FORUM KRITIKA: RADICAL THEATRE AND IRELAND (PART 2)

"A NOTE ON WHAT HAPPENED": EXPERIMENTAL INFLUENCES ON THE IRISH STAGE: 1919-1929

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Abstract
This essay proposes that stage design offers a means of establishing visual links to an aesthetically radical European modernism which was being explored by a post-Revolutionary generation of Irish artists and writers. Existing histories and critical studies of Irish theatre privilege literary approaches and consequently a rich seam of contextual visual material and information has been neglected. Given theatre's important cultural role in shaping questions of national identity, "A Note on What Happened" argues that the study of theatre as spectacle is crucial to an understanding of how contemporary Irish audiences were introduced to avant-garde ideas.

Keywords
Dublin Drama League, Gate Theatre, Irish counterculture, modernist drama, Peacock Theatre, theatre of experiment

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INTRODUCTION

The cultural climate of post-world war I Europe was marked by an intense engagement with the performing arts, particularly theatre and dance. Artists were interested in theatre as a "total" art which could combine visual spectacle, emotional truth, modern design, dance and movement in a laboratory of the senses. In 1924 the Exhibition of New Theatre Techniques in Vienna highlighted the complexity of theatre as a meaningful modern art-form. Displays of the latest innovations in design, lighting, stage construction, choreography and costume demonstrated that in the wake of economic, social and political upheaval, theatre had a renewed urgency for artists as a means of depicting and directing the chaotic condition of contemporary living.

The sense of theatre as a catalyst for cultural change was not new in an Ireland which had seen the Abbey play a pivotal role in shaping emergent national identities. Perhaps because of the recognition of theatre as a cultural barometer within Irish life, there has been a tendency within studies of Irish theatre to sideline the influence of avant-garde/experimental theatre as an agent of social change. Ireland had been in a state of crisis since approximately 1913 (the labour disputes characterized by the disastrous social consequences of the Dublin Lock-Out), and by the early 1920s Irish society had experienced a Rising (1916), a World War (if by proxy) (1914-18), a War of Independence (1919-21) and a Civil War (1922-23). Critical analyses of a radical theatre of experiment within modernism unequivocally relate its emergence to the existential and real-politik crisis of post-war Europe. However, studies of Irish theatre have tended to focus solely on the production of Irish plays, neglecting to address the influence of radical and experimental Modernist theatre within an Irish context. If, by the 1920s, Europe experienced existential displacement, then Ireland experienced both social dislocation and the giddy responsibility of political freedom: theatre was more important than ever as an expression of the possible.

This essay focuses on the brief flowering of a theatre of experiment (for players, designers, playwrights and audiences) from 1919 with the founding of the Dublin Drama League, through the 1920s with the founding of the Peacock and Gate Theatres as experimental spaces, and considers the extent to which European influences on the concept of theatre as "a total art" were influential within the visual aesthetic of an emergent avant-garde theatre.

THE DUBLIN DRAMA LEAGUE AND EUROPEAN CONTEMPORARY DRAMA

The Dublin Drama League's first production in early 1919 clearly stated its aim in its first programme note as being the introduction of European modernist drama to Irish audiences and the promotion "of a vision of … national life other than that of cottage and tenement." The reference to a world beyond the rather proscribed dramatic reflections of "national life" is a direct challenge to the work of the Abbey Theatre, founded in 1904, which by 1918 occupied the position of "official" theatre to the emergent nation state.

In their history of the Dublin Drama League, Brenna Katz Clarke and Harold Ferrar and suggest that the constant "treadmill of peasant plays" on the Abbey stage prompted an interest in continental theatrical experiments in "new psychological exploration" which, in turn, encouraged innovations in staging, lighting, acting and movement to reflect the new forms of writing for the theatre (10). Micheál Mac Liammóir observed that the success of

the Drama League productions proved that there was an appetite for contemporary edgy theatre in Dublin which was "neither the introspective Abbey comedy of country manners nor ... the soufflé of the last London season ... reheated and dished up by English touring companies" (*Theatre* 19). He was not alone in his criticism: *The Dublin Magazine* lamented the lack of imagination on the part of the Abbey for its choice of productions: "were it not for the Dublin Drama League the playgoers of Dublin would not have the opportunity of seeing anything but revue and musical comedy." The writer continues: "[the Abbey's] tradition seems to bind it to the production of very bad plays by Irishmen, instead of very good plays by the dramatists of the world" (Malone).

W.B. Yeats's position in relation to the Drama League is a complex one: on the one hand, his 1919 essay "A People's Theatre: An Open Letter to Lady Gregory" upholds the importance of Irish realism on the Abbey stage, despite his own reservations about its dominance, and the role of the Abbey in producing realistic plays which spoke to a particular nationalist constituency. On the other hand, as Yeats watched "the very naturalism he despised entrench itself as the celebrated Abbey style, [he] began to move toward exaggerated stylization and intensified symbolic gesture" in his own work (Ferrar 11). Yeats found himself in the peculiar position of running a theatre which could not (under its remit) stage his own experimental Noh plays.

As Lionel Pilkington has argued, Yeats's support for realism on the Abbey stage at the same time as his "advocacy of an alternative and elite poetic theatre" is less an inconsistency as it is a realization on Yeats's behalf that "the realism of the Abbey Theatre was vital to an agenda of modernization and state preparation" and must be promoted. Hence, suggests Pilkington, Yeats's recognition of the desirability of staging international and experimental dramas for Irish audiences, yet his refusal to put them on the Abbey stage, must be understood in the context of his promotion of the national role of the Abbey theatre (88). A solution was already underway; in late 1918 a meeting had been called with Yeats, Lennox Robinson, Ernest Boyd and James Stephens to establish a subscription-based theatre group which would use the resources of the Abbey on "dark" nights but which would be independent of the National Theatre (Saddlemyer 354).[1] One of the objectives was to give actors, audiences and playwrights an opportunity to experience the so-called "unpopular" European plays which were outside the Abbey's charter and which were unlikely to be seen in Dublin (Saddlemyer 354). The Abbey could make no commitment of its own to a project devoted to non-Irish work and avant-garde to boot, but it did what it could. It made available its stage and company to the part-time Drama League who performed on Sunday and Monday nights.

The inaugural Dublin Drama League production on the 9th February, 1919 was a translation of a contemporary Serbian play *The Liberator* which had been banned by a Hungarian government offended by its promotion of compromise between Serbs and Bulgars.[2] The author, Srgjan Tucic, a Croat and previously the Director of the National Theatre in Sofia, wrote the play in the aftermath of the First Balkan War in 1912.

Against the backdrop of Irish national politics, the choice of Tucic's play demonstrates a measure of intentionality within the League to stage dramas which would resonate with Irish audiences. The 1918 general election had overwhelmingly indicated a public appetite for an independent Ireland, demonstrated by the landslide election of Sinn Féin, and in early 1919 the meeting of the first Irish Parliament (the First Dáil) reaffirmed the Declaration of Independence originally iterated on the steps of the General Post Office in 1916. On the same day as the First Dáil was convened, 21 January 1919, two Royal Irish Constabulary policemen were murdered in Tipperary and these two events are generally understood as marking the beginning of what has become known as the War of Independence (see Hopkinson). The Drama League's staging of *The Liberator*, a play about national territories, rivalries, disagreements and war, could not have had a more fitting national context in which to be seen.

Produced (and directed) by Lennox Robinson, the cast list features the names of many actors already familiar to regular Abbey audiences. There was to be a steady traffic of theatre practitioners moving between the Abbey and the Drama League. Ann Saddlemyer notes how League members "were encouraged to participate as actors, translators, producer/directors and designers" (355). Indeed the League was a truly ensemble company of artists, with actors Barry Fitzgerald and Arthur Shields, regularly directing; artists/designers Dorothy Travers Smith, Beatrice Elvery, Norah McGuinness and Harry Kernoff designing for the stage; and director/writers Denis Johnston and Lennox Robinson appearing on the stage. The artist and illustrator Harry Clarke designed two out of three of the League's regular programmes with George Atkinson (RHA) designing the other. Robinson was a key figure in the League, as one of its founder members and a regular producer/director; but the League also enabled Robinson's interest and talent in acting. Although he was never on the Abbey stage as an actor, Robinson appeared in ten plays for the Drama League under the stage name Paul Ruttledge, including the lead role in Pirandello's *Henry IV.* For other actors, especially Abbey stars such as F.J. McCormick, Arthur Shields and his brother Barry Fitzgerald, the League offered the opportunity to play key roles in modern classics. Arthur Shields, stage actor and sometime director, had a particular interest in avant-garde experimentalism, especially German expressionism

(possibly because of his German mother), and promoted expressionist acting styles on the Irish stage.

During its first ten years, Drama League audiences saw performances of Russian, German, Spanish, American and Italian contemporary drama as well as works by Yeats and G.B. Shaw. The list of playwrights produced by the Drama League is a *Who's Who?* of world dramatists. Dublin audiences saw Chekhov, Pirandello, Strindberg, Andreyev, Susan Glaspell, Jacinto Benavente, Eugene O'Neill, Henri Lenormand, Ernst Toller, Franz Molnar, Gregoria Martinez Sierra and new translations of Euripides. Ferrar estimates that between 1919 and 1929 the League "produced sixty-six plays written originally in eleven languages by thirty-six authors from fifteen countries, using nearly twenty directors and over half-a-dozen designers" (Clarke and Ferrar 14).

The League was an important part of the literary and visual education of at least two significant Irish playwrights: Denis Johnston and Sean O'Casey both acknowledged its influence on them as writers. Johnston recorded that the League did remarkable work in "introducing to Dublin all the avant-garde plays of the time … [the League] taught us and showed us Strindberg, Pirandello, Benavente, Schnitzler—people whose plays we would never have seen—and maybe not even have read" (qtd. in O'Neill). Lennox Robinson recalls that the Drama League's productions "eventually became very important theatre functions, every seat in the theatre was occupied ... and many of the plays passed into the Abbey repertoire" (121).

THE DRAMA LEAGUE, THE PEACOCK AND THE GATE

By 1926 the Drama League had consolidated an audience with an appetite for contemporary drama in Dublin. The staging of European plays was no longer a "fringe" activity in a city which had a bourgeoning bohemian "scene" in the performing and the visual arts. It was evident that there was a need for a dedicated performing space for experimental art forms.

Yeats and Lennox Robinson had already been thinking about the possibility of opening a separate theatrical space to the Abbey with a remit for new and experimental drama. The founding of the Peacock can be seen as part of the Little Theatre movement which saw small, locally based, independent theatres spring up in the United States and Britain during the 1920s.[3] Early in 1927, Yeats and Robinson identified a small studio space upstairs in the Abbey building which had previously been a library and meeting place. Michael Scott, the architect and sometime Drama League actor, adapted the space

to Yeats's specifications. A café area was converted into a rehearsal room, and above that were some small dressing rooms and a tiny rehearsal space. Liam Miller describes the stage as "a platform at the end of a long Georgian room some twenty feet wide, separated from the auditorium by two steps the full width of the stage." There were 102 seats, and the seats, décor and even the front of the building facing Abbey Street were painted that most bohemian of 1920s colours, peacock blue, giving the new theatre its apposite name: The Peacock. Micheál Mac Liammóir's memoirs recall the "peacock-coloured tip-up seats" as well as the tiny stage (*Theatre* 25-26). The Peacock's spatial limitations made improvisations in staging, lighting and design essential and the theatre's reputation for experimentalism had as much to do with design innovation proscribed by the size of the stage as with the choice of plays. Floor plans reveal the limits to the performing space and the absence of side stage or wings. Hilton Edwards recalls that:

> the stage, which was only eighteen inches above the floor-level of the front row of seats, was backed by a blank wall sixteen feet from the line of the proscenium, behind which there was no wing or parting, so that when the curtain was up and the wall exposed, the only means of getting from one side of the stage to the other was in view of the audience. Upon the actor's left was another blank wall only eighteen inches beyond the proscenium opening, so that there was barely room for a person to remain concealed for an entrance, and this could only be done if the character awaiting entrance occupied the position before the rise of the curtain or had exited upon that side during the scene. These very limitations often proved an advantage in deciding automatically many of those points over which a producer with unlimited facilities is inclined to vacillate.[4]

The limits of the Peacock stage did not however appear to blunt the ambition of theatre practitioners who seized the opportunity of working in a space dedicated to experimental drama. The Peacock inaugurated its first season with a production of the German Expressionist playwright Georg Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight*, directed by Denis Johnston for the New Players in November 1927.[5] It was a bold choice in which Yeats's and Robinson's support was crucial; after all the Peacock officially functioned under the umbrella of the Abbey, and German expressionist plays were a long way from the peasant realism appearing on the main stage downstairs.

Johnston, an active member of the Drama League since 1924, was also a playwright, and was interested in expressionism as an anti-realist dramatic form, but he was especially drawn to the social and existential concerns of expressionism. Johnston had seen *From Morn to Midnight* at the London Gate theatre the previous year and described the experience as opening his eyes to the potential of theatre as an expressive medium (Adams 77). Johnston's decision to stage Kaiser's play was sealed by his observations on the growing disillusion within a newly independent Ireland struggling with issues of autonomy and self-definition. *From Morn to Midnight* centres on the experience of a bank clerk who embezzles money as a means of seeking spiritual meaning through consumption but who is failed by the petty cruelties of social hierarchies.

Fig 1: Norah McGuinness, Design for Georg Kaiser's
From Morn to Midnight, directed by Denis Johnston, Peacock Theatre, 1927.

Norah McGuinness's set (Fig. 1) exteriorizes the psychological interiority of the play and its design draws attention to the differing spatial arrangements that the "new" writing for theatre demands. The kinetic emphasis on psychological states of mind within the expressionist dramatic idiom is captured in McGuinness's use of the colour palette of early modernism and the discordant, dissonant angles of the stage set. Expressionism visually and psychologically disperses the subject (both actor and audience) necessitating a spatial design which enables the audience to enter through multiple viewpoints rather than the singular optimum viewpoint of conventional stage design. McGuinness's fractured, cubist, multi-dimensional stage setting is dominated by vertical lines and by dispensing with axial space it privileges the symbolic over the authentic or "real." The carefully constructed artifice of the design is highlighted by the scale proportions of the doors and the inclusion of a painted curtain. McGuinness's graphic use of red in her design for the teller's window draws attention to the politics of Kaiser's play. Within modernist graphic design the colour red signals a hierarchy of information suggesting that in McGuinness's design the teller's window may symbolize the apparently permeable boundaries of social class, privilege and

wealth. Given the visual resonances with Vladimir Tatlin's 1920 iconic Monument for the Third International, it is unlikely that McGuinness's use of red, the colour of bolshevism and communism in Constructivist graphic design, is only utilized here as an aesthetic choice. The anti-establishment message of the play suggests that McGuinness was aware of the significance of red as a political symbol.[6]

Whether or not McGuinness's design was fully realized on the Peacock stage is not recorded but the production was cautiously praised by the *Irish Statesman* which stated that although "a little expressionism goes a long way" the production was "adventurous and successful" (Curran). The study of stage designs (either through drawings or photographs) offers the theatre historian more than an illustration of the play as text. Importantly, it presents an opportunity to unpack spatial relationships between actor and set, and the specific choices and visual context of performance. It is offers an aperture onto the conditions under which it was performed, and therefore, potentially, comes closer to reconstructing the experience of the actors and the audience in more complex ways than those made available by a conventional theatre review.

McGuinness's fractured, multi-dimensional staging both reflects and articulates expressionism as a new form of dramatic writing. Although expressionism was late in arriving on the Dublin stage, certainly compared to its European neighbours, *From Morn to Midnight* was not the first expressionist play to be staged in the city. Arthur Shields had directed and acted in Ernst Toller's *Masses and Man* in 1925 for the Drama League.[7] However it was Denis Johnston's own flirtation with expressionist dramatic form in his 1928 play *The Old Lady Says No!* that established him as the most interesting of the younger Irish playwrights and consolidated the reputation of the newly founded Gate Theatre.

The work of the Drama League in establishing audiences for contemporary drama effectively laid the groundwork for the foundation of the Gate Theatre.[8] Initially called The Gate Theatre Studio, named in homage to Peter Godfrey's Gate Theatre in London and perhaps signalling its intention to be equally daring and experimental, the Gate Theatre Studio produced its first play at the Peacock Theatre in October 1928. The founding of the Gate Theatre Studio effectively marked the end of the Drama League. As Lennox Robinson notes, "the League, not being a money-making concern, gladly stepped aside to make room for the Edwards-Mac Liammóir company" (121).

The first production of the Gate Theatre Studio at the Peacock marked the ambition of the new company in its choice of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. However it was Johnston who gave the Gate an Irish play which Mac Liammóir described as having "a style that is at once analytic and formal rather than imitative" and which contained "the discovery of

the qualities we seek" (*Theatre* 26-27). Hilton Edwards described the play as "perhaps the most remarkable play we have ever presented." Originally called *Shadowdance,* Johnston's play is a strange piece of work, dreamy and wordy and has been described as "a sardonic reappraisal of Irish nationalism in both its literary and historical manifestations" (Adams 87). Certainly its form was like nothing ever before submitted to the rather alarmed Abbey Board (apocryphally, the play earned its new name in 1928 from Lady Gregory's refusal to have it staged).

In "A Note On What Happened," Johnston reflects on the first Gate production in 1929, categorically stating that "*The Old Lady Says No!* is not an expressionist play and ought never to have been mistaken for one" (83). Nevertheless, the influence of expressionism can be traced in the play's dramatic form, and it is certainly marked by the characteristics of the avant-garde. It occupies a position in the Irish canon at the experimental edge of modernity articulating that double impulse of modernism to both destroy and invent (Calinescu 275). The play lacks standard characters or narrative structure; and is multi-scenic, swift paced and unbound by time or location. It is indebted to the framing conventions of Strindberg, Kaufmann, Connelly and Pirandello (as well as to the pioneering work of Kaiser and Toller) in its juggling of theatrical illusion and the audience's understanding of reality. It is funny, irreverent, strange and wholly theatrical. While it shares with expressionism the "depiction of urban existence and the surrealist portrayal of the bourgeoisie," Johnston recognized that the play's satirical humour set it apart from what has been described as the quasi-religious tendency to "inflated self-pretension" which is too often a characteristic of expressionist drama (Innes 8-9). Toller and Kaiser, observed Johnston, failed to win mass audiences "by a complete absence of humour and [a] Frankenstein complex that seems to have dominated the stage of Central Europe ever since the War" ("A Note" 83).

However, despite an occasional dearth of laughs, avant-garde drama *is* marked by the carnivalesque and *The Old Lady Says No!* dispenses with formal conventions in staging, lighting, writing, acting and movement. The play opens with Robert Emmet (the patriotic leader of the doomed rebellion of 1803) serenading his lover Sarah Curran with a pastiche of romantic and sentimentalized patriotic ballads. The playwright then effectively stages a *coup de théâtre:* Emmet is arrested by redcoats, the actor suffers a bang to the head and the play stops as he lies unconscious on the stage. A doctor is called (a stooge in the audience) and the rest of the play carries on with Emmet wandering in a concussed state through contemporary "newly liberated" Ireland experiencing the banalities and affectations on offer. Full of references to contemporary Dublin (and complete with easily recognizable

caricatures such as O'Casey and Yeats) it is not so much a romp as a rampage through language, sacred cows and conventional dramatic structure. Hilton Edwards, the play's director, described it as "full of biting satire, both political and historical, [and] the first example of an expressionistic comedy … symphonic in form, opening in the setting of conventional Romanticism and continuing in a negative area of curtained darkness picked out with a light never seen on sea or land." The text of the play is a collage of styles, dialects, prose and poetry drawn from street language, Irish political discourse, and with references to the Irish writers, the Bible and world literature.

Unfortunately, the satirical arrows aimed precisely towards local political and social pretensions confined the play's appeal to Irish audiences. Although in some instances the characters are archetypal, Johnston acknowledged that while "the Romantic temperament seeking for an environment in which to express himself" is universal, it was only in "the Free State" that audiences might expect to fully apprehend the play's allusions to the lost ideals of Pearse, Grattan or Parnell ("A Note" 84). *The Old Lady Says No!* has not enjoyed a great number of international (or even Irish) stagings and so, as Johnston himself observed, the inaugural scenographic design of the 1929 production (which was revived without changes in the Gate during the 1930s) "has become as much an integral part of the play as is the text" ("Opus" 21).

Production photographs reveal an aesthetic influenced both by contemporary dance and contemporary cinema. Johnston recognized the anxiety amongst theatre practitioners that cinema represented a threat to the popularity of theatre-going as a pastime. However, writing as E.W. Tocher (also his stage name), Johnston argued that cinema's great gift to theatre was that it liberated the stage and the playwright from the constraints of realism. "If the Irish theatre is to get out of the blind alley in which it finds itself today," he wrote in 1932, "it must be prepared to make a brave leap in the dark ... Everywhere there is the same decay of invention and dearth of material. It is only in those countries where the problem has been tackled experimentally that the Theatre has managed to hold its own with the Cinema." The future of theatre, he suggests, is to be found in the full embrace of experimentalism by drawing attention to its own artifice: namely theatricality. "To my mind" he continues, "we seem to have forgotten the fundamentals, thanks to a long period of picture stages and the reign of a set of artificial conventions misnamed Realism" (Johnston, "A National").

Production photographs and set drawings reveal the extent to which *The Old Lady Says No!* eschewed realistic staging. The use of the painted backdrop, seen here as a drawing (Fig. 2) and as a production photograph (Fig. 3), was both an innovative solution

Fig 2: Micheál Mac Liammóir,
Backcloth design for *The Old Lady Says No*, Gate Theatre Studio at the Peacock, 1929

Fig 3: Production photograph, *The Old Lady Says No!*
Gate Theatre (1933 revival) showing Mac Liammóir backdrop

to staging a play with numerous scene changes and a way of drawing attention to theatrical artifice. Not unlike the dissonant angles of McGuinness's set for *From Morn to Midnight*, the use of an insubstantial scenic backcloth highlights the spatial temporality of the production.

The ephemeral quality of theatre is that which distinguishes it from the cinematic experience. Theatrical space demands an audience and recognition from both the actor and the audience that they are engaged in a collective temporal and spatial relationship to each other: both for a brief time occupying the same psychological, emotional and physical space. Early cinema borrowed from the conventions of theatre before it began to construct a cinematic language of its own. The pioneers of German expressionist cinema, Robert Wiene (*The Cabinet of Dr* Caligari, 1920), F.W. Murneau (*Nosferatu*, 1922) and Fritz Lang (*Metropolis*, 1927) all shared backgrounds in theatre, and their films are marked by a transposition of theatrical artifice into new forms of cinematic visual narrative. Certainly the cinematic conventions devised by the German expressionists are tied to theatrical conventions. For example, the aesthetic of theatre is very evident in *Dr Caligari* with its symbolically charged interiors of painted abstract scenery and graphic backcloths which, as in *The Old Lady Says No!*, are suggestive of a psychological rather than a geographic space. The aesthetic of German Expressionism was a tremendously exciting form during the 1920s for those who

understood it: dramatic, edgy, consciously artificial, technically brilliant, with a real interest in the technology of lighting and camera design. Johnston and Edwards shared an interest in the dramatic aesthetic of cinema, particularly lighting, and the influence of German cinema is evident in Edwards' lighting design for *The Old Lady Says No!* As the play's action shifts location from garden to street to salon to slum there are similar shifts in lighting. Mac Liammóir recalls how the lighting design incorporated the movement from "shadow ... through broad daylight, night, the artificial light of the salon, the candle-lit tenement and back to shadow again" (*All for Hecuba* 21).

Fig 4: Mac Liammóir as "The Speaker"
The Old Lady Says No! (Gate Theatre revival of 1929 production), 1933

In Fig 4 The Speaker (Mac Liammóir) is addressed by a statue of Grattan—leading figure of the Irish parliament dissolved by the Act of Union (1800)—(in shadow) and the Old Lady (Ireland). The diffused lighting heightens the delusional, hallucinatory nature of Emmet's wanderings through contemporary Ireland, creating uncertainty through shadow, reflection and half-light. The use of dissolved lighting such as spotlights, side lighting (often diffused through gauze to create a misty hazy light), and the creation of shadows replaced the harsh lighting effects of overheads and footlights. Lighting technology (and the relatively recent introduction of electric light) enabled Edwards to create a cinematic atmosphere of strange characters, artificial settings, narrative ambiguity and psychological crisis.

Edwards's interest in stagecraft and lighting was complemented by his interest in movement and music. Johnston reminds us of the size of the Peacock stage ("roughly sixteen feet by twelve feet") and the size of the cast (twenty) and attests to Edwards's skill as a director in managing "mass movements of crowds that have to be carried out in a manner not dissimilar to a ballet" (Johnston, "A Note" 85). The Peacock Theatre was no stranger to dance, as Ninette de Valois's Abbey School of Ballet had been housed there since

Fig 5: Production Still: *The Old Lady Says No*,
(Gate Theatre, revival of 1929 production), 1933

1927. The name of the School was misleading: De Valois had trained with the Ballet Russes and "with Cecchetti, Nijinska, Balanchine and Massine," and was influenced by the whole movement of modern dance.[9] The idea of dance as a flow of different states of vitality, of states of being, (as exemplified in the work of Rudolf Laban) is illustrated by the rhythmic movement of the Chorus in Fig 5. Both Edwards and Mac Liammóir were familiar with the work of the stage designer Adolphe Appia who, in concert with Laban, had popularized the concept of "rhythmic spaces" in which architectural shapes were combined with light effects to convey different emotional states and whose use of multi-level platforms, steps and columns allowed for choreographed movements of choral dance (Innes 48).

In an insightful 1936 piece, Curtis Canfield argues that the structure of Johnston's play of "purposeful chaos" is "based on the principles of musical composition rather than on the rules of conventional dramaturgy" and "as such it demands a new set of critical standards enlarged by the presence in the plays of ... several contributory art-forms" (26).

By early 1930, the Gate Studio Theatre finished its relationship with the Peacock, and moved to its present location at the Rotunda to become The Gate Theatre. During some of the most turbulent years of the emergence and foundation of the State, the Dublin Drama League, the Peacock Theatre and the Gate were determined to introduce and promote experimental voices as part of their education as artists and performers, but also as a bulwark against conservatism and increasing cultural isolationism. It is as if the Drama League, the Peacock and the Gate Studio functioned as the unconscious to the Abbey main stage by performing in liminal spaces to conventional theatre buildings: dark nights, back gardens, and domestic spaces. Whether or not the Peacock, the attic to the Abbey, hosted successfully resolved experimental and avant-garde productions is less important than the fact of their presence at all. There is much more work to be done on the emergence, performance and display of avant-garde ideas in the early years of the State. To what

extent do counter-histories puncture received histories of Irish social and cultural life in the 1920s? How does the under-researched history of experimental dance and music inform our understanding of Irish theatre (especially the unwritten history of the Peacock)? Where else do traces of 1920s Irish counter-culture reside? As the State anticipates the centenary of 1916 (and the promotion of a seamless historical narrative of national continuity is already underway) there is an urgency to excavate the existence of counter-histories which offer us, as historians and as citizens, the possibilities of alternative narratives of radicalism.

NOTES

1 George Yeats became involved in the running of the League, becoming honorary general secretary in 1923 and, as Ann Saddlemyer notes, it was Lennox Robinson's and George's enthusiasm and commitment that "tended to hold the project together" over the first decade (355).

2 The play, long since lost to the repertoire, was an unusual choice. The programme note contextualizes the setting around events following the first Balkan War in 1912. "On September 30th 1912 Bulgaria, Serbia Greece and Montenegro allied themselves in a war on Turkey – the first Balkan War. This was ended by the Treaty of London on May 30th 1913, by which Turkey ceded to the allies a considerable extent of territory. Disagreements at once broke out between the allies as to the division of the ceded territory, and on June 29th 1913, Bulgaria declared war on Serbia – the second Balkan War. Greece, Roumania and Montenegro joined Serbia, and Bulgaria was quickly beaten and peace was signed on August 10th 1913 (Dublin Drama League, *Programme Notes*).

3 The growth of Little Theatres in Britain was partly because they were allowed to operate as theatre clubs and therefore fell outside the censoring remit of the Lord Chamberlain. The Little Theatre Movement as a growth in amateur and experimental theatre groups dates from the formation of The Little Theatre in Chicago in 1912. The rapid spread of the movement is attributed to the growth in cinema as a mass spectacle and the "little" refers not only to the ambition of the players (small houses, amateur actors) but also to the experimental and interior focus of the plays staged (see Chansky). In Ireland there was a thriving amateur theatre movement, facilitated by spaces like the Peacock, that hosted productions by the Dublin Jewish Dramatic Society and the Lantern Theatre, from the 1920s to the 1960s. Irish regional and community theatre has its roots in the Little Theatre movement evidenced by the names of still thriving drama organizations such as Gorey Little Theatre, Carlow Little Theatre and Athlone Little Theatre.

4 The reason for Mac Liammóir's and Edward's familiarity with the Peacock stage was that, of course, the Gate Theatre Company occupied the Peacock for two years (1928-1930) before moving to its present premises at the Rotunda.

5 The New Players (also known as "the Dramick") was a 1925 offshoot of the Dublin Drama League for players who had a specific interest in radically avant-garde plays.

6 I am grateful to my colleagues Lisa Godson and Martin McCabe for their insights on the influence of Constructivist graphic design on McGuinness.

7 Ernst Toller had connections to Ireland through his friendships with Yeats and Johnston (see Fischer 192-206).

8 Madame Bannard Cogley, the founder and hostess of a weekly cabaret club in Harcourt Street, and the actor Gearóid Ó Lochlainn had been talking about establishing a theatre company when they

were introduced by A.J. Leventhal to Mac Liammóir and Edwards in early 1928. Mac Liammóir and Edwards had been appointed directors of the Taibhdheardhc Theatre in Galway but were looking for a theatre in Dublin.

9 Victoria O'Brien notes that although it was called the Abbey School of Ballet contemporary production, photographs suggest a broader contemporary remit (71).

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