Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* in New York City

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At the Irish Repertory Theatre, New York City, through December 29

A conscientious and compelling production of Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* is currently running at the Irish Repertory Theatre in New York City. The play, first performed at the famed Abbey Theatre in Dublin in May 1924, is set in 1922 during the Irish Civil War.

That bitter 11-month conflict, which resulted in thousands of deaths, was fought between elements that accepted the Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921), which created the Irish Free State as a partitioned dominion (six northeastern counties remaining part of the United Kingdom) within the British Commonwealth and with the British monarch remaining the head of state, and those who considered the agreement a betrayal of Republicanism.

O'Casey's *Juno* is the second in a trilogy of plays, which also includes *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926). All three pieces treat the character and consequences of Ireland's upheavals from 1916-1922 and they stand collectively as one of the most remarkable bodies of social-dramatic work in the 20th century.

In *Juno and the Paycock*, for the Boyle family of Dublin beset by poverty and sustained mostly by illusions and vain hopes, life is a continuous and largely losing struggle. The Boyles live in a crowded tenement—and the Irish capital (a city of more than 400,000) had some of the most wretched slums in Europe.

Indeed, the infant mortality rate in Ireland at the time among the poverty-stricken was 142 per 1,000 live births. A 1912 report claimed that tuberculosis-related deaths in Ireland, also mostly among the poor, were fifty percent higher than in Scotland and England. In a February 1916 speech, Irish socialist and trade union leader James Connolly noted that Dublin's slums were "notorious the world over for their disease-breeding unhealthy character. All the world over it is known that the poor of Dublin are housed under conditions worse than those of any civilised people on God's earth."

"Captain" Jack Boyle (Ciarán O'Reilly), a man of about sixty, is the "paycock" (peacock) of the play's title (which refers ironically to Aesop's fable about a discontented peacock and the queen of the Roman deities and consort of Jupiter). Like much about him, Boyle's sea captaincy is a mix of self-delusion and dishonesty. O'Casey, in his stage directions, describes the Captain's walk as "a slow, consequential strut." Early in the play, his wife Juno (J. Smith-Cameron), a woman of 45, points out acidly that he has only once been "on the water," in a ship carrying coal between Dublin and Liverpool, a distance of 135 miles.

O'Casey notes in his directions that Juno's face "has assumed that look of the working-class, a look of listless monotony and harassed anxiety, blending with an expression of mechanical resistance." While Juno holds down a job and keeps the family financially afloat, the unemployed Captain spends much of his time in the company of Joxer Daly (John Keating), a sponger obsequious toward whomever he thinks has the price of a drink or a meal.

Mary Boyle (Mary Mallen) is an attractive young woman of 22. She's also employed, but currently on strike, much to her mother's displeasure, as the result of a fellow worker's victimization. When Mary asserts that "a principle's a principle," Juno asks rhetorically what will happen when she tries to obtain more credit from a shopkeeper: "What'll he say when I tell him a principle's a principle?"

Mary's slightly younger brother Johnny (Ed Malone) is a victim of the years of violence in Ireland since the failed 1916 Easter Rebellion against British rule, in which he was wounded in the hip. In the fighting in 1922, he has lost an arm. Johnny is psychologically damaged as well, haunted by his memories, frightened by shadows (perhaps for good reason) and capable of outbursts of rage and self-pity. When he boasts somewhat hollowly that he'd do it all again, repeating Mary's phrase that "a principle's a principle," his mother responds, "You lost your best principle, me boy, when you lost your arm; them's the only sort o' principles that's any good to a workin' man."

The first act, dominated by the Captain's attempts (in the company of Joxer) to avoid his wife's legitimate chastisements, as well as all efforts to obtain him employment, ends on an unexpected and jubilant note. Mary's new boyfriend, Charlie Bentham (James Russell), a self-satisfied, middle class teacher and law student, informs the family that Jack Boyle's cousin has died and left him several thousand pounds, a king's ransom in the currency of the time.

The family members are ecstatic:

Mary: A fortune, father, a fortune!

Johnny: We'll be able to get out o' this place now, an' go somewhere we're not known.

Mrs. Boyle: You won't have to trouble about a job for awhile, Jack.

Boyle (fervently): I'll never doubt the goodness o' God again.

The second act in the Irish Repertory production opens on a brighter, shinier set, dominated by "more plentiful" furniture, "of a vulgar nature" (O'Casey). Asked by Joxer how it feels now to be "a man o' money," the Captain replies pompously (although he hasn't seen any of the legacy yet), "It's a responsibility, Joxer, a great responsibility."

Juno arrives with a gramophone, purchased on credit, and happiness generally reigns, interrupted at first only by Johnny's vision of his dead friend, Robbie Tancred, a Treaty opponent "diehard," killed in a shoot-out with Free State forces. A neighbor, Mrs. Maisie Madigan (Terry Donnelly), arrives, who condescends to take a drop of whiskey ("hard to refuse seein' the suspicious times that's in it"), and the merriment increases. O'Casey here is at his comic flowing best, as Mrs. Madigan reminisces with a fanatical, yet poetic eye to detail and the assembled take turns offering songs.

The festivities are disrupted when the Boyles' neighbor Mrs. Tancred (Fiana Toibin) arrives at the door, in the course of bringing her son Robbie's body to the church. The woman is beside herself with grief: "O Blessed Virgin, where were you when me darlin' son was riddled with bullets … Sacred Heart of the Crucified Jesus, take away our hearts o' stone … an' give us hearts o' flesh!"

Once Mrs. Tancred has left, the Captain responds with petty bourgeois indifference: “We’ve nothin’ to do with these things, one way or t’other. That’s the Government’s business, an’ let them do what we’re payin’ them for doin’.”

The act ends with an IRA man arriving and informing Johnny that he had better show up for a “Battalion Staff” meeting two nights later. The Republicans think the younger Boyle “might be able to know somethin’” about Robbie Tancred’s death. In his desperation, Johnny blurts out, “Good God, haven’t I done enough for Ireland?” The answer? “Boyle, no man can do enough for Ireland!”

In the final act, everything goes to hell for the Boyles in short order. The promised inheritance proves a wash-out, as Bentham has incorrectly drawn up the will. He, in fact, has taken a powder, leaving Mary pregnant and unwed. Creditors come to take back the furniture, the gramophone, even the Captain’s new suit. IRA men drag Johnny off and, we subsequently learn, execute him as a traitor to the cause.

All of these disasters, coming one upon another, prompt Mary to proclaim, “There isn’t a God, there isn’t a God; if there was He wouldn’t let these things happen,” to which Juno replies resignedly, “Ah, what can God do agen [against] the stupidity o’ men!” Mourning for Johnny, she then repeats almost word for word Mrs. Tancred’s earlier lament at the death of her son: “Blessed Virgin, where were you when me darlin’ son was riddled with bullets … Sacred Heart o’ Jesus, take away our hearts o’ stone, and give us hearts o’ flesh!”

Juno and Mary leave, presumably for good. At the play’s grim conclusion, the Captain and Joxer, stinking drunk, are laid out on the floor of a bare, empty apartment.

The current production, directed by Charlotte Moore and designed by James Noone, does justice to O’Casey’s play and its concerns. Each of the performers attacks his or her role with an energy and enthusiasm that never flags, rendering the comic moments comic and the tragic ones unquestionably tragic. Certain moments and performances stand out, but one does not have the sense that any of the actors are after the “tour de force” moment or intent on grabbing the spectator’s attention at the expense of the unfolding drama. It is an ensemble effort, the only kind of theater truly worth watching.

Unlike a good many contemporary troupes when they perform an older work, who all too often substitute their own clever “concept” (“modern” perhaps, but usually not especially enlightening) for the thrust and themes of the original, the Irish Repertory Theatre seems solely concerned to direct us to the circumstances and problems that consumed the playwright.

The production is largely an enjoyable one, a pleasure for the senses, even when the goings-on are terribly painful. It is not a small thing in the current New York theater world for a piece to exhibit an interest in the genuinely human. Between the empty spectacle on Broadway (where the average ticket price this summer was $106 and prices can climb as high as $400 or more) and the self-involved trivia of most low-budget productions further downtown, a serious drama can hardly be said to exist in the city. Of course, the fact that theater in the US goes more or less unsubsidized by public funds makes the situation close to impossible. The wonders of the “free market” have helped produce the present deplorable condition.

It is a tribute to the Irish Repertory that the director and cast members have treated *Juno and the Paycock* so honestly, but O’Casey’s piece burns with a sincerity that would not, one would think, make it attractive to those with ulterior motives. What would be the point of performing this drama, dedicated to examining the condition of a people in the midst of an existential crisis, unless its subject matter and attitude genuinely seized one? It is not the sort of play that could be approached in any fashion whatsoever. It demands a certain emotional and intellectual commitment. A half-hearted, desultory or “conceptual” rendition of *Juno* would probably be unbearable. Either take hold of this work on its own terms, or leave it alone!

This is not to suggest that the play is flawless. Like every dramatic work that wishes to be accepted as a copy of everyday life, especially one that takes place over a short period of time, *Juno and the Paycock* inevitably runs up against the problem of rendering believable an inherently unlikely chain of traumatic events. In “real life,” no family encounters in the course of a few hours the sort of series of disasters that the Boyles undergo. This gives the play at times a melodramatic, contrived character. Its capacity to *thoroughly* convince comes and goes, as it were. At the point perhaps in Act 3 when Juno tells her daughter, “Everythin’s gone wrong, Mary, everythin’,” one almost wants to raise one’s hands and say, “Enough!”

However, this problem—how to organize complex, rapidly changing, even brutal events in a manner that made their staging convincing and moving—was an objective one in the evolution of playwriting and its treatment of social conditions, which posed itself not only to O’Casey, but to Ibsen, Chekhov, Hauptmann, Shaw and many others. Bertolt Brecht, around this time, attempted to overcome the difficulty through his epic theater, which placed emphasis on the truth of the social reality even as it made no pretense of artistic “naturalism.”

In any event, the passionate nature of O’Casey’s opposition to injustice, poverty and cruelty and the vividness of the drama, in the end, carry the day. One would have to have a block of ice instead of a heart not to be moved by the misfortunes of these oppressed and unfortunate people. If the play still carries force, and it does, that points in large measure to the continued existence of the same barbaric social relations 90 years later. Much has changed, but much has not. O’Casey’s play speaks to the reality of our current conditions far more than the overwhelming majority of our current plays or films.

One of the more remarkable features of *Juno and the Paycock*, and one of the principal reasons that it continues to be performed, is its objectivity. The drama is social in its subject matter and implications, to paraphrase Trotsky, and also highly opinionated, but not tendentious.

It is worth noting, first of all, that O’Casey, who was not a pacifist by any means, shows that killings and death, even in the best of causes and from the worthiest of motives, are horrific. Even while we are not inclined to share the helpless resignation of Mrs. Tancred or Juno Boyle, we certainly feel obliged to share their heartrending pain. An artist prepared to reveal the damage and destruction produced by a cause he, at least in the most general sense, believes in, is a figure to be taken seriously.

Probably the least sympathetic figure is the “paycock” himself, and O’Reilly (a co-founder of the Irish Repertory Theatre) doesn’t shy away from the unpleasantness in his performance. O’Casey clearly has an axe to grind against blowhards such as Boyle, self-deluded, puffed up and self-important. And, more specifically, the playwright targets a type of Irish blowhard, full of national-patriotic rubbish, empty poetry (“I ofen looked up at the sky an’ assed meself the question—what is the moon, what is the stars?”) and, when push comes to shove, servility toward his “betters.” Boyle orders his hard-working wife around as if it were the natural order of things and waxes indignant over his daughter’s unhappy condition, for which he blames her books and new ideas (“What did th’ likes of her born in a tenement house, want with readin’?”).

However, one would be hard-pressed to find a “heroic” character in the play. Juno has many admirable qualities, including perseverance and a good heart, but she is also individualistic, fatalistic and dominated by religious backwardness. She feels no sympathy for either Mary’s strike activity or Johnny’s political struggle. Her final appeal to Jesus Christ to “Take away this murdherin’ hate, an’ give us Thine own eternal love!” while sincere, hardly indicates a way out of the family’s, or the nation’s, tragic dilemma, nor does O’Casey, a socialist and an atheist, intend it to.

We feel the most for Mary, who not only faces a bleak present, but as an unmarried mother in Ireland at the time, years of shame and bitterness. As her mother tells the Captain, “What you an’ I’ll have to go through’ll be

nothin' to what poor Mary'll have to go through." But the young woman has been shown to us as rather passive, also fixated on money ("A fortune, father, a fortune!") and status, and her intellectual pursuits have merely brought her into the company of a Bentham, about whom she fooled herself all too easily.

As for Johnny, one almost feels that O'Casey deals with him over-harshly. He is painted as someone who entered the political fray with little sense of the questions at stake, out of an adolescent spirit of revolt, and who now, having been burned badly, has retreated in trauma and shock to near childishness. Superstitious, given to petulant explosions and hysteria, Johnny turns out, frankly, to be a great coward. He too tears into Mary when her pregnancy becomes known and, in one of his final speeches, bursts out, "Not one o' yous, not one o' yous, have any thought for me!"

Just for good measure, O'Casey, perhaps a little extraneously, throws in Jerry Devine, an unsuccessful suitor of Mary's, who, O'Casey writes, "is a type, becoming very common now in the Labour Movement, of a mind knowing enough to make the mass of his associates, who know less, a power, and too little to broaden that power for the benefit of all." We suspect that Devine, who eventually rejects Mary in her desperate hour of need, will end up decades later a well-paid union chief … perhaps even a cabinet minister.

No one escapes O'Casey's critical eye, certainly not Joxer and Mrs. Madigan, who are not ill-intentioned and capable of genuinely good humor, but allow themselves to be inconsequential and weak and dependent on others. They float in and out, flotsam and jetsam-like, with the tide.

The play's antipathy for the Irish Republican Army and the nationalist cause is unmistakable. The IRA men come off as rude, violent and militaristic. O'Casey despised the worship of the gun and considered it something opposed and essentially hostile to the social interests of the working class. Here it is necessary to discuss the writer's biography a little, and the associated historical questions.

According to biographer David Krause, O'Casey was born "proud, Protestant and poor," as John Casey, in 1880. He was the last of thirteen children born to Susan and Michael Casey, "eight of whom had died in infancy, mostly of the croup, a type of diphtheria prevalent among the Dublin poor." (Krause, *Sean O'Casey and His World*, 1976) His father, a commercial clerk, died of a spinal injury when John was six, and the boy himself suffered from a painful chronic eye disease that marred his childhood and prevented him from going to school regularly. However, Michael Casey was a voracious reader, who "used to read, pore and ponder over" (O'Casey, in his memoir, *I Knock at the Door*, 1939) his collection of books, which included the works of Dickens, Scott, George Eliot, Meredith and Thackeray, as well as Shakespeare, Burns, Keats, Milton and Pope.

O'Casey spent his adolescence educating himself, with the help of a sister who was a teacher, and working "at odd jobs as a common labourer with pick and shovel" (Krause). He was drawn into the socialist labor movement led by James Larkin, became a member of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union and wrote articles for Larkin's newspaper, the *Irish Worker*. A high point of the social struggle in this period, and a defining moment for O'Casey, was the Dublin strike and lockout of 1913-14, which pitted 20,000 workers, and, beyond that, the entire working and oppressed population, against 300 employers and the Irish and British ruling elites. At one public rally, Larkin burned a copy of a magistrate's order banning the meeting before a crowd of 10,000. He was later carried off to jail. Police beat and tortured strikers. A state of virtual civil war existed in the Irish capital.

The Dublin workers were attacked by the Irish nationalists, which O'Casey never forgot, and betrayed by the British trade union leaders, despite widespread support in the British working class. Workers were eventually forced back to work, half-starving, in early 1914.

Krause writes, "For Irish nationalists the Easter Rising of 1916 was the crucial event in Irish history; but for the Irish working class, and for O'Casey, Larkin's general strike of 1913 had launched the first blow for the liberation of the Irish people. As he did throughout his life, O'Casey put his socialism before his nationalism, and he turned out for the strike but not for the Rising. … Though he was active in the strike and served directly with Larkin in the union's headquarters at Liberty Hall, and became secretary of Labour's Irish Citizen Army [a workers' militia], the militant wing of the union organized to protect the people from police brutality, he ultimately resigned from the Army in protest against the middle-class nationalists who had been unsympathetic to the strike and were now, he believed, undermining the cause of economic freedom."

In the Easter Rising, or Rebellion, in April 1916, some 1,250 forces belonging to the Irish Volunteers, led by the nationalist Padraic Pearse, the Irish Citizen Army under Connolly (Larkin had departed to the US) and allied supporters staged an uprising against British colonial rule. They faced 16,000 well-equipped British troops and 1,000 armed police. After a heroic struggle lasting a week, the rebels were defeated and many killed or executed, including Pearse and Connolly.

Leon Trotsky, in a piece published in July 1916, provided the most cogent analysis and explanation of the Dublin events: "So far as the purely military operations of the rebels were concerned, the government, as we know, proved to be easily the master of the situation. A nationwide movement such as the nationalist dreamers had hoped for completely failed to occur. The Irish countryside did not rise. The Irish bourgeoisie, together with the upper, more influential stratum of the Irish intelligentsia, held aloof. Those who fought and died were urban workers, along with some revolutionary enthusiasts from the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia. The historical basis for a national revolution has disappeared even in backward Ireland."

Paying tribute to "the heroic defenders of the Dublin barricades," Trotsky concluded, "The experiment of an Irish national rebellion … is over and done with. But the historical role of the Irish proletariat is only beginning."

O'Casey was decisively formed as an artist by the turbulent decade of economic and political conflict in Ireland, and internationally, between 1913 and 1923. He was not a young man by the time he had his first play produced at the Abbey Theatre in April 1923 (after numerous rejections). Due perhaps to a combination of his maturity, his quasi-"outsider" status as a Protestant by birth, his experience with the socialist and labor movement, his wide reading and critical thinking, O'Casey was not swept away by a sentimental fondness for Irish nationalism and Republicanism, much less the "Celtic Revival" and the legend of Kathleen ni Houlihan. At certain points, the playwright even adopted a somewhat "ultra-left" attitude toward the Easter Rebellion itself, which he called " a terrible mistake," suggesting that Connolly had sold out the cause of labor by participating in the rising.

Whatever O'Casey's confusion about the strategy and tactics of the socialist movement in relation to the national question, his clear-eyed view of the Irish nationalists served him well in his Dublin trilogy of plays. His insistent concentration on dramatizing—and making poetically, artistically convincing—the condition of the working class, without idealizing anyone, in the face of Republican demagogy and mythology, helps give these works their continuing radiant power.

In *The Shadow of a Gunman*, set in 1920 during the Irish war of independence against the British, a would-be poet, Donal Davoren, shares a miserable room in a Dublin tenement with a sometime salesman, Seumas Shields. Various residents mistake Donal for an IRA gunman on the run (at times, to highly comical effect), and he does little to contradict the gossip, especially when it wins him the admiration of the pretty and flirtatious Minnie Powell. The charade helps lead to tragedy, however, when Minnie, who proves to be the bravest and most self-sacrificing

character in the play, is arrested and ultimately killed in a street battle. (A remarkable 1995 BBC television version with Kenneth Branagh, Stephen Rea and Bronagh Gallagher, is available on YouTube)

Shields perhaps speaks for O'Casey when he remarks in Act 2, "It's the civilians who suffer; when there's an ambush they don't know where to run. Shot in the back to save the British Empire, an' shot in the breast to save the soul of Ireland. … I believe in the freedom of Ireland, an' that England has no right to be here, but I draw the line when I hear the gunmen blowin' about dyin' for the people, when it's the people that are dyin' for the gunman!"

The third play in the trilogy, *The Plough and the Stars*, first performed in 1926, whose final two acts take place during the Easter Rising of April 1916, is without question O'Casey's greatest creation and deserving of a separate commentary. (The "starry plough" flag was flown by the Irish Citizen Army during the Easter rebellion.) O'Casey's play has few rivals in its honest, intense treatment of the social turbulence of the era. Brecht's *Drums in the Night*, about the German revolution of 1918-19, first performed in 1922, and Isaac Babel's *Maria*, written in the early 1930s, but set in St. Petersburg during the post-Russian Revolutionary civil war, come to mind.

O'Casey's play follows the activities of the residents of a Dublin tenement, and later the customers in a pub, in the midst of the social drama of the doomed uprising. At the center of the piece are Jack Clitheroe, a bricklayer and commandant in the Irish Citizen Army, and his pregnant wife Nora, who is desperate to keep her husband out of the fighting. But a whole cast of working class characters is present: Fluther, a carpenter; "The Young Covey," a fitter and ardent socialist; Nora's uncle, Peter Flynn, a laborer; Mrs. Gogan, a charwoman; Bessie Burgess, a street fruit-vendor; and Rosie Redmond, a prostitute.

The second act in particular, which O'Casey originally wrote as a one-act play, stands out. A host of minor dramas unfold within the framework of the national tragedy, from Rosie's complaints about the lack of business during a mass meeting ("There isn't much notice taken of a pretty petticoat of a night like this … They're all in a holy mood") to the bitter conflicts that erupt between "The Covey" and Fluther, over politics and Rosie's honor, and between Mrs. Gogan and Bessie—the latter castigating the former "As a woman on her own, dhrinkin' with a bevy of men."

All of this takes place while we hear, from time to time, the voice of a public orator, whose words are taken from speeches by the nationalist Pearse, proclaiming his support for World War I ("We rejoice in this terrible war … the last sixteen months have been the most glorious in the history of Europe") and issuing high-flown boasts about Ireland's prowess ("Our foes are strong, but strong as they are, they cannot undo the miracles of God …").

O'Casey's remarkable objectivity is once again on display. Although he clearly sides with "The Covey," who denounces the rally going on as "a lot o' blasted nonsense, comrade" and declares "There's only one war worth havin'; th' war for th' economic emancipation of th' proletariat," he makes no secret of that young man's immaturity and even prudishness.

And, once more, although he presumably does not sympathize with Nora's efforts to exclude Clitheroe from the struggle and her desire for a private life away from all the social conflict, O'Casey puts his heart into her speeches and makes her situation a genuine and tragic one. "There's no woman," Nora asserts, "gives a son or a husband to be killed—if they say it, they're lyin', lyin', against God, Nature, an' against themselves."

The play, with its complex and critical look at the nationalist record and the social issues at stake, caused a scandal. The Abbey Theater performance "was stopped completely in the third act when curses, vegetables, shoes and chairs were hurled at the stage and stench bombs were set off in the theatre." (Krause) W.B. Yeats, the poet and director of the Abbey, went onstage and decried the reaction, but objections continued to appear in the press and elsewhere to the denigration of Pearse and the Republican cause, as well as to the depiction of the rough tenement life and, in particular, the presence of a prostitute on stage.

O'Casey left Ireland in March 1926 for London and lived in England for the rest of his life. (He only returned to Ireland once, in 1935.) The Abbey's official rejection of his semi-expressionist anti-war play, *The Silver Tassie*, in 1928, formalized his break with Irish artistic and intellectual circles, or their break with him.

The Dublin trilogy of plays had an enormous appeal in the 1920s, 1930s and beyond, and rightfully so. Alfred Hitchcock filmed a relatively faithful version—except for certain oddities—of *Juno and the Paycock* in 1929 (also available on YouTube). The brief period of collaboration between O'Casey and Hitchcock, when the latter was still making films in England, sheds some light on the great filmmaker's anti-establishment sentiments.

Critic Bill Krohn, in his *Hitchcock at Work* (2000), observes that the director "was the son of working-class Cockneys of Irish descent who owned a small grocery store in London's East End." Krohn cites the comment of producer John Houseman, who described Hitchcock as a man "marked by a harsh Catholic education and the scars from a social system against which he was in perpetual revolt."

In any event, Hitchcock told François Truffaut (*Hitchcock/Truffaut*, 1967) that he thought *Juno* an "excellent play," but "could see no way of narrating it in a cinematic form." When the critics praised the final film, the director went on, "I had the feeling I was being dishonest, that I had stolen something." Hitchcock and O'Casey began to collaborate on a film in 1933, a story set in Hyde Park, but the director withdrew from the project. O'Casey later turned it into his play, *Within the Gates* (1934).

Another remarkable filmmaker of Irish descent, John Ford, filmed a far less than faithful version of *The Plough and the Stars* in 1936. The film, starring Barbara Stanwyck as Nora Clitheroe and Preston Foster as Jack, is pleasant enough, but it bears little resemblance to O'Casey's work. In fact, it turns that work upside down and celebrates the Irish nationalist leaders. Very little of the political discussion or social texture remains, although there are a few vestiges left of "The Covey's" socialist ideology.

In his *Searching for John Ford* (2001), film historian Joseph McBride refers to *The Plough and the Stars* as a "badly botched … dream project," and that is no doubt the case. Interference from the studio prevented him from importing Abbey Theatre players, although Barry Fitzgerald did make his Hollywood debut as Fluther.

Moreover, in a 1936 letter to O'Casey, Ford explained that he intended to alter the play's themes. According to Adrian Frazier's *Hollywood Irish: John Ford, Abbey Actors and the Irish Revival in Hollywoo* d (2010), Ford's letter asserted that the current Irish government had "carefully achieved an amazing change in the economic and social lives of people." Frazier comments, "in short, the Easter rebellion that O'Casey's play mocked was actually, Ford believed, both great and good, the work of heroes not cowards, and he intended his film to make this point clear. A director who romanticized the IRA was taking on a film [rather, a play] that was a classic anti-romantic debunking of nationalistic revolutionaries." (Thanks to McBride for pointing this out to me.)

As a result of this experience, O'Casey was apparently, and understandably, made "reluctant to approve another film adaptation of his work." (McBride) Several decades later Ford embarked on a project to turn O'Casey's autobiographies into a film. But *Young Cassidy* (1964) too was largely a botched effort. The film romanticizes and simplifies O'Casey's life and experiences, in the process transforming the playwright, who had a lifelong struggle to retain his eyesight, into a swashbuckling artistic adventurer, played by the robust Rod Taylor. Ford became ill part way through shooting and was replaced by Jack Cardiff. Maggie Smith stands out beautifully in the film. The real difficulty with the work is that Ford was either not in a position or unwilling to confront

O’Casey’s left-wing politics in a post-McCarthyite Hollywood.

The three plays from the 1920s proved to be the most interesting work O’Casey ever produced. *The Silver Tassie* (1927) has its moments, but it already leans on “timeless,” expressionist methods and motifs that are not lively or socially insightful. *Within the Gates* (1934), with characters including “The Dreamer,” “The Atheist” and “The Young Woman,” is an artistic and intellectual failure. In Krause’s words, the play “dramatizes the struggle between good and evil for the soul of a sinner, a Young Whore, the everywoman of the parable set in a Hyde Park world that reflects the spiritual and economic depression of the early 1930s.” The play is not convincing, enlightening or amusing, except in brief stretches.

The sources of O’Casey’s decline are complicated and not truly the subject of this review. The playwright’s removal from Dublin and the goings-on and language of that city’s poor and struggling population, whom he had been the first to present seriously on the Irish stage, must have been one difficulty. His dialogue and action never again match the concreteness and energy of the Dublin trilogy. More importantly, and, in fact, bound up with self-imposed exile, was his undoubted discouragement over the course of the social situation in Ireland, the decline of the socialist workers movement and the consolidation of the bourgeois elements, the elements he despised, in power.

The role of Stalinism, as with so many left-wing artists in the 20th century, cannot be left out of account. Although O’Casey never joined the Communist Party in Britain, in his growing pessimism about the possibility of social revolution, he became one of the most fervent “friends of the Soviet Union” and uncritical apologists for the Stalinist regime. Especially disgraceful was his 1938 defense of the Moscow Trials, Stalin’s genocidal assault on the Bolshevik Party and socialist workers and intellectuals, in the pages of the *Daily Worker*. O’Casey paid homage to Moscow as “a flame to light the way of all men towards the people’s ownership of the earth.”

Part and parcel of belonging to the Stalinist orbit was the obligation to blame the populations, and not parties and leaderships (especially the various Communist Parties), for the catastrophic defeats of the 1930s and 1940s. And this obligation had a damaging effect on a host of left writers, Brecht high on the list.

O’Casey’s plays such as *Purple Dust* (1940/1945), *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* (1949) and *The Drums of Father Ned* (1959) are simply negligible. *Red Roses for Me* (1942), concerned with a struggle that resembles the 1913 Dublin strike/lockout, is considered something of a return to form and the drama certainly has its moments. But it is too self-conscious, flowery and elliptical to have a profound effect.

The same can be said about his numerous volumes of autobiography, which suffer from the same overly poetic, elegiac and rather pretentious approach. Brooks Atkinson, the *New York Times* theater critic, and a great admirer of O’Casey, comments that the latter “tells the story of his life in terms of a grand myth, like Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and in some elusive manner, the Old Testament, as if his own life were a footnote to the mythology of mankind, part of the ‘sad, sweet silent music of humanity.’” I would not consider that a recommendation.

In any event, we have O’Casey’s three plays of the Irish revolution and civil war, and as the Irish Repertory Theatre’s production of *Juno and the Paycock* brings home sharply, these works remain living, breathing testimony to the ability of art to convey “the convulsions of our epoch, the most grandiose and the most monstrous, the most significant and the most despotic ever known to human history” (Trotsky). We are grateful they exist.

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