

# “Did That Play of Mine ...?”: Theatre, Commemoration and 1916

*by Shaun Richards\**

In 2012 the Republic of Ireland began a Decade of Commemorations marking the centenaries of significant historical events in the country between 1912 and 1922. Central to these was the anniversary of the Easter Rising, which began on 24 April 1916 (Easter Monday) when armed members of the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army rose against British rule and occupied strategic sites across Dublin. Patrick Pearse, the leader of the Volunteers, read the Proclamation of the Irish Republic from the steps of the city's General Post Office (GPO), declaring the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies. Although there was some military action in Galway, Wexford and Meath there was little popular support across the country. The rebels in Dublin held out for six days against superior British forces, but on 29 April, with the area around the GPO in ruins and the building on fire, Pearse gave the order to surrender. The Rising seemed to have been a failure, but the execution of fifteen of its leaders ignited nationalist sentiment which led ultimately to the War of Independence between 1919 and 1921 and the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922.

The Rising was choreographed by a seven-man military council which included three playwrights, and the theatrical nature of the event was marked from the start. Many thought that the preparations for the Rising were rehearsals for a play and the Proclamation, which was printed and circulated across Dublin, was even mistaken for a playbill. Indeed, as Roy Foster points out in his *Vivid Faces: the Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890-1923* (2016), the Rising was ‘a climatic performance... the result of intense rehearsals conducted since the turn of the century’. Plays and performances created a culture in which military action was regarded as a desirable step towards national liberation. And in keeping with this aspect of the Rising the title of my talk, ‘Did that play of mine?’, is taken from W. B. Yeats's late poem, ‘The Man and the Echo’ (1938):

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... All that I have said and done,  
Now that I am old and ill,  
Turns into a question till  
I lie awake night after night  
And never get the answers right.  
Did that play of mine send out  
Certain men the English shot?

'That play' was *Cathleen ni Houlihan*; 'certain men', the insurgents of Easter 1916. The poem was written a year before Yeats's death, but from the moment of its premiere in April 1902 he had a strong sense of the significance of the play: 'Nothing but a victory on the battlefield could so uplift and enlarge the imagination of Ireland, could so strengthen the National spirit'.

*Cathleen ni Houlihan*, just to remind you, is a short one-act play set in the home of the Gillane family where the son, Michael, is about to get married. It takes place in a cottage close to Killala, Mayo, in 1798. This of course is the Year of the French when the troops of Revolutionary France were to land in the west and join the rebellion led by Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen. Preparations for the wedding are disrupted by A Poor Old Woman who speaks of the loss of her four green fields and the need for sacrifice in the cause of their liberation. Overcome by her message the bridegroom-to-be abandons plans of marriage and leaves to join the rebellion. The key line occurs at the play's end as a new arrival is asked if he saw an Old Woman as he approached the cottage and replies 'No, but I saw a young girl and she had the walk of a queen'. Clearly the Poor Old Woman, Kathleen Ni Houlihan, the personification of Ireland, is rejuvenated by the blood of those willing to die for her liberation.

The play was staged in Dublin in St Teresa's Hall, described by one of the actors as a little hall behind a grocer's shop in Camden Street. It was an amateur production and the set, as an actress recalled, wobbled dangerously. But on each of the three nights of its performance some 300 people crammed in. This was not by chance. The play was produced by Inghinidhe na hÉireann (the Daughters of Ireland), a body of nationalist women which had already been involved in theatrical performances such as those produced by poet and activist Alice Milligan. And in the part of the Poor Old Woman it had Maude Gonne, president of Inghinidhe na hÉireann and a woman known throughout nationalist circles. Well over six feet tall Gonne was a commanding figure and as the *All Ireland Review* commented, 'Maud Gonne, the well-known nationalist agitator', addressed 'not the other actors, as is usual in the drama, but the audience itself'. This made the performance as much a political rally as a piece of theatre. Yeats added to the overtly nationalist interpretation of the piece, for instance proclaiming in an interview in the *United Irishman* on 5 May, a month after the production – 'My subject is Ireland and its struggle for independence'.

The success of the production led to the company forming the basis of what was to become the Abbey Theatre, now also known as the National Theatre of Ireland in Dublin, and *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was a constant in the repertoire. From the founding of the Abbey in 1904 up until 1916 there were no fewer than 350 performances of the play. These would typically be for two or three nights, and frequently on tour, so a few nights in Manchester, Oxford, London, Liverpool, Cardiff, Glasgow, or in Providence, Long Island, Lowell or Springfield, Massachusetts, Chicago, or Dayton, Ohio, for the tours took in the UK and the USA as well as Ireland.

Frank Fay, the directorial force behind the company, spoke of the need for the play 'to send men away filled with the desire for deeds' and many of the audience for *Cathleen ni Houlihan* were aware of what those deeds were likely to be. As the writer and politician, Stephen Gwynn, wrote in 1936: 'I went home asking myself if such plays should be produced unless one was prepared for people to go out to shoot and be shot'. And George Bernard Shaw, in 1909, commented: 'When I see that play I feel it might lead a man to do something foolish'.

All this then might suggest that the answer to Yeats's question was 'yes' – that play did send out certain men the English shot. To which the stinging riposte was written years later by the poet Paul Muldoon in '7 Middagh Street', 'If Yeats had saved his pencil lead, would certain men have stayed in bed?' But of course it's a complicated situation that can't be captured by a simple yes or no.

Firstly, it was not Yeats's play, but was co-authored with Lady Augusta Gregory, the influential dramatist and folklorist, and she would seem to have started the process. 'All this mine alone' she wrote on the draft of the opening scene then adding, 'This with WBY.' As shown by the role of Inghinidhe na hÉireann in the original production in 1902, an active cultural movement with a strong interest in theatre existed already and there was clearly an audience for such work. Theatre was recognized as fundamental to the national cause. Arthur Griffith, the founder of Sinn Féin, declared: 'We look to the Irish National Theatre primarily as a means of regenerating the country. The Theatre is a powerful agent in the building up of a nation'.

We can start to get some sense of theatre's ability to achieve this from a review by the writer J. M. Synge of the premiere of Douglas Hyde's Irish-language play *Casadh an tSúgáin* (The Twisting of the Rope) in 1901. Synge noted that members of the Irish language movement, the Gaelic League, had taken up the majority of the cheaper seats and during an intermission: 'it happened that the people in the galleries began to sing . . . They sang the old songs of the people. Until then I had never heard these songs sung in the ancient Irish tongue by so many voices. The auditorium shook. . . I saw one head bend down behind a programme and then another. People were weeping'. One sensed, he said 'that the spirit of the nation had hovered for an instant in the room'. And this was the year before *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, so if the 1902 play did plant the seed of 1916, it did so in well-prepared soil.

*Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was not the only work in what was in fact contested terrain. As early as 1899, and in the early years of Yeats and Lady Gregory's attempts to found a theatre, Patrick Pearse, one of the leaders of the Easter Rising, wrote to the Gaelic League journal, *An Claidheamh Soluis*, attacking Yeats and his associates as dangerously anti-Irish: 'Against Mr Yeats personally', he declared, 'we have nothing to object. He is a mere English poet of the third or fourth rank, and as such he is harmless. But when he attempts to run an "Irish" Literary Theatre it is time for him to be crushed'; and as for the theatre, said Pearse, 'Let us strangle it at its birth.'

Pearse was both a leader of the Rising and the man who read out the proclamation of the Republic. Just months before the Rising he wrote of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, that in his childhood he believed there actually was a woman – Erin – who physically embodied Ireland and, he said, 'had Mr Yeats's Kathleen ni Houlihan been then written and I had seen it, I should have taken it not as an allegory, but as a representation of a thing that might happen any day in my house'. Not an allegory but a reality and one which therefore could be lived.

As the American critic William Irwin Thompson wrote in 1967 (in one of the first studies of what he termed 'The Imagination of an Insurrection'), 'Before Pearse fired a shot he rehearsed insurrection by writing a play about it'. The play to which he referred, *The Singer*, was written in 1915 and not produced nor published in Pearse's life-time. However the message of its concluding lines 'One man can free a people as one Man redeemed the world', equating the death of the rebel with the crucifixion of Christ – both leading to the salvation of the people – is one that permeates Pearse's writing.

What I want to stress then is the place of drama in the preparations for the Rising among those who actually led and fought in it. In writing, particularly with Thomas MacDonagh and Pearse, we can see that a rehearsal of the Rising was being staged – quite literally – in the years leading to 1916. Indeed in the prelude to 1916 MacDonagh is quoted as saying 'I am going to live things that I have before imagined'.

His play, *When the Dawn is Come*, had four performances at the Abbey in October 1908 and its plot, set fifty years in the future, was of insurrection against England – resulting in an Irish victory. It was praised as 'the first Sinn Féin Drama' and the editor of the diary of events for St Enda's, the school founded by Pearse where MacDonagh was a master, noted 'We were present in a body at Mr MacDonagh's play, *When the Dawn is Come*, at the Abbey theatre. Our youngest boys came home yearning for rifles'.

Pearse himself wrote some eight theatrical pieces, most intended for production by the boys at St Enda's. The first of these, a historical pageant, was performed at the school in March 1909. Pearse's comments from that year convey his objectives for the boys who participated in his theatre work. They would leave St Enda's, he said, 'under the spell of their beloved hero', namely the legendary Cúchulain whose statue, sculpted by Oliver

Sheppard in 1911, now stands in the GPO as memorial to the Rising. Cúchulain's solitary and heroic embrace of death made him the subject of Yeats's plays too, but he was central to Pearse's educational objectives. A picture in St Enda's depicted the arming of the young Cúchulain, and underneath Cúchulain's famous words, 'I care not though I were to live but one day and night provided my fame and deeds live after me'. Many of the senior boys of the school, actors in the plays and pageants, embraced that ideal, fighting in the Post Office with Pearse and McDonagh, living and dying the parts they had earlier rehearsed. And to add to the complex inter-relationship of drama and political action *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was scheduled to play at the Abbey on Monday 24 April 1916 but had to be cancelled because of the Rising. Sean Connolly, the actor who was due to play the role of the father in the play, had already in March performed in James Connolly's play *Under Which Flag?* produced by the Irish Workers Dramatic Company. He took part in the attack on Dublin Castle and was killed trying to raise a rebel flag over the City Hall. The claim is that this was the same flag used in McDonagh's *When the Dawn is Come*. True or not, what we see in this blurring of myth and history is the tendency at the time to read the Rising as a performance which was rehearsed in the theatre and to read events through that lens.

Yeats, Pearse and McDonagh were not the only ones writing plays about insurrection. On 7 January 1915 Yeats wrote to Lennox Robinson about his play, *The Dreamers*, which the Abbey had accepted for production. It was about Robert Emmet's attempted Rising in 1803 and Yeats ended his letter by saying: 'I believe your play will be the making of us in Dublin this Spring. I imagine it will have many revivals. And with Pierce [sic] and McNeil [sic] flirting with the gallows tree, will be almost topical'. In 1915 these were prophetic words indeed.

So, to return to Yeats's question about *Cathleen ni Houlihan* – 'did that play of mine send out certain men the English shot?'. The question could be more readily asked and answered in the affirmative by Pearse. But both his and Yeats's work were elements in a complex cultural and political moment leading to the Rising, in which Yeats's play could not be considered the sole catalyst. Indeed one might say that Yeats's play did not so much make the Rising as the Rising made the reputation of the play. Perhaps because of Yeats's question though, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* has become associated with the Rising, certainly more than anything by Pearse. Yet it is striking how little it is now performed. Before the Rising it had, as I've said, 350 performances. But prior to a rehearsed reading in 2010, its previous production at the Abbey was in 1990, before that in 1984, 1965 and 1950.

The play on the subject of 1916 that is performed, however, is Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, first staged in 1926 and critical of the Rising for its nationalist rather than socialist agenda. It has been performed every couple of years at the Abbey since the original production. The longest gap without it being put on there was between 1984 and 1991; in this century

it has been staged in 2002, 2003, 2005, 2010, 2012 and 2016. In 2016 it was also performed at London's National Theatre, an indication of how completely it has become the play associated with the Rising. It has not been without controversy, however, and not only because of the disturbances at the time of its premiere in 1926. Indeed at the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising in 1966 the Commemoration Committee judged that 'An O'Casey play during the period of the celebrations would not be in keeping with the spirit of the occasion'. However on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Rising, in 1991, it was staged at the Abbey in a radical expressionist production directed by Garry Hynes. In this production Pearse was present in Act Two, rather than being an off-stage voice, and was dressed in a modern-day business suit and located in the stalls among the audience. Pearse faced a huge mirror set on stage, the back wall of the pub, which reflected him and the audience back at themselves. Here Pearse was seen merely as the precursor of subsequent politicians, for whom gestures were more important than social justice.

A similar reading of the Rising was again found in the 2016 Abbey production, which stressed the contemporary relevance of *The Plough*, with the looters in Act Three seeking out today's desirable objects such as mobile phones. I don't think it was a convincing staging but what we can see here in this regular performance of *The Plough* is that while the Rising continues to have a significant place in the Irish theatre it is mainly through a play which questions, rather than celebrates the idea of sacrifice for the nation.

And it's on that issue of sacrifice that I want to end, and to point to a another play about 1916 which has been on at the Abbey far more recently. Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme* was on the main stage throughout August and September 2016. Its subject is the 36th Ulster Division at the Battle of the Somme, which began in July 1916. The play ends as they go into battle with a chilling awareness of what is to come. As one of the men realizes, 'We're not making a sacrifice. Jesus, you've seen this war. We are the sacrifice.' But the play, as noted by the critic Fintan O'Toole, held out the hope that the sacrifice need not be repeated forever.

Given this modern sensibility it is understandable why O'Casey's play – along with McGuinness's – should be staged in 2016 rather than *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*. And while Yeats asked if that play had sent out certain men the English shot we need to remember that he asks the question with no sense of pride. He also asks, not if he inspired the Rising, but if he could have stopped it:

Could my spoken words have checked  
That whereby a house lay wrecked?  
And all seems evil until I  
Sleepless would lie down and die.

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