

Sean O'Casey: A Politician who couldn't help being a Writer

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Sean O'Casey

Sean O'Casey was born in Dublin in 1880 in an area that had seen better days. He was a man of immense contradictions, who refused to conform to the image created for him by the literary and political elites. In later life, he experienced rejection, exile, censorship, and a determination not to surrender any part of his literary soul to the small-minded bigots who patrolled the corridors of Irish life. We get a sense of a writer who rose above the naysayers and discredited critics who tried

to pull him down and who managed to create a literature of lasting value.

He was never the 'guttersnipe playwright from the slums' that some of his critics dismissed him as. But he gave a voice to those who are rarely heard; the poor, the dispossessed, and the tenement-dweller, whose lives he shaped into a work of art. He was a socialist, a humanist and a great writer who put politics at the centre of his work. He sent his blasts and benedictions across the world and he asserted the role of the writer as a transformative force in society'. O'Casey was always a fighter, and never suffered from the 'cruelty of low ambition'. He was an angry man capable of great rages long before John Osborne and his generation gave birth to the concept in the 1950s: 'But his anger was based, not on his dislike for mankind, but on his love for it. When he scourges Ireland, it is because he feels it is betraying the ideals he cherishes for the native land he loves so fiercely'¹.

Perhaps this was the reason why Irish critics were always provisional or uncertain in their attitude to Sean O'Casey. Nevertheless, he lived to witness the birth of a new generation of scholars. In the late 1950s what can only be described as an O'Casey industry, based mainly in United States, came into being. Books, journals, and reviews all flowed at a furious rate. Robert Lowery writing in 1976 believed that O'Casey's reputation was 'alive and well'. Dr. David Krause, friend, biographer and editor of O'Casey's *Letters* felt that the publication of the four volumes of letters 'will open up an O'Casey industry

¹Richard Watts Jr., *New York Post*, 7August 1960.

in Ireland and among outside scholars, at least as great as the Joyce industry'².

Sean O'Casey died in 1984. The following year the *O'Casey Annual*, which had replaced the *Sean O'Casey Review* in 1982 ceased publication. Perhaps there was nothing more to say. The O'Casey 'industry' withered - a sickly relative of the Joyce 'industry'. By the end of the 1980s O'Casey's reputation was in decline, the Dublin plays fell-out of the repertoire and the later plays were almost never produced. But O'Casey is too good a writer to be left languishing in the second division for very long. The centenary of the Abbey Theatre in 2004 demanded an appraisal of his work and his place in the Irish theatre. Shivaun O'Casey's documentary film, *Sean O'Casey - Under a Coloured Cap* (2004) showed a softer side of O'Casey, the family man, the artist at work. Christopher Murray's 2004 book *San O'Casey - Writer at Work*³ introduced O'Casey to a new generation of theatre goes and will surely stand as the definitive biography for years to come.

If there were intellectual giants who recognised O'Casey's genius, there were also pygmies who tried to impugn it. This had nothing to do with literary merit or historical accuracy, but rather a dislike of his politics and his critical comments on the role of Catholic Church in Ireland. O'Casey was assailed by the nationalists for his critique of nationalism, and by right-wing commentators for his atheistic communist politics.

We do O'Casey no favours by softening or dismissing his political beliefs; they go to the heart of the man and writer. The emphasis that modern biography places on childhood, married life, and so forth, in most cases displaces, the work, ideas, and social context of the artist or writer.

O'Casey was one of the most political writers of his generation, always exploring the frontiers between literature and politics. Like his mentor George Bernard Shaw he wrote for a purpose, he understood that 'being in the world demands engagement'. His life is also the history of the early twentieth-century, a period in history that was shaped by two great ideas, nationalism and socialism. History and politics are woven into the fabric of his life. His daughter, Shivaun, described him as 'a politician who couldn't help being a writer'.

O'Casey is best known for the three Dublin plays, but he was one of the most prolific writers of the twentieth-century. He left us fourteen full-length plays, nine one-act plays, six volumes of autobiography, songs and poems, short stories, hundreds of critical essays, and many thousands of letters to friends and strangers across the world.

Words as Weapons

The greater the work of art or literature the more political it is. But, literature can only gain importance and political meaning by being literary. Great drama or literature is political because it involves complexity, contradiction, difficulty, and beauty. But we must take heed of Walter Benjamin's warning against 'having a message in readiness', and the danger of being over reductive in linking politics and literature. However, a sympathetic reading of O'Casey's drama illustrates the way in which his concerns with political, social, and moral issues were animated by his own life experiences. James Larkin, the Irish labour leader, had a profound effect on O'Casey. Larkin who came to Dublin in 1907 on his 'divine mission of discontent' inspired O'Casey to use words as weapons

²Desmond Rushe, *The New York Times*, 13 July 1970.

³Christopher Murray, *Sean O'Casey: Writer at Work* (Gill Macmillan, Dublin, 2004).

in the fight against poverty and oppression. The *Irish Worker*, the weekly newspaper of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union aimed to be the 'tribune of the people' and that was the real strength of Larkin as an editor. He was always prepared to open the pages of the paper at great length to a worker like O'Casey, who wanted to tell his story. In many ways O'Casey learned his trade writing for the *Irish Worker*. His articles were sometimes over-long, but we get a glimpse a writer with a command of detail, allied to irony and humour that was sadly lacking in the socialist press of the time. However, it was his experience as a labourer, underfed and exploited that heightened his feelings for socialism. O'Casey himself believed that his participation in the Dublin lockout of 1913 ranked as his finest moment.

War and Revolution

The early decades of the twentieth-century were marked by war and revolution and O'Casey was an active participant in the 1913 lockout, the events leading up to the 1916 Rising, and the War of Independence. His pamphlet, *The Story of the Irish Citizen Army* and his heartfelt broadsheets on the death of his friend Thomas Ashe were not only concerned with the politics and direction of the Irish revolution but were also critical of the conduct of the Allied forces in the Great War. Out of this experience came the Dublin trilogy. He wrote of war and its horrors, of poverty and inequality that deforms human life and is as destructive as war itself.

O'Casey probed the age-old ambivalence of humanity towards war and dramatises society's love affair with violence even as he satirises this often fatal liaison. The World War I poets, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, created a 'myth of war' which O'Casey manages to subvert. The

world at large continues to give currency to his prevailing themes. What O'Casey wrote about war and civil strife in Ireland in the 1920's could be extended to any field of war in the world today. The Dublin plays of Sean O'Casey and especially *Juno and the Paycock* have a universality that goes beyond the Dublin slums of the 1920s. O'Casey in his work went from a specific people or culture to a universal humanity. He wrote out of the experience of slum dwellers who lived on the Abbey's doorstep but who rarely crossed the door of the theatre, and in the process, he spoke to the world of their possibilities.

O'Casey rendered with brutal precision the savagery of war, particularly as it affected the civilian population and in the midst of oppression and rebellion he found nuggets hope and laughter to make the tragedy bearable, and in the process he made an original contribution to the presentation of war in art and literature.

Revisionism

O'Casey's drama is also relevant in Ireland today because it avoids the idea of Ireland as a special historical case whose history and fate is rooted in historical and political inevitability, or rooted in violence and irrationality. The upcoming hundredth anniversary of the Easter rising in 2016 has reopened the debate on the role of the physical force tradition in Irish history that has prompted fractures and disputes among historians and politicians over the last three decades. David Krause, O'Casey's friend and biographer has argued for many years that O'Casey was the first revisionist - presenting the Dublin plays as studies in pacifism that counter the rhetoric and deeds of Irish nationalism. He stands square behind the view expressed by Seamus Shields in *Shadow of a Gunman* that it is innocent civilians

who suffer most in the fighting. However, O'Casey's position is more complex and dialectical than Krause allows; O'Casey criticises both sides though the British forces come in for the largest portion. O'Casey attempted to demythologise the Irish revolution in the light of the political reality that emerged after independence.

The *Plough and the Stars* has been criticised for attacking republicanism and for being unsympathetic to the ideals of the 1916 revolutionaries. O'Casey's point is: that it was the wrong war for the tenement dwellers of Dublin and indeed for the British soldiers on the other side of the barricades, a point that would not be lost on the combatants in the Middle East today. His proposal in *The Plough and the Stars* that they should put aside nationalism and religion and unite in the class war led to riots at the Abbey theatre when it was first produced in 1926. In *Juno and the Paycock* which is set in the midst of Ireland's civil war, Captain Boyle says: 'we've nothing to do with these things one way or the other'⁴. But the Boyle family cannot escape the war. The tension between the desires of ordinary people to live their lives in peace is subverted by the real world of war and strife intruding into the lives.

Even his most left-wing critics often present a one-dimensional view of O'Casey's politics. More often than not, he is presented as having little compassion for those fighting oppression. O'Casey was never a pacifist. He portrayed war and its effects from a variety of standpoints. Ronald Ayling suggests that there is no playwright comparable to Sean O'Casey 'insofar as the complex dramatic interplay of history, warfare and memory is con-

cerned'⁵. O'Casey's portrayal of war was not confined to a exposé of the misery and suffering caused by war, but also, war as a precursor of radical social change.

The reception of O'Casey's Dublin Trilogy internationally has always been problematic. French audiences rejected *The Plough and the Stars* in the late 1940s as they considered it openly derided the integrity of resistance fighters during World War II. On the other hand it gained acceptance in the 1960s during the Algerian War of Independence by that section of French society opposed to imperialism. In 1972 a Finnish production of *The Plough and the Stars* rewrote the ending to indicate the continuity of the struggle in the light of the Provisional IRA campaign in Northern Ireland⁶.

O'Casey is asking us to judge the morality of war and revolution on the basis of the outcome. His criticism of the Irish War of Independence was not a simple pacifism or a denunciation of violence. Rather, it was a more complex analysis, which judged the legitimacy of the sacrifices made on the outcome of the revolution and the class forces involved. The poor suffered the most for the least reward, they sacrificed themselves in a struggle which was waged in their name but not in their interests - in *Juno and the Paycock* the middle-class solicitor squandered the Boyle family inheritance - a metaphor for post-independence Ireland that would not have been lost on the audience in 1925.

Unlike Yeats, who wondered if 'that play of mine sent out certain men the British shot'⁷, O'Casey never had such doubts. He was not a pacifist, but he forces us to look at the question from the point of

⁴Sean O'Casey, 'Juno and the Paycock', *Plays 1* (Faber Faber, London, 1998), p. 54.

⁵Ronald Ayling. *Sean O'Casey's Theatre of War* (Kalamalka Press, Vernon BC, 2004) p. 24.

⁶Sirkklau Aaltonen, "Time Sharing on Stage", *Topics in Translation: 17*, (Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2002).

⁷W.B. Yeats, 'The Man and His Echo', *Collected Poems* (Macmillan, London, 1950), p. 393.

view of those who do the dying and the suffering. O'Casey writes about those caught in the crossfire of civil war, about the millions around the world impoverished as a result of war and invasion. In his plays O'Casey shows us war and revolution, not as it physically was, but made manifest by language, intensified by poetry, song, and movement. Out of war and strife come the possibility of change

Political Theatre

In the absence of debate theatre can become a force involved with history, because it contains within it the idea of a culture, which has not yet come to be in political terms. Theatre can become a political forum as much as a literary or intellectual form. However, documentary drama is no substitute for real drama, it merely substitutes for real journalism. Yeats had always intended that the Abbey should be a forum for public debate, which is the function of a national theatre. At an Abbey Theatre seminar in 2005 Richard Norton-Taylor, the author of the documentary drama *Bloody Sunday*, outlined the role of theatre as a medium for presenting current events, but was reminded by the theatre critic Helen Meaney that 'remembrance is not art', theatre must transform reality into something else - it must have a dramatic content. Political issues should not be confined to verbatim recreations but must also contain dramatic interpretations⁸.

There has been a revival in the confidence and focus of political theatre that was damaged and disorientated by the defeats of the last twenty years. A critique of dramatic texts as a historically and politically contingent enterprise, in the past

confined to the margins of Marxist literary theory, is now accepted as part of the mainstream in both theory and practice. In 1981, Frederic Jameson suggested a political interpretation of literary texts that has currently found acceptance as 'the absolute horizon of all readings and all interpretations'⁹. Today, the politics of literature is everywhere in drama. Writers and audiences have been stirred up at every level at the theatre. The Middle East wars have revitalised the history play. David Hare with *Stuff Happens* and *The Vertical Hour*, Henry Naylor's *Finding Bin Laden*, Tim Robbins *Embedded*, and Alan Rickman and Katherine Viner's *My name is Rachel Corrie*. The revival of plays from the period just before and after World War I is no accident and reminds us that the old wars are our wars, the old issues are our issues, even if they are decked out in hobble skirts and old uniforms. The recent performances of O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, *The Plough and the Stars*, and *The Silver Tassie* are in this tradition.

Left-Wing Critics

In modern times the most trenchant critique of O'Casey has come from Post-Colonial theorists. Both Terry Eagleton and Seamus Deane, amongst others, have criticised O'Casey's work because any progressive outcome appears beyond the powers of humanity. They argue that in O'Casey's drama his socialists' are cardboard cut-out caricatures and his nationalists' self-serving cowards or dreamers. That history in O'Casey's work is just a series of recurring motifs and the spectator can do nothing, except watch passively the action on the stage, which serves to confirm the political action is futile. Dreams

⁸Helen Meaney, "Theatre and Politics" Abbey Theatre Seminar, 15 October 2005.

⁹Frederic Jameson, *The political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act*, (Ithaca, New York, 1981), p. 17.

of progress seem always to be doomed to failure.

The dialectics of O'Casey's drama is complex; deeply held human aspirations for peace, brotherhood, and happiness are subverted by war. But, there is a restlessness that points to the possibilities of a new unity and a far-reaching resistance at the heart of his work. That is why O'Casey, like Brecht, set himself against 'Tragic Theatre' because nothing human can possibly be outside the powers of humanity, and such tragedies have human causes¹⁰. A more sympathetic reading of O'Casey shows his plays are redolent with hope and humanity.

In *Red Roses for Me* he was able to do justice to the humanity of his characters and present them in a more rounded way. He presents the alternative possibilities inherent in Irish history that can be recognised and developed in contemporary conditions. If his early work can be criticised for offering no alternative, here he points to the potential of a better life. O'Casey takes the religious festival and symbolism of Easter and transforms it into an earthy vision of sacrifice and hope for the future. In *Red Roses for Me* he implies that the real Easter sacrifice was not that of the Nationalists in 1916 but that of the working-class in 1913. Jack Mitchell draws attention to the way that O'Casey transforms Yeats' poem *Easter 1916*: 'all changed, changed utterly: a terrible beauty is born' into an interpretation of 1913 as: 'A subtle change and a tentative beauty', whose possibilities are still to be realised¹¹. In his autobiography O'Casey qualifies Yeats' iconic line on the 1916 Rising, 'a terrible beauty is born', by his remark that it was not born in Ireland, but in Russia in 1917.

In *Red Roses for Me*, O'Casey paints a 'vision of a city, of Dublin as it existed in the life of the people in its despair and in its moment of glory, its deep tragedy and the permanence of its heroic endeavour'¹². This is the nearest that O'Casey comes to Bertolt Brecht, whose *Days of the Commune* shares that same festive spirit of a great city coming alive in a new millennium. Both writers paint a picture of a new age of learning and a bright future for mankind. Both plays are based on historical fact and reveal the process of history through the struggle of the masses. *Red Roses* is a portrait of the artist as a young socialist and although Ayamonn is not shown explicitly as a communist, he represents O'Casey's own understanding of the communist ideal that is every much as heroic as the Communards in Brecht's play.

Ayamonn represents the reality and aspirations of a working-class person aspiring to a fuller life for himself and his class. O'Casey sets forth a vision of people changing under the impact of tragic events, where his characters have to confront the reality of capitalist society. Ayamonn is also the personification of the anonymous 'mob' who 'make their own history' and refuse to have their destinies determined by events happening somewhere else. *Red Roses* strikes a more collective note than is usual in O'Casey's work. Typically, his protagonists are heroic figures who reveal rather than overthrow the laws of society and are destroyed in the process.

O'Casey trusts his audience to draw their own conclusions, which is why his work speaks most forcefully and controversially in times of strife and war. His plays are open-ended, frustratingly so, yet

¹⁰Bertolt Brecht, *The MessingKauf Dialogues*, trans. John Willett, (London, 1965), p. 32.

¹¹see footnote 1

¹²Horst Hohne, 'Brecht vs. O'Casey, or O'Casey & Brecht' *O'Casey Annual No. 1* (Macmillan, London, 1984), p. 28.

they invite the audiences sympathy for the victims of war and oppression. *The Silver Tassie*, his darkest play with little humour to soften the tragedy ends with a call to take part in life: 'As long as wars are waged, we shall be vexed by woe; strong legs shall be made useless and bright eyes made dark. But we, who have come through the fire unharmed, must go on living'¹³. Despite Seamus Heaney's warning that 'no lyric ever stopped a tank', O'Casey's drama is revolutionary in that it forces us to confront and examine our relationship with the world.

Tragedy and Comedy

'Tragedy' is not a definition that is unproblematic: 'One who is hearing the events unfolding shudders in terror and feels pity at what happens'. 'Tragedy' is both a descriptive and the theatrical term that conveys an image of events as a mutually destructive process. Terry Eagleton said 'Brecht always placed immense emphasis on the need for an audience to enjoy itself, to respond with sensuousness and humour'¹⁴. O'Casey wanted to his plays 'to be seen through bursts of laughter'¹⁵. He was as conscious as Brecht of the liberating social and political implications of laughter in times of barbarism. O'Casey uses comedy to leaven the tragedy, to make it bearable; and in the process he undermines the dramatic conventions of tragedy. His work has been consistently subjected to an insidious sentimental interpretation where the comic is privileged precisely because it makes nothing happen¹⁶. As

early as 1925 the critic Andrew Malone, protested against productions that emphasised the comedy over the tragedy - he insisted the plays where 'hideous tragedies', and accused the Abbey actors of deliberately playing for laughs. The brilliance of Sarah is Allgood and Barry Fitzgerald - their light touch masked the tragedy and set a trend in O'Casey productions. Garry Hyne's controversial expressionist production of *The Plough and the Stars* at the Abbey Theatre in 1991 on the 75th anniversary of the 1916 Rising was a bold savage presentation. It delivered a shock by reminding us that 'this was always meant to be a shocking play'¹⁷.

Franz Fanon suggested that a colonised person has 'to manage his image, to resist any attempt to position him'. In the 1970s and 80s O'Casey's work was either ignored or reduced to deny the Republican movement the possibility of inserting it into current political discourse. Terry Eagleton in a 1991 review of *The Plough and the Stars* at the Young Vic in London concluded that the play was a failure because its 'knockabout naturalism conspires with the very colonialist standpoint it's author so vehemently rejected'¹⁸. Eagleton, quite correctly, had reviewed the performance, not the play, but in the process he inadvertently colludes with the production in transforming the text into a 'grisly and ironic reversal'¹⁹ of O'Casey's overt intention. Plays are written as 'localised strategies' at particular instants in history, but the audience encounters the play at a particular historical moment and the realisation of the text will be coloured and ex-

¹³ Sean O'Casey, 'The Silver Tassie', *Plays 2* (Faber Faber, London, 1998), p. 262

¹⁴ Terry Eagleton, quoted in David Krause 'The Risen O'Casey' *O'Casey Annual No. 3*, p. 153.

¹⁵ Sean O'Casey, *Letters* (Macmillan, New York, 1975) vol. 1, p. 882.

¹⁶ Bernice Shrank, 'The Politics of O'Casey's War Plays', *Ritual Remembering*, Eds., C. C. Barfoot and Rias van den Doel (Rodopi, Amsterdam - Atlanta, GA, 1995), p. 76.

¹⁷ Fintan O'Toole, *Irish Times*, 22 November 2002.

¹⁸ *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 May 1991.

¹⁹ Jameson, p. 102.

perienced by the shifting interaction between playwright, play, and audience. Performance always takes place in the present; therefore it has a friction with the present - the past becomes alive in the present. In denying the present context of his work practitioners have denied the integrity of O'Casey's attempt to give a voice to the culture and politics of those traditionally excluded in Ireland.

O'Casey devoted his life to a critical assessment of social reality. Theatre, literature was a means to change the world. Like Brecht he was no crude determinist, he incorporated tactical changes to form and content according to historical circumstances.

Conclusion

In today's world radical interpretations of history are under sustained attack. If, as the postmodernists argue, society is 'beyond critique and negative portrayal'²⁰, then political theatre as envisaged by O'Casey, Shaw, Brecht, and its modern practitioners has become almost impossible. Political drama in the postmodern world has been reduced to 'nothing more than an object for nostalgia'²¹. At a time when revisionist historians are rediscovering the virtues of empires and imperialist wars Sean O'Casey is worth revisiting. O'Casey presented war and civil strife in all its complexity, which as much concern for the victims as for the cause. His faith in

the innate courage and endurance of ordinary people would surely find a resonance among the beleaguered people of the world today. I think O'Casey would have liked the fact that his plays could be a force for peace and progress. His work affirms that theatre matters, that it can speak to us as nothing else can.

Always his own man, O'Casey was an active and deeply committed socialist. Though associated and supportive of the Communist Party in Britain during the last thirty years of his life, he was never a member of the party. I think he understood instinctively that his humanism and decency would never have survived the straitjacket of Stalinist dogma. Yet, his defence of Stalin and the Soviet Union in some of his post-war letters and essays appears naive and blinkered from the perspective of the early twenty-first century. His support for a corrupted form of socialism in the Soviet Union partially crippled his ability to set down what a political theatre could do. Despite this, his personal courage and passion survived an age which did not look kindly on his ideas and whose understanding of his political concepts was shallow enough to dilute O'Casey the political agitator into O'Casey the comic genius. In the past his critics have often been too rigorously academic or exclusive in accusing O'Casey of politicising art. Few acknowledge the contribution he made to bringing theatre and politics into a conscious connection.

²⁰Charles Grimes, 'Bernard Shaw's Theory of Political Theatre', *SHAW The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies* 22 (2001), p. 122.

²¹ibid p. 118