

Contemporary Theatre.

For the People or the Cultural Elite.

Geraldine Moran.

3rd Year Theatre Design

HISTORY OF ART

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COVER : WAITING FOR GODOT by SAMUEL Beckett.

IRISH Theatre Company - 1982.

ILLUSTRATION NO. 1

Contemporary Theatre.

For the People or the Cultural Elite.

1975 saw the foundation of two new state- assisted companies The Irish Ballet Company and the Irish Theatre Company. Less than eight years later we have witnessed the drop in subsidies to the Irish Ballet Company and the closure of the Irish Theatre Company due to the withdrawal of their grant by the government. We see the dramatic economy drive imposed on our National Theatre The Abbey which is being forced to bring back virtually all previous plays which had a successful run in an effort to make money at the box office and cut the cost of producing any new material.

This fight for survival is in operation throughout the other few remaining theatres in Dublin. Is this significant to the comment made by a member of the Dublin Corporation Committee in reference to the Dublin Theatre Festival, the representative show case of theatre in Ireland today " That the festival was only for 'Hob Nobs' " **ILLUSTRATION NO.1.** - sadly not a name coined to describe a new theatre movement but a reflection of the attitudes towards the questionable relevance and existance of theatre in Dublin. It is worth noting, I think, that this attitude has been summed up by a committee dealing with the arts, but who represent the cultural interests of the vast majority of people within the Dublin area who would not consider themselves members of this so-called Elitist 'Hob Nob' element.

Elitist is a word which has for a long time been applied to various theatrical movements. Indeed, since the wave of romanticism in the nineteenth century, the demythification of art

Illustration from
The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald
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THE Dublin Theatre Festival, which suddenly finds itself in hot water, is about two things — REALITY and DREAM.

First, the reality. It was planned to make this three-week event this year first-class despite the lack of funds, though it would have still cost £200,000 to stage it.

Now the Dublin Corporation has cut its grant by half to £10,000, a stunning blow to the festival organisers. It may mean, if the decision isn't rescinded by the Council, a two-week festival instead of the accepted three. It will mean the cancellation of some imported shows.

Briefly, it means a poorer festival.

So, to what I term, the dream. Festival Director **Brendan Smith** and his programme director **Michael Colgan** dream up events for the programme so that festival-goers are assured of some first-rate productions. For instance, this year Smith wanted **Peter Brook** here with his brilliant production of "Carmen", a production that has won wide acclaim. Colgan dreamed up some splendid imports from Japan and New York, but he has had to cancel at least two of them.

For the duo of Smith and Colgan, who work well in tandem, it is a depressing time. Months of hard work may come to naught because of lack of money. Colgan is particularly upset by the Corporation decision which he describes as "appalling". Some of the inaccurate statements also hurt him.

He told me: "Dublin Theatre Festival is of the city and for the city and, even though the Corporation do not give as great a portion of our grant as does the Arts Council, we in the festival naturally look to the city representatives for their support and encouragement.

"It is understandable to cut funding to an organisation that has not proven successful in recent times, but to judge by public and press response, the festival is now at a very important and exciting stage of its development. To say that the festival was only for 'hob-nobs', as was said at the Corporation meeting, is entirely wrong".

Arthur Lappin, the representative of the Arts Council in charge of theatrical matters, pointed out that the £82,000 grant from his council would be given on the understanding that the festival was a three-week event. He stressed that relationships between the Council and the festival were

now extremely cordial; indeed they had a good working relationship.

Ironically, I found from my own enquiries that some people would prefer a two-week festival, and that includes impresario **Noel Pearson**.

Pearson, for example, argues that he would prefer to see money given by the Corporation put to maintaining both the Olympia and Gaiety Theatres. Both needed money spent on them, especially the Gaiety which already had an application in for money. "I believe," added Pearson, "that the Corporation should take over the maintenance of these theatres."

On the other hand, **Brendan Smith** argues that the Corporation has got very good value for money they donate for the festival and should acknowledge this fact.

Michael Colgan said that it might even be partly understandable if the cut back was a one-off decision. However, some of the Councillors on the Cultural Committee seriously argued for eventually reaching a point when the festival would receive no funding from Dublin corporation.

Illustration NO.1.

Gus Smith. Arts Sunday. Sunday Independent
16. May. 1982.

bringing it down to the level of the masses, there has, as a reaction, been created followers of avant garde or cultural Elite. This rift continues to widen. At the beginning of this century Dublin provided the stage for four plays 'At the Hawks Well', 'The Only Jealousy of Emer', 'The Dreaming of the Bones', and 'Calvary', all done in the Japanese Noh style by a poet and dramatist we now hail as one most gifted writers Ireland has ever produced - W.B. Yeats. **Illustration No. 2.**

- Nobody understood the plays, Yeats admitted " that the plays should be written for some country where all classes share in a half- mythological, half- philosophical folk belief which the writer and his audience lift into a new subtlety". He also conceded that such a country only existed in his fantasy.

Perhaps Yeats was moving in the right direction with his Noh plays, this need to return to the use of symbolism and the art of illusion in a reaction to the clutter of the nineteenth century theatre and lifestyle. But did he have the right to impose his desperate need for change, a need which has been arrived at through the background of a solid education and preparation in the appreciation and understanding of art, the security of being a member of the financially powerful minority from which cultural Elitist groups tend to stem.

Out of this Yeats felt justified in offering his new style primitivism to the majority of people who had for almost a decade been fed imitation art and the exaltation of the mundane - to provide them with a false reality and sense of decor-

Illustration No. 2
Zobovese No. 12



ILLUSTRATION NO.2 .

Japanese Nō style

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ative beauty in their lives to ease the reality of their less pleasant environment.

It goes without saying that Yeats's primitivism was recognized only within a small initiated group of that time - other writers such as Gordon Craig and Richard Wagner who worked in the same vein as Yeats adapted the same presumptuous attitude, expecting the support of society for the individual style of work.

Craig and Wagner strove to keep theatre as an elitist art form. A product of the directors - whom they saw as 'the priests of art' with all others subordinate to them. Their ideal theatre was to focus all the arts in a magnificent, overpowering unity of impression. Hence this involvement of various art forms within the staging of a production became known as the 'arts theatre movement'. **ILLUSTRATION NO 3.**

It is questionable whether a small group can create a trend if the time is not ripe for it. But in advocating the 'Arts Theatre movement' neither Craig or Wagner could have foreseen the enormous chasm that was soon to open between art and society in general. Conventional form simply disintegrated and the ensuing fragmentation was felt in every quarter; literature, painting, sculpture, music and dance. Does then society in general, which I would also classify as the average consumer, feel they have been cut off from art for the last 75 years? Or in retrospect, could it be said that in the 1920's the artists' sensibilities felt their way in the direction of the times, needs and moods. Frighteningly enough the artist does seem to

ILLUSTRATION NO. 2

DESIGNED IN 1907 BY GORDON GORD
THE CHURCHES IN A.D. 1907 AND GORDON

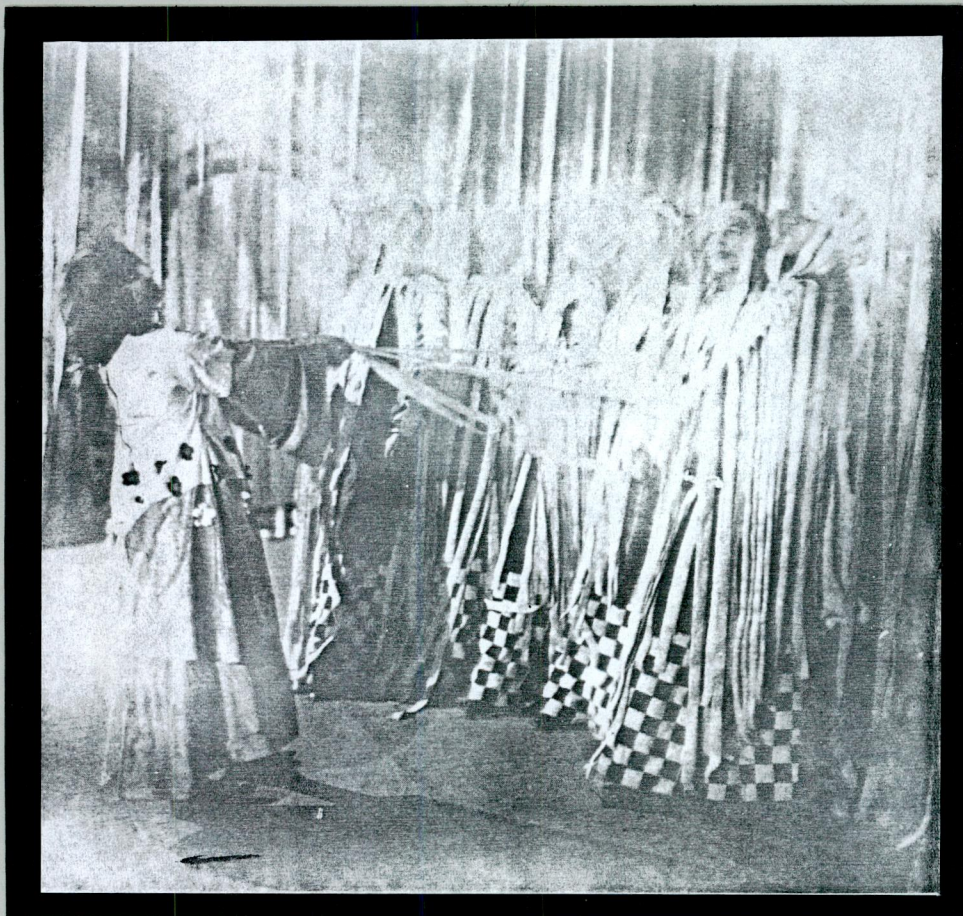


ILLUSTRATION NO. 3.

The chorus in *Acis and Galatea*
DESIGNED IN 1902 by Gordon Craig

(Illustration No. 5)

have the ability to predict or is it promote, trends. Perhaps this is the genius of a true artist, the intuition and creativity about a subject to see something new in it. This idea would then lead us to believe that society and the consumer could be governed by the artist. We know through experience that the artist in the theatre over the last century has not had the power to manipulate society but to present a performance with the objective of provoking an emotional response, previously buried in the subconscious.

I think the disintegration of conventional form in the early twentieth century and the artists ability to assess trends does not extend beyond an attempt to give meaning to mans innermost visualisations and to reach beyond the ordinary. To express a part of him of, which up until then, he had only been vaguely aware. The era of the individual was nigh, but the sense of vulnerability scared people, - as I believe it does today. Theatre as an art form was growing increasingly personal and individual in both its language and vision - aligned with an increasing vogue for introspection and self awareness.

To me this so called split with society was the theatres introduction to real life - is the consumer afraid of his own reflection? Is the artist the only one facing up to reality, accepting life with all its cruelties and disenchantments? **ILLUSTRATION NO.4.**

Or who is an artist and who is not? We all, believe different things in life, we all follow different truths. Do we then select our dramatists as we do our gods to suit our own needs?



ILLUSTRATION NO.4.

Who is the artist and who is not?

Illustration 10.5

Example: Antonin Artaud, in 1910, at the age of five almost succumbed to meningitis, and the disease left him with permanent brain damage that grew progressively worse. The Frenchman's extraordinary powers of observation allowed him to study the disintegration of his own mind with the objectivity of a scientist and the subjectivity of a poet. As he struggled to give exact expression to the steps of his psychic deterioration and the consequent failure of his habitual thought processes, Artaud saw himself as a microcosm of the general process of disintegration in communication between the artist and society. He began to feel there was a surer level of communication than words. Artaud was convinced that he had discovered the process by which Western Theatre could bypass the ruined language of words and with gesture cries, and ritual, reach a defenseless area of direct communication. He eventually elaborated his plans for a theatre of cruelty in a series of essays and in 1935 he applied some of those theories in a Parisian production of 'The Lover' which ran for only 17 performances. Parisian audiences detested it, and the critics were abusive - this man who had received little serious attention during his lifetime, achieved during the 1960's the status of prophet - martyr. His violently worded theatre of cruelty manifestos appealed to the growing spirit of revolt at that time and became the professed articles of faith for many experimental theatre groups. **ILLUSTRATION NO.5.**

So what does the consumer want and what is he getting from the theatre? I feel that society has broken up into so many sub-sections, there can be no one dramatist or movement which will suffice the broad spectrum of tastes. Like Artaud, his writings were only appreciated when the economic and social

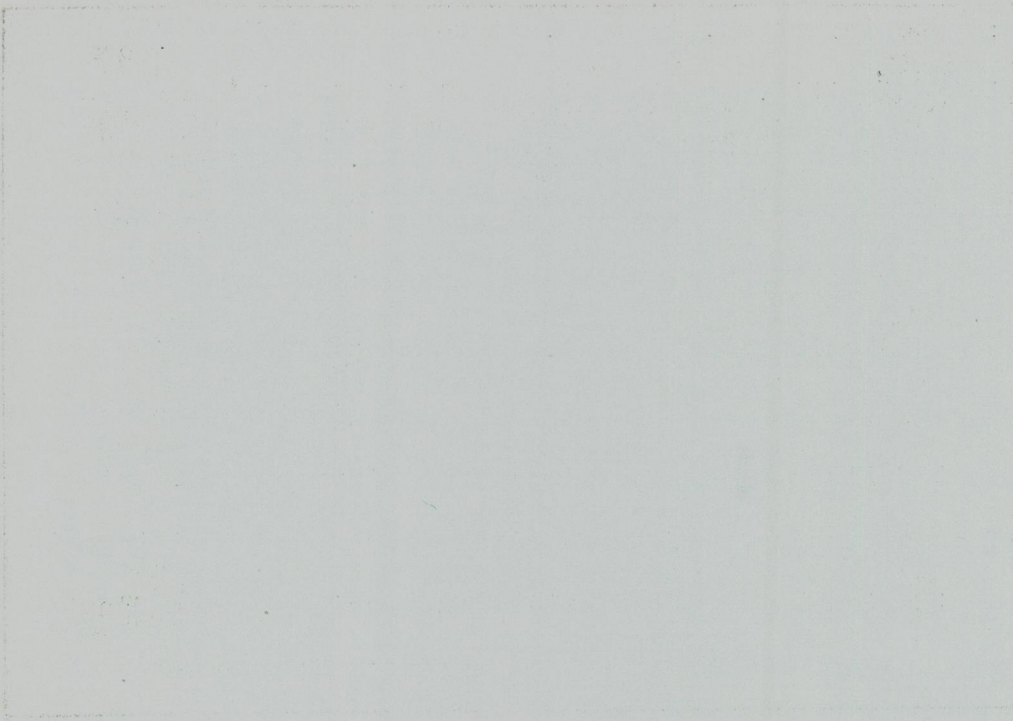


Illustration 103

To support human art passing for
words with gestures and mind - to read
a difference and of direct communication



Illustration No.5.

Theatre by passing the ruined language of words with gestures cries and ritual - to reach a defenseless area of direct communication.

environment proved ready - ready in the minds of one group, but I do not believe his writings appealed to all sections and ages at that time. Therefore is theatre right when it reflects the beliefs of only a small section of the community at any given time?

Dublin, I feel, patronises the bourgeois element of theatre, with plays of Ibsen, Chekov, Shaw etc. Nothing wrong with this except it is seen too often in Dublin at the expense of alternative movements.

These plays are aimed at a certain level of society where money is readily available to support the shows and financial success guaranteed. The summer season of Dublin's National Theatre is crammed with plays geared to the passing tourist trade. Is this promotion of Irish style kitsch a just way of using government funds and is the theatre's existence mainly for financial gain and political manipulations to keep the masses content? Do the government not have a duty to their own people to use funds from the ground level, educating the majority of people to understand the art of the theatre to provide workshops where they can experiment and experience first hand the ritual of creativity that only one can comprehend when faced with a genuine work of art. **ILLUSTRATION NO. 6.**

There exists the problem when one's environment is not congenient to creativity and free expression that one will not create art acceptable to the cultural élite - but surely art coming from the core of real society can stand the test of time better than the over indulged nostalgia, predominant in

Formation of Cash style notch

Illustration of notch



ILLUSTRATION NO. 6.

Promotion of Irish style kitch.

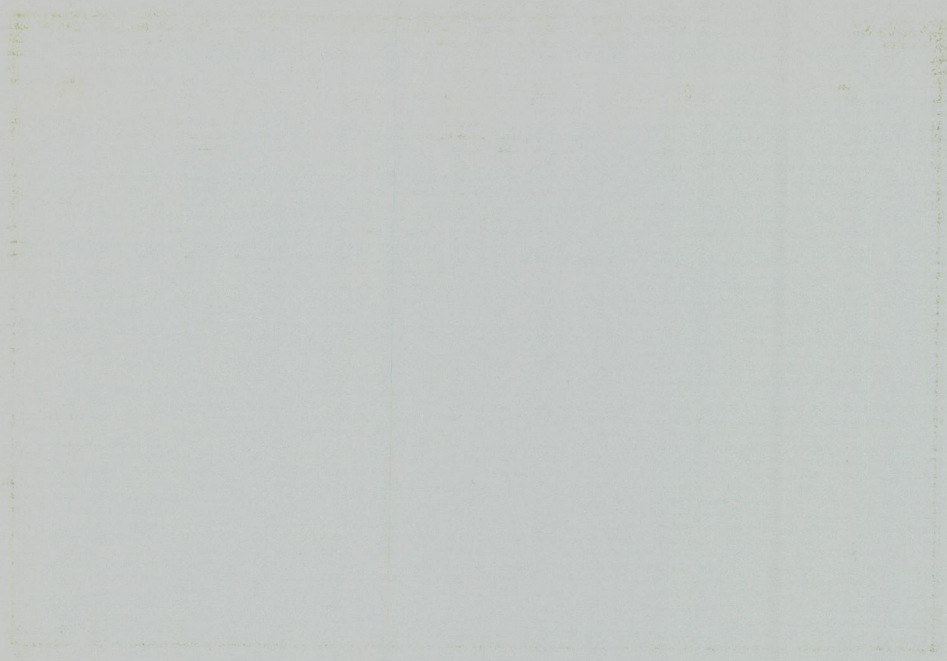


Illustration No. 1

Some people who have taxes
toothless phytos remain in the
government assistance



ILLUSTRATION NO. 7.

Workshops exist only on a very small level . and remain almost entirely without government assistance .

recent years from Irish writers.

Can we look with pride to our currnetly popular Irish play-writes - Hugh Leonard, Brian Friel, Thomas Kilroy for the moods and feelings of tomorrow - I certainly would'nt wish to be inspired by them, its all been done before, they provide nothing new. I think Dublin theatre has become stale, selling itself out to popularisation, clinging to the classical style and safe proven plays. I have no doubt this is a reaction to the climate of nouveau cultural consumer - who are terrified and disturbed by the true artists' acknowledgement of reality.

One must respect what has gone before but must not cling to it for security. Theatre must now emerge into the streets and be recognised within all areas of society. It must provide society with food for thought and every member of society must recognise his right to that.

Theatre may take new forms but as long as there is life, there will be theatre.

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