THE IRISH PLAYERS IN AMERICA: THEIR PURPOSE AND THEIR ART: BY ANN WATKINS

FEW weeks ago there came to a New York theater the famous little company of Irish Players from the Abbey Theater in Dublin, here on their first visit to America. They had played in Boston and in Washington with marked success, but the attitude toward them of the average New York theater-goer and also of several of the dramatic critics, was at once amusing and mortifying in its utter lack of comprehension. Fortunately there were enough people who were able to appreciate their rare and delicate art and the wonderful truth and subtlety of the little Irish sketches they put on, to give them fairly good houses at each performance, but taken in the large sense they proved to be caviar to the multitude.

To audiences accustomed to the glittering elaboration of the conventional Broadway production, it meant a radical change of viewpoint to appreciate the simplicity of the stage settings, which were confined to the fewest of absolutely necessary accessories. The thing apparently that hurt the feelings of the hand-fed critics who obediently chronicle the showy triumphs of the syndicate productions was the lack of what one of them termed “clean-cut histrionic methods.” As a matter of fact, the very cornerstone of the singular and compelling charm of these artisan players is that they have no histrionic method whatsoever. They have temperament that is like a flame, sincerity that halts at nothing in the portrayal of conditions and characteristics that to them are a part of their own life, and magnetism that fairly hypnotizes any audience sufficiently receptive and sympathetic to respond to it. They speak with rich, soft inflections that reveal new possibilities of beauty in spoken language and that is as different from the conventional stage imitation of the Irish brogue as music is from discord, and in strong or tragic situations their power sweeps out like a tidal wave. But the critics speak truth in one sense; they make absolutely no effort to obtain effects either by studied gestures or tricks of elocution, so their methods can hardly be termed histrionic.

The plays they put on were those of the new school of Irish writers whose work represents such an important phase of the Nationalist movement in Ireland,—William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, J. M. Synge, T. C. Murray and others. Most of them were vivid little sketches of Irish life, thrilling with its age-long sorrow and inextinguishable mirth; some founded on the old heroic traditions of this fiery and fascinating Celtic race, and others upon the little everyday happenings which reveal the infinite complexity of the
THE IRISH PLAYERS IN AMERICA

Irish temperament. They did not act these in the ordinary sense of the word; they lived them so keenly that even an American audience felt, if it could not quite understand, the glow and quiver of that throbbing life. Only once did they miss fire, and that was when they attempted a Bernard Shaw play which was as foreign to them as the subject of the play was to the experience and genius of Shaw himself. In this play alone—an extravagant drama of life among Western American cowboys,—the players were as ill at ease as American actors would have been in attempting to portray the characters by Lady Gregory or Mr. Synge. But in their own plays they fully bore out the contention of a noted English critic that this unpretentious group of Irish actors has succeeded in attaining to a degree of dramatic art such as has not been seen since the palmy days of the Comédie Française.

TO UNDERSTAND the spirit and meaning of the work of both playwrights and players, we must go back about twenty years, to the beginning of the new epoch in Ireland. We have always known in a casual way of the struggle of the Irish to preserve their nationality. We have heard echoes from the other side of the unending fight for home rule: of rebellions and uprisings and of the passionate clinging to all things that are truly of the soil. And we have had ample evidence in this country of the energy and resourcefulness of the transplanted Irishman, especially in politics. But few of us have known of the wealth of Irish literature, music and art that has lain buried for centuries in ancient manuscripts, or has been handed down by oral tradition among the folk in remote country places. We know that, six centuries ago, the relentless suppression by the Statute of Kilkenny of all evidences of Irish nationality drove the Irish language and the old heroic traditions alike into hiding, but few outside of the stricken island realized that they were cherished all the more sacredly because of the passionate resistance to the power of the conquerors, and that in many places the people still held to the old beliefs of nature worship and still thought in the ancient Gaelic tongue.

The rich and vivid language that sprang from this welding together for centuries of the natural Irish thought and the enforced English speech, and the treasures of folk-lore to be found in every peasant’s cabin, offered a field for the reaping to such men as William Butler Yeats, Edward Martyn, Dr. Douglas Hyde, George Moore and the others of that famous group who set on foot in eighteen hundred and ninety-four a movement to restore and preserve the ancient Gaelic tongue and also to create a modern Irish literature.
that should show forth the inner national life of the people. For some time this movement to recover and reëstablish the literary identity of a nation was confined to the efforts of the Irish Literary Society to get the Gaelic tongue accepted and taught in the schools; to publish books and poems in the ancient language and to translate into English the old legends and traditions of Ireland. But there was another phase, made inevitable by the literary rebirth, and that was the dramatic representation, first of the romantic and heroic events of history, then of the strange and exquisite fancies which grow like flowers in the rich soil of the Celtic mind, and lastly, of the strange, baffling temperament of the Irish people of both yesterday and today.

The time was ripe for the development of a new and vital dramatic art. There was plenty of material, for Mr. Yeats and his colleagues had been writing plays as well as poems and books, and in eighteen hundred and ninety-nine the plan of the Irish Literary Theater was formed by Lady Gregory, William Butler Yeats and Edward Martyn. They dreamed of establishing an Irish National Theater, but at first it seemed impossible to get Irish actors to produce the plays. The only Irish actors had become practically denationalized in England and America, and knew no more of the subtle savor of Irish life than if they had been foreign-born. Therefore the founders decided that for three years they would experiment with English actors imported to Dublin to give the conventional stage representation of Irish plays. At the end of that time they were convinced that the country would support the project of establishing a purely national drama and would make it a part of the national life. This much accomplished, the next step was to get Irish players who would give the true interpretation to the plays that were springing up everywhere.

LIKE all great and vital movements, this one received its first impulse from sheer necessity. The primary cause of the change was that the promoters of the Irish Literary Theater had no money to pay their English players. So, taking courage from the fact that the plastic and volatile Irish temperament lends itself naturally to dramatic representation, they gathered together from among the young working men and girls of Dublin a few who had given evidences of unusual imagination, intelligence and a natural gift for acting. Dramatic training they had none, but the writers of the new plays knew exactly what they had in mind and trained the actors to express that and nothing more. And the actors, being utterly and blessedly unsophisticated, did exactly as they
WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS: IRISH POET AND DRAMATIST AND ONE OF THE INAUGURATORS OF THE IRISH LITERARY THEATER

From a Photograph by Alice Boughton
Sara Allgood as Nora Burke in "The Shadow of the Glen."
FRED O'DONOVan AS Blanco Posnet IN BERNARD SHAW'S PLAY OF "THE SHOWING UP OF BLANCO POSNET."

From a Photograph by Alice Boughton
From a Photograph by Alice Boughton

LADY GREGORY, WRITER OF IRISH DRAMA AND MANAGER OF "THE IRISH PLAYERS."
THE IRISH PLAYERS IN AMERICA

were told. It was not difficult, because they only had to be natural and to give free rein to the mood inspired by the play, but the work seemed endless before Lady Gregory and Mr. Yeats were ready to pronounce it good. Week after week these young people, after working hard all day in shop or factory, came in the evening to rehearsal and simply did their best to make alive and real the plays which either caught them up to the heights of fantasy or else mirrored their own life and their own people. They were not paid because there was no money to pay them. They did the work for the pure love of it and for the glory of God and their country.

Two years after the little company was gathered together and molded into shape, an English woman, Miss Horniman, leased the old Abbey Theater in Dublin and gave it to them for a term of years. This was their great chance and they made the most of it. Playwrights and players gave their work for nothing; one friend or another helped to make costumes or paint scenery, so they started the winter hopefully with a capital of forty pounds. Fortunately it was a hobby of the managers to use as little scenery as possible and to make each costume do multiple duty, so ten or twenty pounds paid the expenses of quite a long run. By the end of the first season they had made enough money to give an infinitesimal salary to one or two of the chief players, who gave the most time to the theater and worked the hardest. Also the manager sent the players out to the villages where small dramatic societies had been started, thus realizing their dream of spreading the dramatic movement over Ireland.

Then success began to come in generous measure. From the very first these young actors did right instinctively because they never had learned to do wrong; they imitated no one because they had seen no one to imitate; they made few gestures and kept very still upon the stage because they were not naturally given to movement or gesture in the affairs of daily life. And they gave full value to the literary quality of the plays, both because they appreciated it themselves, and because, as Mr. Yeats once said, “In the speech of the Irish country people who do all their thinking in Gaelic, the words themselves sing and shine.”

When the players were taken to London, after a season or two in Dublin, they did more to create among the English people a genuine appreciation of the artistic power that had so long lain dormant in Ireland, than has been accomplished by any other phase of the Irish Revival. Since then they have played an annual season at the Court Theater,—that shabby old playhouse which has come to be known as the home of all things daring and radical.
SUCH is the story of the Irish Players. The plays themselves are even more a part of the literature of Ireland than of the budding drama. Taken as a group, they give a picture of vividly picturesque life and thought as seen from every angle. Each one of the group of playwrights most intimately concerned in the Irish Revival seems to have marked out his own definite line of research and action and to have established his own viewpoint. For example, William Butler Yeats is the poet par excellence of the strange fantasies that embody the ancient beliefs and legends of the countryside, where remnants of an almost vanished paganism still linger among the Catholic traditions of later centuries. Therefore the majority of his plays are as far removed from daily life as the “Morte d’Arthur” or the “Nibelungenlied.” So delicately imaginative are they that it is almost better to read, by the light of the inward vision, of supernatural beings and heroic days than it is to see them acted by mere men and women on the stage. These plays have all been put on, and successfully, but it is hardly within human power to visualize the strange unearthly beauty of “The Land of Heart’s Desire,” where the new-married bride, full of dreams and vague longings for beauty, is witched away on May Eve by a child of the fairy people. And in “Countess Cathleen,” even the rare dramatic art of these players is strained to the utmost in the endeavor to realize the haunting horror of the famine-stricken land and the fiendish subtlety of the two demons who came in the guise of merchants to buy human souls in return for bread. The tragedy of “Deirdre” comes closer to human passion and human woe, but even that grows dim through the mist of the ages. The hero light glows around the head of Cuchulain as he closes with his unknown son in mortal combat “On Baile’s Strand,” but we see it only when we close our eyes, and it is only with our inner ears that we hear the thunder of many wings as the enchanted birds fly away to “The Shadowy Waters,” bearing with them the sister of the king.

Lady Gregory writes of the people in the markets and villages of the west country,—people she has known and ruled and mothered all her life. Most of the little one-act sketches that have come from her pen are pure comedy, for, as she says herself, her young colleagues give enough tragedy to the story of Ireland. She alone out of them all has grown old enough to laugh. And it is delicious and inextinguishable Irish mirth—this laughter of hers. Her people talk in the pure Galway dialect, with the rich Gaelic idiom underlying the English words, and the Galway dialect is a thing to remember as one of the joys of life. She touches upon all phases of Irish life and character; upon the desperate national struggle that lies
THE IRISH PLAYERS IN AMERICA

behind the escape of the political prisoner in the "Rising of the Moon," and upon the childlike enthusiasm and imagination, as well as the impish humor, that first gives poor "Hyacinth Halvey," a character that no saint could live up to and then insists upon his maintaining it through all his efforts to be wild and reckless. She makes you laugh until the tears come with the irresistible Irishism of the two old paupers in "The Workhouse Ward," who quarrel fiercely, yet elect to stay there and go on quarreling rather than be separated, and she thrills you to the core with pride over the fierce loyalty of the two poor women who stand in the dawn at "The Gaol Gate," waiting for news of a beloved prisoner, and then burst into passionate rejoicing because the man who is all the world to them has allowed himself to be hanged rather than give information against the neighbor who committed the crime for which he suffered. In this poignant little play Lady Gregory does not laugh, but she sings a song of triumph over Irish honor and courage.

BUT to Mr. J. M. Synge alone belongs the forceful and relentlessly truthful presentation of what Mr. Yeats calls "the folk imagination as it has been shaped by centuries of life among fields or on fishing grounds." His people talk a strange musical language, as remote from English as if the words were in a foreign tongue, and one never hears from them a thought that is of today and not of yesterday. There is humor in plenty, but the tragedy of a hard and precarious existence lies so close to the surface that it is never quite hidden. The "Riders to the Sea" is pure tragedy, and incidentally it is one of the greatest plays in the English language. The core of all its strong and terrible simplicity lies in the lament of the old woman who has seen the sea take away her husband and her six strong sons. When the last one is brought in dead she ceases her lamentations, for the peace of utter despair has come to her. "They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me," she says quietly. "I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises and they hitting one and the other. . . . They're all together this time, and the end has come. May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul and on Michael's soul and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch and Stephen and Shawn and may He have mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul of everyone is left living in the world."

It is hard to see why there should have been so many denunciations of "The Playboy of the Western World." In a way it is
broadly humorous, but it is neither sarcastic nor brutal. And it turns the searchlight upon the simple hero-worship and kindliness, as well as the cruelty and changeableness, of the Irish peasant. A frightened, haggard young chap comes to a western village, hiding from justice because, in a moment of unconquerable rage, he has slain his father. He tells his story pitifully to the people who give him shelter, explaining that he had been browbeaten all his life until at last he had turned. The inflammable Irish imagination is instantly fired by this great and strange crime and, to his utter amazement, the boy finds himself the hero of the community, because, as one man puts it, "bravery's a treasure in a lonesome place, and a lad would kill his father, I'm thinking, would face a foxy divil with a pitchpike on the flags of hell." All goes merrily until the father, having been only stunned instead of killed by his son's blow, turns up, bent on vengeance. But the boy has been reconstructed by the admiration of his neighbors. He is cock of the walk now and in the end the two go off together rejoicing, the old man for the first time really proud of his son and the son self-respecting for the first time in his life. The subtlety of the Irish viewpoint is shown when the boy, goaded to desperation, actually attacks his father again and apparently kills him. The people turn in an instant upon the murderer, and the girl he is in love with sums up public opinion by saying: "I'll say, a strange man is a marvel, with his mighty talk; but what's a squabble in your back yard, and the blow of a loy have taught me that there is a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed."

Nevertheless this much-talked of play of Mr. Synge's seems less significant than either "The Well of the Saints" or "The Shadow of the Glen." In the former, where a blind man and his wife have the sight restored to them by water from a sacred well and find that the world is not all they pictured it in their days of darkness, it is hard to imagine anything more exquisite than the complaint of the old man when reference was made to the "grand day" that he was cured. "Grand day, is it," he says, "or a bad black day when I was roused up and found I was the like of the little children do be listening to the stories of an old woman, and do be dreaming after in the dark night that it's in grand houses of gold they are, with speckled horses to ride, and do be waking again, in a short while, and they destroyed with the cold, and the thatch dripping, maybe, and the starved ass braying in the yard?"

And the loneliness of the young wife of an old man is poignantly expressed in "The Shadow of the Glen," where Nora says: "I
PRAYER FOR A LITTLE CHILD

do be thinking in the long nights it was a big fool I was that time, Micheal Dara, for what good is a bit of a farm with cows on it, and sheep on the back hills, when you do be sitting looking out from a door the like of that door, and seeing nothing but the mists rolling down the bog, and the mists again, and they rolling up the bog, and hearing nothing but the wind crying out in the bits of broken trees were left from the great storm, and the streams roaring with the rain.”

It is dangerous to begin to quote from these plays because the strange, haunting charm of them is so compelling that it is hard to know when to stop. The glory of the written word, however, endures where the spoken word has faded from the memory and these Irish plays will endure and delight future generations with their pictures of deep feeling and homely life long after the gallant Irish Players have spoken their last lines.

PRAYER FOR A LITTLE CHILD

“O LORD, O God, take pity on this little soft child. Put wisdom in his head, cleanse his heart, scatter the mist from his mind and let him learn his lessons like other boys. O Lord, thou wert thyself young one time; take pity on youth. O Lord, thou, thyself, shed tears; dry the tears of this little lad. Listen, O Lord, to the prayer of thy servant and do not keep from him this little thing he is asking of thee. O Lord, bitter are the tears of a child, sweeten them; deep are the thoughts of a child, quiet them: sharp is the grief of a child, take it from him: soft is the heart of a child, do not harden it.”

—Extract from the Irish play “The Lost Saint,” by Dr. Douglas Hyde.