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The Decline of Abbey Theatre Drama

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The Decline of Abbey Theatre Drama

IN the healthy growth of literature in all countries spells of great barrenness and decline follow brilliant creative periods. These periods succeed each other with fair regularity. The Abbey Theatre opened with at least three dramatists of genius—J. M. Synge, W. B. Yeats and Padraic Colum. Then, about two years ago, it reached that natural stage in its development when it began to decline—when there succeeded to the literary plays with which it opened that kind of violent and unsubtle drama in which a section of every theatre audience greatly delights. It is the kind of drama which is described as “strong” by the sporting editor of our daily papers, who in Ireland is frequently the dramatic critic also.

The dramatists who heralded and developed the decline of the Abbey Theatre are the three whose plays, published by Messrs. Maunsel & Co., are now before me. Their names are L. Robinson, T. C. Murray, and St. John Irvine.* That the decline of drama in Ireland has taken the form of the work of these writers is a thing to be thankful for. The ultimate success and influence of a literary movement greatly depends on the form of its decline. Many who welcomed the genius of the first Abbey dramatists were doubtful about the development of the drama in Ireland. And indeed a great many things might have happened which would have crushed its development for ever. It might have gone on for a number of years producing works of genius and then suddenly collapsed, or the successors of the first dramatists might have been aridly intellectual after the manner of Galsworthy and Granville Barker—they might have been excruciatingly brilliant like Bernard Shaw—they might have expounded new philosophies or invented strange emotions. Fortunately they have been none of these things—they have done none of these things. They have just gorgeously vulgarised the sources of inspiration of the first dramatists, for they have made such a cheap and

* *Harvest* and *The Clancy Name*. By LENNOX ROBINSON. 2s. *Mixed Marriage*. By ST. JOHN IRVINE. 1s. *Birthright*. By T. C. MURRAY. 1s. Dublin: Maunsel & Co.

DECLINE OF ABBEY THEATRE DRAMA

ugly traffic of peasant Ireland that no serious writer can venture to present a peasant in literature for the next ten years.

These later Abbey dramatists have steeped the peasant play in all the horrors and paraphernalia of ancient melodrama. At present a loud and stirring gun-shot rocking the house with horror is so much the recognised ending of a play among these writers and their imitators that their work may be suitably classified in the history of the Abbey Theatre as the "gunshot school of drama."

They have introduced in a new guise some of the stock characters of the Queen's Theatre and the *Family Herald*. There is the girl who went astray in London; the girl who does not believe in love and rejects an ardent but portionless young suitor for a wealthy and elderly one to satisfy her ambitions; there is the old villain who gets money from insurance companies by dishonest means; there is Esau and Jacob once more—the two sons one of whom was the darling of his mother's heart. In the Abbey Theatre they settle the business of who shall be his father's heir by a gun-shot. All these antique characters treated in the good old way, but put in new surrounding and clothed in the English of peasant Ireland, have still, I easily admit, a great deal of interest for an audience, and not only for the uncritical audience of the stalls, but also for the more critical audience of the pit—an audience which in the Abbey forms the bulk of the house. It is an audience for which I have the profoundest respect. It indeed most powerfully convinces me that however unsubtle and lacking in imagination the latest Abbey drama is, it is healthy. A decline of some sort in Abbey drama was, as I have said above, natural and certain. The special form of decline evidenced in the work of Murray, Robinson and Irvine is the most healthy and progressive form of decline from which any art can suffer. What a difference there is between the audience attracted by their plays with the audience attracted by a typical play of the form of decay from which the drama in England suffers! The audience in the Abbey is a fine virile audience, mostly composed of young, hard-working people who take their drama as seriously as in Russia they take politics and parliaments. Such an audience will develop with the development of the theatre, and will come to demand a subtle powerful, imaginative drama. Compare with them the people at a Barker, Galsworthy or Shaw play—the people, for example, to be found

THE IRISH REVIEW

any night at the Little Theatre. The theatre itself is a diminutive and effeminated imitation of the Abbey Theatre. The decoration is the latest thing in chaste artistic design. The prices are so exclusive that only a few seats are to be had as low as the price of an Abbey Theatre stall. The audience is the latest thing in "intellectual" advancement in England. Very consciously cultured young women in very consciously æsthetic garments applaud in a very consciously well-bred, intelligent manner, and discuss Stridenberg between the acts with their prototypes of the male sex. Such an audience and such a play can have no descendants. After Galsworthy, Barker and Shaw, the dramatists of the worn-out intellectual and imaginative life of England, the only possible successors are the picture theatre and the wordless play. But here in Ireland, where we are a young and undeveloped people, unspoiled by material prosperity, where famines and oppressions and rebellions have made our imaginations more vivid, our wits more nimble, and our longing for vital things more intense, we can hope for great things from our literature. In drama, I believe, we are going to dictate to Europe. At present we have London and America, so to speak, under our thumb. The management of the Abbey Theatre showed an unbounded faith in the gullibility of London, critics and audiences, when they solemnly presented the work of the three latest Abbey dramatists as representative of the genius of Ireland. They showed the same unbounded faith in the essential want of culture of America. In this their faith has been justified, for America welcomed our gun-shot dramatists and insulted our great genius. What America might think of the work of Mr. Colum we do not know. It got no opportunity to judge. I gather from the papers that his plays have not been acted in America. Yet America might have been supposed to have had some curiosity concerning the youngest of the first dramatists—he is still, I believe, in the twenties—who made the reputation of the Irish theatre. Neither did America get a chance of passing judgment on the exquisite and fantastic imagination of Lord Dunsany, for his plays have not been acted there. If America should develop a curiosity about these dramatists, I fear me that she will have to go to Moscow to hear Dunsany and may have to go to Vienna to hear Padraic Colum.

Concerning the plays which lie before me—Robinson's *Harvest* and *Clancy Name*, Murray's *Birthright*, and Irvine's *Mixed*

DECLINE OF ABBEY THEATRE DRAMA

Marriage—I have little to say separately. Print is the final test of the merit of a play—the test that decides its lasting merit. The writer that comes best out of this ordeal is Irvine. The vitality of his characters and dialogue is more noticeable in the book than on the stage. Robinson, of all three, has the firmest grip on stage technique.

As to the capabilities of these plays for affording diversion to an audience, the dramatic critics of the daily papers have pronounced long ago. They are now offered in book form to be judged as literature. There is not in any of them a single character or line of dialogue worthy of remembrance. They have no claim to be considered literature, and in my opinion they ought not to have been printed at all. I await their successors.

G. HAMILTON GUNNING.