ( the emblem has been returned to it's original square form) but consciously departs from the idea of this theatre preforming to an elitist audience. *The Importance of being Earnest* asserts the role of the contemporary magazine advertisement; straightforward, direct and absent of any intricate decoration.

The treatment of the typography raises the level of advertising to a shout. This new style of advertising within the Abbey Theatre appears to reflect the ideas of New Yorks public theatres artistic director, George C. Wolf, who states that he wants 'to bring elitist culture to a populist level' (Steven Heller, 1976, p. 29)

It targets not only the middle-class, mainstream audience, but also the younger element of society ( there is a distinct similarity between the style of this advertisement and the style of the advertising used for the recent film *Trainspotting* [Danny Boyle '95]). The realisation of this new combustible theatre identity within the most recent Abbey Theatre poster effectively illustrates the progressive nature of the modern Abbey Theatre posters.



fig. 42 *The Importance of being Earnest* 1997



## **Conclusion:**

In this study of the poster designs of the Abbey Theatre it has been shown that even within an establishment so relatively small as Irelands National Theatre, the poster has, over the course of time proven its susceptibility to a variety of different influences. An insight has been given to the range o f sources from which the designs of the Abbey Theatre have drawn inspiration, and to the huge range of styles and techniques utilised to visually represent the medium of Theatre entertainment. This study has indicated the influence of world wide trends and movements in art and design on the modern Abbey poster and has also drawn attention to the historical elements of tradition and Nationalism within the Abbey poster design. In conclusion I feel that this study has proven the theatre poster as realised within Dublin's Abbey Theatre, to be a vibrant and charismatic continual document of both social and artistic trends.

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