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**The On and Off-Stage Roles of Abbey Theatre Actresses of the 1930s**

Supervised by Prof. Adrian Frazier & Prof. Lionel Pilkington  
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**Introduction**

Building on the work of Maggie B. Gale and John Stokes in *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress*, this doctoral thesis exposes 'the construction of the actress' in the particular context of the Irish Free State (1922 – 1937). (2) It examines the life stories of five women who performed together in the Abbey Theatre Company during the 1930s. These are life stories that intersect and interweave, that separate and come together. The five women, Eileen Crowe, May Craig, Aideen O'Connor, Frolie Mulhern and Ria Mooney, are connected by one thing: a devotion to Irish theatre. The 'construction' of an actress is multi-faceted, but has two key elements: (1) the training and development of her theatrical craft, and (2) the professionalization of the individual as a working performer with the consequent impact of this position on her place in society. The following chapters examine the careers of each of these women, detailing many of their performances at the Abbey Theatre and two particular tours of America by the Abbey Company (1934-35 and 1937-38), to expose these two elements.

Chapter 1 traces the genealogy of theoretical research in this area, considers the methodologies available and sets out the intervention I seek to make in the field of theatre history. Chapter 2 focuses on the lives of Eileen Crowe and May Craig, considering their careers particularly in the context of their predecessors at the Abbey Theatre and the social context of the 1930s. Crowe's career, I argue, is most usefully considered in the light of the Irish Free State and the female ideal it upheld for nationalist purposes. Chapters 3 and 4 consider the lives of Aideen O'Connor and Frolie Mulhern, who joined the company in the 1930s. Chapter 5 traces the life of Ria Mooney, the development of her artistic vision in New York, and argues that she was the first feminist director at the Abbey Theatre, whose contribution to Irish cultural life has been overlooked.

For the editors of *The Cambridge Companion*, the dominant feature of 'the actress' is her 'occasional invisibility coupled with her all-pervasive

significance'. (Gale and Stokes 2) While portraying 'real' women, she retains a unique status as an observer of their lives both on and off stage. She is, independent of the characters depicted, in a position to understand the risks and rewards involved in any act of self-presentation by women in society. This is significant in the context of 1930s Ireland, where women were particularly vulnerable to what Melissa Sihra terms 'the monotheistic patriarchal meta-narrative', i.e., the power of Church and State. (2)

The theatrical lives explored here have been largely forgotten or ignored; yet I argue these women are legitimate subjects for an exploration of the formation of the professional actress in Ireland. In this dissertation, I draw on much archival material that has hitherto never been collated or used for scholarly purposes. In each case, I re-constitute archival traces and strive to capture a sense of the woman herself: her understanding of her craft, her personal challenges, her achievements and failures. The nature of the search, challenges and material unearthed is commented upon in each section and there is a concerted effort, as Susan Bennett urges, 'to extend and disturb historiographical method beyond its usual evidence.' (55)

The length and density of each of the chapters reflects the volume of archival material about these women. These are partial biographies, based only on archival traces, and such traces vary from actress to actress. However, I argue that, presented together, these biographies facilitate the induction of patterns that allow a deeper understanding of strategies used by women to further their artistic careers.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, where these women may not have consciously calculated their every career and life choice, the overall story of their lives as actresses was shaped by their decisions in tandem with external circumstances and influenced by prevailing ideologies. Collected together in this manner, these biographies provide evidence that Irish women who conformed to the dominant

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<sup>1</sup> In using the term 'strategy', I am relying on Joan Wallach Scott's definition of the term, being one that enables us to think about how people make decisions in the face of changing economic circumstances. Scott also says, 'In addition, we take strategy to be a shorthand for the application of (culturally specific) perceptions to the practical (subsistence) demands of daily life.' (Scott and Tilly 7)

ideologies on and off the stage of the Abbey Theatre were rewarded with a level of success, longevity and professional respect in Ireland. Conversely, women who behaved in a manner viewed as in any way subversive of that ideology met with resistance that had the capacity to end their careers in this country and/or to deny them respect they deserved.

**The Concept of Role**

A key research question is: how do these particular actresses of the Irish National Theatre learn and play the myriad roles required of them—on and off the stage? Gale and Stokes suggest using 'a double lens' to consider 'the loss and disguise of the self in dramatic performance' while simultaneously holding in balance 'the practical and ideological aspects' of the career. (2) The agency of the actress, the ability to earn independently and to publicly represent other women, sits at odds with the requirement of the actress to conceal her individuality and subsume her own personality into an on-stage presence. Such agency also conflicted with the ideologies in Ireland that demanded particular behaviour of women.

Stanislavski, actor and theoretician of the craft, alluded to a principle similar to this 'double lens'. His translator Jean Benedetti states:

The actor's individuality, her own particular way of doing and saying things, was of paramount importance. At the same time all the actor's gifts and talents had to be subordinated to the central theme of the play. (13)

In researching this thesis, it became evident that such a 'double lens', as suggested by Gale and Stokes, is useful but not adequate. Something closer to a kaleidoscope is required, allowing as this would for shifting focus, background and foreground to switch places at various points, and a full appreciation of the myriad of elements at play at any one moment in the lives of these women. That said, the concept of 'role' was vital in all aspects and thus demands definition.

Theatre and Stanislavski scholar Sharon Carnicke has explored the Stanislavskian definition of 'role' and how this can be applied in critical



theory. Carnicke suggests that by 'role' Stanislavski meant 'the words that serve as a "score" for the actor's performance, in the same way that notes provide a "score" for musicians.' (4) A 'role' allows each actor to give a unique performance, while providing a structure and form that must be preserved. These paradoxical positions of the actor, repetition coupled with incessant variation and invisibility coupled with public notoriety, drove Stanislavski's thinking. Like his mentor Mikhail Shchepkin, Stanislavski viewed character-creation as a process not of self-effacement but of self-transformation. He claimed that a third being was created in this process, a fusion of the character the author wrote and the actor's own personality, 'the actor/role'. (Benedetti 95) It is this 'actor/role' – the two positions together, distinct and overlapping – that this thesis centres upon.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'role' as: 'An actor's part in a play, film, etc.' ('Role') However, it has a secondary meaning invoking, the 'function assumed or part played by a person or thing in a particular situation.' ('Role') In sociological terms, a 'role' denotes particular behavioural patterns that are connected to social status. The word 'role' is in fact synonymous with 'capacity', 'duty', 'responsibility' and 'place.' In using the phrase 'roles' in my title, I am consciously invoking all of the meanings of this term – considering the place of these women in Irish society as well as in the theatre, considering their capacity as an Irish woman and as a performer. The rate of married Irish women in paid employment remained around the 6% mark from the establishment of Irish Free State up to the 1960s. (Hill *Women* 99) Thus, the married actresses (May Craig and Eileen Crowe) were already in a distinct minority in Ireland.

### **Potential Role Models: Actresses at the Abbey Theatre prior to the 1930s**

The women of the Irish National Theatre Society and of Inghinidhe na hEireann are a useful starting point in seeking role models for the actresses of the 1930s. Inghinidhe na hEireann was a radical nationalist women's organization, Daughters of Ireland, founded in 1900. In 1902, several nationalist organisations came together to perform two Irish plays:

George Russell's *Deirdre* and Yeats' *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*. (Trotter 74) Inghinidhe na hEireann members took on vital work as producers, financiers, ticket sellers and actors. These were a united body of women from across social classes, but as Mary Trotter has elucidated, 'Feminism, nationalism and workers' rights activity often pulled [these] women in contradictory directions.' (73) Some of the playwrights and actors involved in the 1902 productions went on to form the Irish National Theatre Society (INTS) a year later. At that point, Inghinidhe na hEireann discontinued dramatic activity, although some women remained active in both groups.

The women of Inghinidhe na hEireann began to blur the boundaries between the personal and the political realms that had been so distinct for women in Irish public life. But it remains that the female performers that emerged from this movement, most notably Maud Gonne, remained political and nationalist advocates first and foremost. Even where members of the group did become devoted to acting, they were always primarily identified with the political group. Historian R. F. Foster, in writing of how Gonne, Sara Allgood and others took drama classes organized by the Inghinidhe, concludes, 'All of them saw their theatrical activities as an integral part of nationalist consciousness-raising.' (*Vivid Faces* 81)

As Trotter also describes, these women 'performed not [as] "real" women but [as] idealised personae, developed from rhetoric of Irish femininity such as Hibernia and Dark Rosaleen.' (78-79) Inghinidhe na hEireann initially presented 'tableaux', still images carefully posed to represent ideas or political moments. When they began rehearsing plays, Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, the original Nora Burke in *In The Shadow of the Glen*, recalled how in rehearsals for the 1903 premiere Frank Fay told her: 'Be the *mouthpiece* of Nora Burke, rather than Nora Burke.' (qtd in Ritschel 90) In Fay's teaching, these were not real or ordinary women, but rather were the mouthpiece for a particular type of Irish femininity. To perform typically male political acts, Gonne had to construct and present herself as an *extraordinary* woman. She did so with aplomb, but her class and economic privilege undoubtedly assisted. The stage remained for Gonne

primarily a political platform to rally support for nationalist causes. When it no longer served to support her cause, she moved on.

The next generation of actresses at the Abbey Theatre included Sara Allgood and her sister Molly (Maire O'Neill). Allgood had also begun her career with *Inghinidhe na hÉireann*, although she later travelled to Liverpool and left for Australia in 1915 with the lead in 'a Hibernicized melodrama' entitled *Peg O' My Heart*. (Frazier *Hollywood Irish* 149) Having appeared on stage in the UK frequently, she returned to the Abbey in the 1920s, before settling in Hollywood where she established a film career and applied for US citizenship in the mid 1940s. Allgood was, from early on, ambitious and hardworking. Her depiction of the mother figure Juno in Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* in 1924 was considered a landmark in Irish acting. (Crowe was present for that premiere, playing the minor role of Mary Boyle, Juno's daughter.) Many actresses who played Juno, Crowe in particular, never escaped the shadow of Allgood's lauded performances.

In considering Allgood's career it becomes evident how she became synonymous with a particular type of female role. Adrian Frazier describes how she was brought to Broadway 'to advertise a degree of Irish authenticity' in a production of Paul Vincent Carroll's *Shadow and Substance* in 1938. (*Hollywood Irish* 151) Allgood's plump figure, plain, soft features and Irish accent defined her roles. She was adept at mimicry and presentation of the stereotypical 'Irish characteristics' demanded by Hollywood executives. But by the 1930s, actresses at the Abbey were straining to take on roles not always defined by their nationality, and were increasingly aware of international theatrical influences.

It was in travelling to America that these women found role models and female mentors. For Ria Mooney, it was the inspiration of director and actress, Eva Le Gallienne. For Aideen O'Connor, it was Broadway composer, Kay Swift. Both Le Gallienne and Swift left an impression on their Irish counterparts, allowing consideration of another kind of femininity and the prospect of playing their chosen role in more radical ways.

The women represented here by their life stories form part of the

first wave of professional Irish actresses from the National Theatre. They did not seek to rally political support, although they held political views. They did not travel the world to showcase a particular form of Irish nationality and womanhood. Instead, they sought to be independent and successful theatrical performers worthy of appearing on the world stage, and aimed to perform a wide range of female roles. Mooney, O'Connor, Mulhern, Craig and Crowe all held an identical score, to fill all the roles required of a professional actress.

The training and technical development of these women is tracked here alongside the development of Irish theatre during the period of the Irish Free State and beyond. I consider their interpretation of female roles along with the female characters that were being staged at the Abbey in the 1930s. However, as Olwen Fouéré, the actress and theatre artist, asserts, 'Contrary to public opinion, actors don't need a play to practice the art of theatre. It is a way of life. A lot of our work is about completely subverting the script.' (Qtd in Sihra 220) This thesis seeks also to explore their lives off the stage and to expose the script they subverted and lived.

Foster asserts, 'Part of recapturing their world must involve prospecting the ties of affection, and the patterns of tension, between families, friends and lovers.' (*Vivid Faces* 116) This thesis explores such ties and patterns, among Abbey actors and outside of that circle. Unexpectedly for me, the women of American theatre that inspired their Irish counterparts by demonstrating how to lead a life full of creative ambition, with independence and love, became a vital part of the narratives.

To argue that the life choices made by these women were right or wrong, good or bad, their theatrical careers were 'successful' or 'failed', is not my intent. They all sought professional success in the theatre and personal happiness. Each woman negotiated her own life, within the very particular circumstances and constraints of Irish society in the 1930s. This thesis is a study of the work required and the choices made by these women to construct themselves as Irish actresses.

**Chapter 1: Research Methodologies, Archives and Truths**

**Introduction**

This thesis is working on a number of different fronts. In the first instance, it presents the biographies of five Irish actresses of the Irish Free State, recounting life stories of women that have been largely elided in the history of the Irish National Theatre recorded heretofore. There are limited accounts of the achievements of these women and, with the exception of Ria Mooney, no prior written accounts of their lives. Therefore, these biographies draw on extensive archival research and shape the hitherto unknown material into narrative. They are the stories of women who dedicated their lives to the stage. It is this dedication to Irish theatre I wish to draw out, rather than any notion of success, of legacy, or of lasting influence. These are individual lives, but they are stories embedded in Irish theatrical history. They are case studies of female lives in Irish theatre during the first half of the century.

In her essay 'Actors' Biography and Mythmaking: The Example of Edmund Kean', theatre historian and biographer Leigh Woods asserts, 'Not only does the biographical narrative furnish a way of selecting and organizing fact, consistent with the narrator's preexistent values; but it can, finally, absorb fact, amoeba-like and reconstitute it in order to *transcend* it. It can, in this, tilt the narrative mode into a dramatic one.' (245) Such a 'tilt' empowers biographical work in a new way. In Woods' writing on actors, this dramatic mode is allied with the creative work of the actors themselves. I argue that the narrative mode can also be tilted into a different, more theoretical mode that exposes and highlights how archival material may re-constitute a life story. This means that in using archives to construct a life story, it is possible to simultaneously reflect on that manner of construction.

Second, this thesis serves as a critical intervention in the field of theatre history through the development of methodologies for the treatment of archives and theatre history. In this way, it contributes to the

furthering of knowledge in this area. It is a composite biography of women previously elided in Irish history. It is also a piece of critical writing on the history of Irish theatre and performance, and how we serve this historiography by different modes of working with archival material. Most crucially, however, it works at the intersection of both fields, forcing reflection on and re-evaluation of how we record, re-tell and perform the history of Irish theatre.

### **Theatre and Performance History**

In *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, Katie Normington et al pose a question essential to this study: 'What methodologies are appropriate to retrieve a theatre history for which there are few traces?' ('Researching' 86) Theatre and performance histories are concerned with the ephemeral and intangible and the limited materials available to the historical study of performance and performers should not be limited to a fixed notion of documentation. Restricting the exploration of past performances to an examination of textual remains works against capturing the temporal nature of the event, but to focus only on the performance aspects (ignoring such textual remains) similarly restricts understanding. In *Research Methods* a number of subject-area experts explore the possibilities of various research methods.

According to Joseph Roach, an important strategy of performance research today is to juxtapose living memory as restored behaviour against a historical archive of records. (Normington et al. 'Researching' 101) He is following a current within performance studies that sets 'the archive' — written and material text housed in an archive — against the 'repertoire' — embodied traditions of performance. For Roach, these are fundamentally different modes of working for a theatre historian. However, Diana Taylor, one of the first scholars to separate the discursive from the performative, describes the relationship between the archive and the repertoire as 'not by definition antagonistic or oppositional.' (36) The two forms of knowledge, Taylor states, 'usually work in tandem.' (21)

For Taylor, the focus on repertoire is a political act of resistance. The archive sustains power in its current form while the repertoire enacts social agency and thus is not amenable to being housed in an archive. Both Taylor and Roach champion the body and oral traditions as legitimate points of focus for future study. (Normington et al. 'Researching' 92) Dance historian Susan Leigh Foster elucidates the compelling notion of 'Bodily Writing'. (She had previously set out this concept in the 1995 volume of essays, *Choreographing History*.) Bodily writing examines the physical traces of the past within contemporary somatic expression including the relationship of bodies to their surroundings: buildings, clothing or objects. (Normington et al. 'Researching' 87)

In contrasting these aspects of study, the archive and the repertoire, the binary between the two is re-asserted. Even where they may work in tandem, they become two distinct forms of archive, where one can be treated as more 'authentic' or more 'real' than the other. By setting out to find a more inclusive mode of study, Taylor arguably reiterates what Rebecca Schneider in *Performing Remains* called 'the tired mutual exclusivity' between the 'error-ridden theatrical' and a pure form of the 'real'. (18) Schneider's work focuses on the possibilities offered by historical re-enactment, and the 'temporal drag' that comes when 'in the syncopated time of reenactment, ... then and now punctuate each other'. (2) She insists that theatricality is not a matter of the *loss* of some prior, purer actual. Instead, theatricality and mimesis are allied; neither threatens authenticity. Rather, both are 'vehicles for access to the transitive, performative and cross-temporal real'. (30)

This thesis does not seek to re-play the argument about the 'archive' and the 'repertoire', or to reify one mode of archival research over another. This is a study not only of theatrical performances but of the performers themselves - although their performances are fundamental to how the world viewed them as well as to how they viewed themselves. Therefore, lines of enquiry focusing on the dramatic repertoire (oral traditions and bodily memory; bodily writing) are not only limited because

of the historic nature of my subjects, but also are limiting in that they exclude a number of other approaches. Other methods of biographical research including the examination of documentation, interviewing related people, visiting locations and reflecting on the larger political and social context had to be incorporated. It was sometimes necessary to develop methodologies to meet my ends. It is here useful to revisit historical theories on archives and their impact on the development of performance theory to further explain my methodological approach.

**Archives: Traces and Marks**

Derrida's notion of 'traces and marks' regarding the ongoing power of language to communicate in the absence of the original interlocutors remains a core concept in the investigation of historical performances. (Franko and Richards 5) The 'trace' is only ever a tantalising glimpse, without real substance, while the 'mark' is something that remains. Theatre and performance studies must consider that which remains, persists, and even returns. The archives themselves are 'marks'; the documents can be handled, examined, copied and cited. The 'mark', as Mark Franko and Annette Richards have pointed out, is a scar, a clear reference to the past. (5) But while Franko and Richards believe that scars do not refer to the present, I would suggest that the relevance of the scar lies in its current interpretation.

Such 'marks' disappear only if we ignore them, fail to read them accurately, or read them outside of an appropriate pattern. Making decisions about the context in which the 'mark' is placed is a crucial point of departure. The composition of the pattern in which we situate and read the marks becomes crucial, as it is this structure (rather than the material itself) which provides meaning and affords power to the marks.

In 1985, Bruce A. McConachie made a powerful argument for the need to move beyond the aesthetics of theatre to its modes of reception and to the social and cultural contexts that engendered these. (Normington et al. 'Researching' 89) He drew attention to the fact that



theatre histories (plural) do not exist in a limbo but are part of something broader in scope and relating to society at large. It is equally important that as the scholar researching and narrativising this history that I acknowledge my own ideological position and subjective decisions. I intend this thesis as a work of feminist historiography: exploring lives of 1930s actresses and asserting the importance of recognising these women's careers in Irish theatre history.

T. C. Davis asserts, 'In writing theatre and performance history, we utilize theory, logic, surmise, and induction.' ('Context' 204) Induction allows the inference of a general principle from a number of specific instances. She excludes 'deduction': the inverse of 'induction'. This process involves using general principles to investigate specific circumstances. However, *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance* points out that a 'top-down' approach to investigation is just as legitimate as a 'bottom up' approach. (Normington et al. 'Researching' 92) That is, it is as valid to look at the cultural backdrop of the 1930s and make assumptions (or surmise) about the treatment of actresses in the Irish theatre business (using 'deduction') as to begin with the experience of a sample of women and elicit information about the position of actresses in Irish theatre during that time (using 'induction'). This thesis uses both methods at different points, exposing the limitations as well as the strengths of these approaches. Yet any methodology must continually question the equation of 'archive' with 'truth'.

### **Can Archives Yield Truth?**

In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* Derrida explored the politics of the archive. He interrogates the nexus of power relations around the 'archive' and argues that the word itself denotes commencement and commandment: the origin and the principle. He wrote of an archontic power which 'gathers the functions of unification, of identification, of classification' and also 'of consignation'. (Derrida 9) The act of consignation was not only the putting *in* order, but the putting *into* order. For Derrida

was troubled by this archontic principle: its authority, and its genealogy, the right that it commands, and the legitimacy that depends on it. It is the structures that establish and house the archives that demand most of his attention; Derrida sees these as predetermining archivable material and enforcing particular ways of reading it. Maggie B. Gale and Ann Featherstone, interrogating 'the archive' both in concept and material form, also call on scholars to 'develop awareness of how ideology, values and beliefs *nuance* how archives have been created and the intentions that have informed the process of collection.' (18)

My own research process underlines the continuing importance of Derrida's concerns. In 2011, I abandoned research on the actress Shelah Richards because of a lack of archival material documenting her life. I subsequently discovered that the actress's personal diaries and most intimate letters are contained in the (William) Denis Johnston Collection held in Trinity College Dublin. This is the archive of materials donated by her ex-husband, the writer Denis Johnston. The letters and diaries were his property on his death. Indeed, the material archives show his amendments, edits and retorts to her correspondences; he used a different-coloured pen to annotate her letters in the margins as he assembled material to complete his autobiography. Detailed consideration of this material allowed me to re-visit Richards' inclusion in this study. However, it became apparent that she was set apart from the other women by virtue of her Protestantism, family background, and by her departure from the company in the 1930s to work in other theatres. All the other women travelled together with the Abbey Company in 1934 and 1937; this shared experience is vital to my narrative. Richards was not, I concluded, a fitting piece for the pattern I was constructing. This is not a reflection on the power or importance of her life story; it was a pragmatic decision to omit a story that didn't connect with those set out here.

The nexus of power relations around the archives of women (writers, artists and performers) in Irish theatre history is slowly being interrogated. At the same time, the structures around Irish archives

themselves are being rethought and realigned (in particular, due to the introduction of digital archives). I have chosen to set aside these concerns because Derrida's discussion about the politics of the archive interests me less than the proposals he makes about the archive as a pledge that provides a response, a promise and a responsibility. As Rebecca Schneider asserts, 'materials in the archive are given, too, for the future of their (re)enactment.' (108)

Schneider focuses on this aspect of the archive that promised a token for the future. She states that, 'the archive *performs* the equation of performance with disappearance, even as it *performs* the service of "saving".' (Schneider 99) The question then becomes: Can the archive perform differently? Or, accepting Derrida's emphasis on agency: Can we make the archive perform differently? Rather than disappearing or restoring, Schneider suggests the archive could be 'saved' by its transmission into the future. She goes on to argue for a new mode of working in which the archive may be pitched towards the future, where it may function as a form of text that can be set in play. Rather than the notion of a script, which arguably plots a course even as it allows space for improvisation, Schneider suggests that archival documents may be a 'score, script or material for instruction.' (28) I find most useful the notion of the archive as a musical score: a written representation that shows all of the vocal and instrumental parts arranged one below the other, to foreground different elements at various points but always to work towards a piece harmonious with its guiding principle.

This consideration of the future possibilities of archives moves scholars away from a form of archival research that is akin to 'archaeology'. This process of excavation and analysis is often used as an analogy for archival research, but archaeology strives (never succeeding) to expose a historical site in a place where it holds no meaning without the framework of a secure, immutable context. As Davis describes in arguing for a feminist methodology in theatre history:

A theatre history that assembles primary sources (textual, visual, and tactile) to describe but not to analyse performance ... results in ... the archaeology of theatrical forms [...]  
(‘Feminist Methodology’ 65)

Davis continues:

Feminist theatre historians are rarely satisfied with 'recreative' approaches because the meaning of the production is always paramount among our concerns. (‘Feminist Methodology’ 65)

This composite biography begins with such a re-creative approach, seeking to reconstitute the details of the women’s lives from all manner of archival material. It does so in the understanding that, as Shannon Jackson has pointed out, ‘A focus on the detail, the local, the particular has a gendered history.’ (150) Jackson observes that throughout history, femininity has been associated with what was generally seen as inconsequential detail – inconsequential either for being seen as merely ornamental (Jackson uses the term ‘decadence’ (162)) or as mundane ‘prosiness.’ Yet, such detail contains a threatening power:

[I]ts tendency to subvert an internal hierarchic ordering of the work of art which clearly subordinates the periphery to the centre, the accessory to the principal, the foreground to the background. (Naomi Schor qtd in Jackson 163)

Assembling primary material on the lives of these women allows an exploration of this hierarchical ordering. One can finally shift the focus between foreground and background, centre and periphery. But it is vital to move past the archaeological model once that work is completed because on its own it is, as Davis asserts, unsatisfying in its failure to express something meaningful and current. Furthermore, the strata of archaeological layers do not allow the ‘syncopation’ of past and future that Schneider celebrates. This movement, the travelling and returning, a jumping and recurring, ‘troubles ephemerality’. (Schneider 94) Such syncopation is vital for theatre history to create a connection with the present. It is inherent in the relationship between historical subject and current day researcher, and its presence can be exposed rather than eliding the connection. A feminist methodology, then, may be required to

make the archive perform differently. I intend to revisit this notion of syncopation and performing archives, but before I move on from this consideration of archival and performance theory, it is useful to examine the relationship between historicity and performativity.

### **Historicity and Performativity**

For Peggy Phelan, 'Performance's only life is in the present.' (146) There is no space for history in Phelan's concept of absolute performance. Its temporal condition and independence from reproduction is fundamental to its being. C. M. Sousloff, however, has probed the interdisciplinary concept of 'performativity' to assess its effectiveness in the interpretation of historical performance in her essay 'Like a Performance'. (69-99) Sousloff traces an argument from J. L. Austin's *speech acts* to Derrida's insistence all communications exist as a presence known only through iteration, and hence to Judith Butler's argument that:

Performative acts within theatrical contexts are like or similar to natural acts in any other context, and it is only through the extreme naturalisation of each - the loss of their 'cultural meaning' - that has allowed them to appear distinct from each other. (Butler 520)

Butler continues, 'In its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status.' (520)

Sousloff examines these concepts in relation to sculpture, but in its 'dual subjectivity' acting is allied to this ancient art form. Sculpture reveals something of the creator/artist whose idea rests in marble alongside the body of the sitter/figure, whose shape is imitated in stone. In their performances, the women I write about embodied the characters and ideas of playwrights, but without entirely erasing their self-manifestation as women living in the Free State established in Ireland in 1922.

### **Is Gender a useful category of analysis in Irish theatre history?**

In 1986, feminist Joan Wallach Scott first applied to her study of history the theoretical concept of gender as a way of referring to the social

organisation of the relationship between the sexes. Scott went on to cite and explore its usefulness as a category of historical analysis. ('Gender' 1053-1075) This category of analysis must be considered here as a further dimension to the intervention of this thesis. The power dynamics at work in the lives of these Irish actresses are evident throughout these chapters, whether those tensions be related to class, religion or gender. While the issues of class and religion have been explored in prior Irish scholarship, there has been little direct focus on gender. A focus solely on gender, however, would occlude the other aspects of these lives: they were professional performers first and foremost. I would like to include gender in my analysis of their lives, without ignoring other aspects of their careers.

Scott asserted that 'the writing of women into history necessarily involves redefining and enlarging traditional notions of historical significance, to encompass personal, subjective experience as well as public and political activities.' ('Gender' 1054) She set out the four elements she identified of gender as a constitutive element of social relationships, and as a primary way of signifying relationships of power. These are: (1) culturally available symbols; (2) normative concepts (which set forth interpretations of the meanings of symbols); (3) kinship system (based on household and family but also to include the labour market, education, polity) and (4) subjective identity. ('Gender' 1067) These four elements do not operate chronologically or in isolation to each other. Rather, they serve to show the connections between the individual identity and the wider social sphere. Scott demonstrated that gender operates in subjective and local terms as well as in the social and national consciousness, and that these aspects are inextricably interconnected.

It will become apparent that this study considers all four elements of gender in the context of Irish theatre history. Culturally available symbols of Irish femininity were a strong feature of the early plays performed at the Abbey Theatre, most notably with the nationalist icon of Cathleen ni Houlihan who first appeared in Yeats' and Lady Gregory's one-act play in 1902. Cathleen or 'the Sean Bhean Bocht', is discussed in detail

in Chapter 2. The manner in which such symbols of Ireland and Irish womanhood were manipulated and used by later generations of playwrights is evident in the exploration of dramatic female characters through the 1920s and 1930s. Later characters, such as Deevy's Katie Roche and O'Casey's Rosie Redmond (both discussed in Chapter 5), show how the cultural symbols were gradually transmuted into normative concepts. While these plays and characters may have been conceived as a critique or commentary on the ideology of the Irish Free State government, in many cases they served to solidify the status quo. In setting out the ties between these women, their families and colleagues and in considering the terms and conditions of their labour, I explore the operation of gender in the kinship system. With its biographical focus, this thesis considers the subjective identity of each woman in detail.

In the 1999 revised version of *Gender and the Politics of History* Scott returned to her ground-breaking book to ask a number of questions, including: 'Does the presence of women always call for gender analysis?' She went on to assert that 'the physical presence of females is not always a sure sign that 'women' are a separate political category, that they have been mobilised as women.' (Scott 212) Scott asks that feminist scholars be precise about the kind of gender analysis that is appropriate and useful. (212) I have endeavoured to ensure that this thesis is precise in its gender analysis. A consideration of gender is inherent in the use of the term 'actresses' but the fact remains that these performers were not mobilised as feminists in the political or social sense. Indeed, Irish historian Mary Daly has claimed that the 'Irish women's movement lost momentum as a political force after independence' and so these women were in step with much of their generation. (108)

In her 2014 book, *Haptic Allegories: Kinship and Performance in the Black and Green Atlantic*, Kathleen Gough draws attention to the challenge of reading the objective reality of Irish women as separate from their allegorical images and metaphoric constructions in history. She is intrigued by the possibility of finding in an archive a female body that exists prior to

such metaphoric constructions. (Gough 7) This thesis uses archival material never considered before to take on this challenge, and endeavours to go further by placing the real women in direct contact with the allegorical and metaphoric constructions of women, in the form of the characters they played on the stage of the National Theatre.

Focused gender analysis is a notable absence in the scholarship of Irish theatre history to date. In 1991 Irish historian Margaret Ward challenged how Irish history was being researched, published and taught. In *The Missing Sex* in 1991 Ward asked that the collective amnesia of male historians be interrogated, with a fresh focus on women's contribution to Irish history. However, in terms of Irish theatre history there remains a dearth of such work, with a few notable exceptions. Melissa Sihra's *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation* has been called 'field changing' and commentators see the essays contained therein as locating 'a discursive gendered relationship in Irish theatre practice, thus making way for a richer understanding of the pluralities of gendered representations on the stage.' (Caulfield 276-277) In her 2010 volume *Irish Women Playwrights 1930 – 1939: Gender and Violence on Stage* Cathy Leeny focuses on a small number of female playwrights to work towards 'a critical framing and contextualization of these playwrights within a gender/violence dialectic.' (Caulfield 276-277) More recent work such as *Performing Feminisms in Contemporary Ireland* considers gender on the Irish stage in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (Fitzpatrick 2013) Yet, for the most part, academic and historical theatre research has not engaged with the Irish female performer in history.

### **The (Irish) Actress in Theory**

The publication of *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* by Tracy C. Davis in 1992 was a departure in the study of women in theatrical history. It was the first new historical reading of the actress, re-inscribing the figure within a sociological framework. Yet, in *The*



*Cambridge Companion to the Actress* (published in 2007), Davis's work receives only two brief references. In the introduction, the editors state:

The actual business of theatre is, as T.C. Davis has shown in early research that has done more than any other to determine this whole field, a guarded male preserve. (Gale and Stokes 4)

But from there, the volume swiftly moves in a different direction, exploring new research and offering a radically different perspective on the 'powerful and lasting phenomenon' of the actress. (Gale and Stokes 2) (The second reference to Davis is a footnote relating to her later work on female playwrights.) As her starting point, Davis acknowledged the key relationship of women's work on stage to their social existence off stage. In her introduction, Davis explains how she abandoned narrative models of historical explanation when she came to believe that the complicated social existence of actresses could only be explained pluralistically. (*Working Women* xi) In her work, she sought to use 'hard facts' (legislation, census returns, labour supply) but to balance these with 'soft evidence' (social beliefs, customs and values).

Davis brought together individual stars (many already familiar personas in theatre history such as Ellen Terry) with a host of hitherto forgotten and largely unknown woman performers—ballet girls, music hall acts, acrobats, equestriennes, trapeze artists—all of whom can be legitimately categorized as 'actress'. The initial commentary on the volume united in applauding how Davis succeeded in grouping the female performers of this period. Critics asserted that she 'highlights the Victorian actress as a kind of every woman worker confronted with the necessity of earning a living within the rigid gender restrictions of her time'. (Ferris *Signs* 162-172)

In 1994, writers in *Feminist Review* were championing the employment of Marxist and feminist theory by Davis, as well as applauding her use of ideas from New Historicism to establish the group of the Victorian actress. (D'Monté 94-97) (Again and again, scholars resist the use of 'class' for the less political and more generic term 'group'.) But already it

was being noted (in *Feminist Review* and other journals) that Davis had made little reference to the appearance of that strong and political figure of the late nineteenth century, the 'New Woman'. Her Marxist reading of the Victorian actress as the subject of exploitation by employers, the male audience and society at large, put the actress in the role of victim. Davis viewed a woman's entry into a life on the stage within the light of labour supply and financial demands, without any consideration of creative ambitions or ambitions for personal fulfilment.

Gail Marshall offered an important challenge to Davis's work in 1998, exploring how the 'Galatea-aesthetic' of the Victorian era positioned actresses as visual and sexual commodities. Marshall restricted her study to 'legitimate theatre,' (i.e., drama rather than music hall acts) and then convincingly argued that the actress could be a highly conservative social figure. Marshall recognized how this ran counter to the prevalent current view of the Victorian actress as a woman of positively transgressive and liberating sexual energies. (97) She elucidated how the emergence of the 'New Drama' at the end of the century challenged this aesthetic. Her analysis showed how Victorian actresses were not constitutively subversive but instead conformed to Victorian expectations of middle-class femininity.

Writing an article on 'The State of the Abyss: Nineteenth Century Performance and Theatre Historiography in 1999', Jane Moody conceded, 'Davis's monograph represents a brilliant synthesis of interdisciplinary methods and historical rigour'. (112) Her work was still seen as a sophisticated critique that overturned the familiar orthodoxy of Victorian actress as prostitute to examine the more complex issue of the social identity of female performers. But aside from the historical rigour and economic investigation, feminist scholarship had moved on and was straining to look at the agency of women, rather than their victimhood.

Kirsten Pullen's *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and in Society* (2004) noted how traditional accounts and historical investigations focused on the subjugation of actresses, rather than their potential for activity. Pullen opened up the possibility that actresses did have a measure of

control over their own work and representations. In her reading, actresses were entitled to unique 'class privileges' not afforded to other women in society. Pullen saw actresses as having a degree of financial autonomy denied to many women. (41)

It is in the course of continuing along the trajectory set by Pullen that *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress* casts off the assumptions of Davis's work. Gale and Stokes set out their central concern as being 'as much to do with the construction, the loss and disguise of the self in dramatic performance as it is with the ideological and practical relations between "acting" and "action".' (Gale and Stokes 2) Viv Gardner opens up a chapter on autobiography by discussing how actresses usurped the male right to a public persona both as individuals and as members of the working class, but somehow managed to do this without losing their subordinate and domestic role as women. ('By Herself' 175)

Pullen explores the concept of 'the actress' in Great Britain and the United States, with a particular focus on the seventeenth century, but not excluding those in the twentieth century. Yet a gap in scholarship remains; there has been no attempt to understand the particular circumstances of 'the Irish actress'. In 2007, Melissa Sihra edited the volume of essays *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation*, which considers female Irish playwrights from Lady Gregory up to the current day. In her introduction to the volume, Janelle Reinelt spoke of how the book disentangled real women from the mythical figures. She called the volume 'a work of feminist scholarship in a moment too-often considered post feminist'. (Sihra xii) The playwright Marina Carr also acknowledged this tardiness in her preface saying, 'But for now the naming, the announcing, the revival is the thing.' (Sihra xi) Productions of these plays and attempts to establish either their value or their success in standing the test of time were going to have to wait. The recovery of these female voices had to come first.

There is a wealth of criticism analyzing the play scripts of the 1930s, situating them in the historical context of the Irish Free State. In *Women in*

*Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation*, Lisa Fitzpatrick examines how the dwindling opportunities afforded women in this period are reflected in the plays. She stops short of calling Teresa Deevy's work 'feminist', instead asserting it addresses 'a discomfort or uncertainty regarding the unjust social position of women'. (Sihra 71) Fitzpatrick explores the public reception of Deevy's work and how the plays were reinterpreted by male commentators to conform to dominant social attitudes of the time. Again, the subject of actress/role is bypassed for a detailed textual analysis that ignores the creative input of the actresses performing (and often creating for the first time) these roles.

It is curious, and startling, to find that in a book that focuses on female playwrights, the final word was given to an actress and theatre artist: Olwen Fouéré. Her eloquent afterword opens up a new debate rather than concluding one, asking not only that we recover and celebrate the female playwrights, but that we look again at the female performers, their performances and their lives. (Sihra 220) Fouéré's testament to the craft and vocation of actresses was as valid in the Victorian period studied by Davis as it was in the 1930s, and it remains true in Ireland today.

In his book *Hegemony and Fantasy in Irish Drama 1899 – 1949* Paul Murphy sometimes looks specifically at the depiction of women. He argues that Deevy's characters are deliberately hyperbolic to emphasize the economic brutality and sexual repression of the period. For Murphy, Deevy's work shows 'the relative complicity between women and the ideological roles they were required to play'. (182) In his work, Murphy consistently attaches the name of the performer to the part. For example, in his analysis of *The King of Spain's Daughter*:

In the opening lines the threat of patriarchal violence is made clear by Peter Kinsella's (John Stephenson) annoyance that Annie (Ria Mooney) hasn't made his dinner on time.' (Murphy 182)

By setting out the close alliance between character and actor in the Abbey Theatre during this period, Murphy captures the connection between the actress and the role. He also hints at the complicity of the audience with

the Abbey Company during this period.

In considering Victorian actresses, Davis discusses their unique position among English women of the period, on account of their having a co-sexual work place and the ability to earn equal pay. Davis suggests that,

by engaging in an insecure, itinerant, and bohemian occupation, female performers pushed beyond the traditional consciousness of home-centred women and engaged in active struggle with the ideology of the dominant (masculine) culture. ('Feminist Methodology' 69)

While this might be true of Irish actresses during other periods of history and for female performers outside of the Abbey, being a member of the Irish National Theatre company during the 1930s was not an insecure or wildly bohemian life. The ideology of the dominant masculine culture was rarely openly confronted, but my research shows it was continually encountered and negotiated by women on a private and covert level.

In a letter to Synge dated 1906 W. B. Yeats declared the hopelessness of finding a 'passionate woman actress in Catholic Ireland.' (Saddlemeyer 174) 'Women of the class of Miss Garvey and Miss Walker' - Irish Catholic actresses - Yeats once complained, 'have not sensitive bodies' even though they had 'high ideals' and 'simplicity of feeling'. (Frazier *Behind* 188) Yeats' insistence on employing English women to embody his heroines suggests he noted a particular subjectivity in the performances of the Irish actresses that resisted passionate emotion to conform to Irish cultural expectations.

The production values of the Abbey Theatre in the decades after 1906 still bore the marks of its amateur beginnings: many of the actors had day jobs, the food on the plates was cardboard and performers often used their own clothes as costumes. The 'illusion' was signaled by a huge brass gong and reinforced by the greasepaint on the performers' faces. Unlike the reverential silence of today, the audience ordered tea and coffee and smoked throughout the performances.

Theatre scholar Aoife Monks has written of the formative nature of

costume. Monks asserts how 'because in a theatre performance, costumes represent "clothes", they become symbolic of a series of moral, emotional and ideological qualities, and stand in for a set of broader social values.' (39) The values of Dublin society were intrinsic to the National Theatre, where actors fashioned their costumes from their own or a borrowed wardrobe. An outing to the theatre was a social event, where actresses mingled with theatregoers in the lobby dressed as they were on stage.

**Context for the working structures of the Abbey Theatre Company**

The Abbey School of Acting was established after the theatre received a state subsidy in 1925, and it offered evening classes to students who could pay for tuition. There is little archival data on the nature or format of the classes, although M.J. Dolan's papers in the National Library of Ireland suggest that students had to audition for a place in the school and that the emphasis at such auditions was on vocal technique of the classical style: enunciation, recitation and 'word painting'. (NLI Mss 22,556)

Students in the school attended weekly classes during the 'term' and the term concluded with a performance of a play, usually drawn from the main repertoire. While there was no automatic route from the School of Acting into the Company, as the experiences of Mooney and O'Connor show, the directors were aware of talented students. Requests to join the Company appear to have been on a 'type needed' basis. Therefore, if a member of the performing Company left, they would draw on the school to provide the required 'type'. O'Connor joined the Company after the female ingénue Kate Curling departed for America; she automatically took on the roles Curling had played. Others first appeared with the main Company when a child or teenager was specifically required; for instance, May Craig in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). Later, schoolgirl Phyllis Ryan was attending classes when they auditioned her for the role of Brigid in *Shadow and Substance* by P.V. Carroll in 1937.

It is useful here to note the prerequisite for actors to have financial means to pursue their interest in theatre. Students paid for classes and

only those with employers that allowed time for rehearsals and didn't object to public performances, or the independently wealthy, could join the Company on a permanent basis. On her appointment as director of the School of Acting, Mooney had aspirations to eradicate (or at least, conceal) the class differences between the students by providing a standard 'uniform'. This proved difficult in light of other priorities. (McGlone 64)

As well as the Abbey School, the biographies recorded here do show a transfer of artists from other performing groups in the city to the theatre. Many began performing in the 'At Homes' or other upper-class entertainments, including the Dublin Drama League. There was a vibrant amateur music hall scene in Dublin during the 1930s as well as small, covert but strong scene of experimental theatre. However, only a few notable exceptions (such as Ria Mooney) transferred seamlessly from such groups to the Abbey Company.

Many scholars have considered the social context of the 1930s in terms of Irish nationality, its 'performance' and its transmission on national and international stages. Barry Monahan, for instance, has pointed out:

On the stage of the Abbey theatre, actors and actresses effected an embodiment of the ideological positions occupied by the group before and after the foundation of the Irish Free State. (Monahan 111)

In *Acting Irish In Hollywood*, Ruth Barton follows the same line of enquiry, developing her argument by considering the identification at work between film spectators and performers. But while the performance of nationality has been studied, there has been less consideration of the impact on gender roles in the Irish Free State. Scholars have not explored the blurring between Irish actress and character that is not reflected in any script. Nobody has explained that negotiating Dublin social life as a female member of the acting profession, particularly in the deepening conservatism of the 1930s, was a task as arduous, if not more so, than any of the parts they played.

Davis's book *Actresses as Working Women: their social identity in*

*Victorian Culture* laid the foundation for subsequent investigations of the subject, yet since then the perspective has shifted radically. Where Davis saw victim, Gale and Stokes see power. I want to take up the argument from Gale and Stokes but to interrogate it in the specific context of the Irish Free State, where the women were making career choices, compromises and personal decisions within complex strictures. The nature of the female parts they were playing on the stage (whether penned by men or women) put into stark relief the complications of their own lives—both personal and professional.

This is not a study of 'the Irish actress' in general terms. It does not seek to make a claim for a particular nature of performer across decades of Irish history. Instead, it focuses on a small number of women trained and working in the Irish National Theatre during the Free State period, when there was political and social pressure to meet a particular type of female ideal. My work seeks to point up this aspect of the careers that I study, and to demonstrate how archival research can expose the pressure on individual lives, as well as how the women responded to these challenges in their own life choices. I'd like to prise apart performativity from performance, while always showing them as co-constitutive. This is only possible with the extensive use of a wide range of archival documentation.

### **Context and Micro-History: Encountering and Countering Gaps**

'The Context Problem' was elegantly outlined by T.C. Davis in 2004. Davis asserted, 'In theatre and performance history, the encounter with 'gaps' is a major conundrum of the discipline.' (203) She uses the art history techniques of 'rigatino' and 'rondeur' to interrogate the processes by which theatre historians can mask, fill in or draw attention to such gaps. Davis asserts, 'Contextualization is a process. It involves reasoned choices about what is sought and provided as explanatory mechanisms.' (207) My work aims to expose these subjective choices and to foreground the incompleteness of the data used to forge a historical and social backdrop. As Davis explains, the process of what painters call 'passage' allows the



foregrounding of specific elements or features for the first time. Within this 'complete' landscape, the narratives of these women's lives (each unique) now take the central focus.

Foucault's notion of 'micro histories' as set out in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is one line of enquiry, championing as he does the connection between the existence of documents and the existence of events. In the evocatively-titled essay *Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory & Biography*, Jill Lepore sets out the differences in these two modes of working. She defines micro-history as studying the history of 'hitherto obscure people' that 'concentrates on the intensive study of particular lives'. (130) Lepore argues that micro-historians 'trace their elusive subjects through slender records and tend to address themselves to solving small mysteries.' (133) She explains that micro-historians see the value of a life in its exemplariness, as an allegory for broader issues, rather than its uniqueness. That is, 'The life story is always a means to an end -- explaining the culture.' (Lepore 133) My subjects did not, in every case, leave 'slender' records, and I address small as well as larger mysteries. I do not primarily seek to explain the culture, but I do want to explore these actresses' lives in relation to their culture.

In a strictly 'clinical' sense, one might read this thesis as case studies of the actress who held steadfast to her individual craft (Aideen O'Connor), the actress who trained as a director and teacher (Ria Mooney), the upper-class girl who became a comedienne (Frolie Mulhern), the wealthy widow that acted for pleasure (May Craig) and the respectable Catholic wife and mother (Eileen Crowe). But one might also read each of these life stories as a unique and discrete biography, celebrating the individual life choices, achievements and contribution to theatre in Ireland.

Lepore goes on, 'Micro-historians maintain a kind of distance (or illusion of distance) from their subjects. A biographer's alter ego is usually the subject itself, while a micro-historian's alter ego may be a figure who plays the role of detective/judge in relation to the subject.' (134) In this

thesis, I aim not to judge but to understand and to narrativise the details of their lives. In this mode, I find myself allied with the biographer.

Pullen, in her seminal study in this area *Actresses and Whores: On Stage & In Society*, dismisses the use of case histories as only capable of producing tentative, incomplete, revisable conclusions. (5) The question then becomes: can tentative incomplete conclusions be useful? Certainly, it is in these revisable conclusions that significant truths may be found.

### **Origins & Endings**

In Freudian psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on repetition, traces and repression, Derrida saw a theory of the archive that drove the investigator always back to origins. Freudianism, for Derrida, was a science of the archive concerned with a powerful (death) drive moving in one direct line, back to the source, where the moment of inception could be recovered. The 'fever' he writes of is part of this desire to find, or locate, or possess the beginnings of things. In her essay collection *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*, Carolyn Steedman applied practical experiences of archival research to Derrida's theories. She argues in 'Something she called a fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust' that authority comes not from documents themselves, but from the researcher's visits, and she asserts:

No one historian's archive is ever like another's; each account of his or her experience within them will always produce counterexamples. (Steedman 1163)

The insistence on 'within them' is revealing. Her focus is not the structures around the archive. Instead, archival documents can subsume and envelop the historians. Researchers arrive at the site with the weight of their own ideological baggage, perhaps with an arsenal of political belief already in place to attack the material. They come with the intention to extract something. Instead, they must become absorbed into the material, with the visit allowing a particular type of osmosis between past and present. While Derrida focuses on possession, Steedman is enthralled by the creative possibilities in the relationship between researcher and material.

Derrida also questions the 'the instant of archivization' in an age of technological advances where boundaries between public and private spheres are increasingly difficult to find. Writing as he was in 1995, Derrida may have anticipated but could not have foreseen exactly how digital technologies would transform both social and cultural contemporary life and the process of storing and researching archives. Steedman arguably needs to incorporate such changes into her own exploration of research expeditions. Now, the journey can be virtual. The composition of the 'dust' inhaled in such a simulated encounter has been omitted from her study. Refuting any connection between archives and origins, Steedman says:

Rather, they hold everything in medias res, the account caught halfway through, most of it missing, with no end ever in sight. ('Something she called a fever' 1175)

This refutation comes from the notion of 'dust'; the exploration of everything and nothing that archives may contain, where the minutest detail can be vital, and absences can be as telling as the items present. For even if one is collecting material with the knowledge (or hope) that it will be archived, how can one know the final shape this material will take when events haven't yet unfolded?

Joseph Holloway's diaries in the National Library of Ireland represent a particular type of archive for theatre historians, and indeed cultural historians, researching Dublin in the first decades of the twentieth century. Holloway transcribed and catalogued events in a meticulous fashion. His narrative style, episodic and asymmetric, makes no distinction between 'everything' and 'nothing', describing as he does the traffic on the way home with the same detail as the performance he had seen. Long conversations with Abbey directors sit side-by-side with banal dialogues with strangers. Frank O'Connor described the journal as 'that donkey's detritus'. (Hogan and O'Neill xvi) Editors have described it as 'a gigantic repository of trivia rendered in a style that makes the reading sometimes an almost unendurable agony' while it retains 'hypnotic fascination'. (Hogan and O'Neill xx)

The episodic structure Holloway employs stalls traditional narrative drive, working in opposition to the autobiographical (and biographical) instinct to narrate and shape story. As Steedman says, if historians are to contemplate 'everything', then they must begin somewhere, which is not to say they must find an origin. Steedman asserts, 'starting is a different thing from originating, or even from beginning.' ('Something she called a fever' 1177) It's vital to begin, without finding the beginning.

Similarly, there is no ending. We bring about a conclusion, but there is no end; the reader is still there with the closed book, and the researcher remains, packing bags in the archive room of the library and preparing for the journey home. The biographical subject lives on within that relationship and 'the truth' is never found but 'a truth' is conjured into being by that encounter.

### **Conjuring a Truth: Speculation and Imagination**

Thomas Postlewait has drawn attention to the significance of micro-history as a means of investigating the theatrical past. He persuasively argues that studying the past synchronically may yield results that differ substantially from more diachronic studies. (Normington et al. 'Researching' 96) As Schneider has asked of Phelan's concept of 'a maniacally charged present': 'is it not punctuated by, syncopated with, indeed charged by other moments, other times?' (92) This notion of syncopating archives with 'other times', of releasing moments from the restrictions of linear narrative history to syncopate, or pulse through, the present is compelling, permitting as it does an element of informed creativity. In fact, *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance* is perhaps most convincing when it states that:

the study of theatre history and historiography is something of an adventure, not so much a survey of what was, as an investigation of what might have been. [...] It arguably comes alive at the moment when careful scholarship and detailed research merge with imaginative speculation to ignite a creative yet informed response to live data. (Normington et al. 'Researching' 97)

This echoes the call of Susan Bennett to feminist scholars to reconceive theatre history itself: 'I see the task as one that must draw emphatically not on notions of "truth" or "fact", but on what history most fears: imagination.' (51)

This idea of 'imaginative speculation' must be interrogated further. In *Reflections on Biography*, Paula Backscheider reminds us that there are no facts; there is only *evidence* for assessment and interpretation. (61) She states: 'Evidence must be presented in ways that make the arrangement seem to have arisen almost irresistibly from it.' (Backscheider 88) In the elision of 'seem to', there is once again the slip into the area of 'imaginative speculation'. A stable, fixed history is not dictated by an archive. Truth, even when resting on documentary evidence, is elusive.

Archives, whether official or un-official, textual or non-textual, are only forms of evidence. Data requires a pattern to become suggestive of a meaning. Appropriate strategies for reading such evidence effectively are essential. An example may help to illustrate this point. The marriage certificate for Arthur Shield's marriage to his third wife, Laurie Bailey, is contained in the Shields Family Archive in the James Hardiman Library at NUI Galway. The certificate was issued by Our Lady of Peace Church (15444 Nordhoff Street, Sepulveda, California 91343) on 17<sup>th</sup> September 1955. The names on the certificate in the archive read Lewis Shields and Loretta Bailey. (Shields T13/A/495) The collection's descriptive list states this is an error; the error was noted by Laurie Shields in later years, in person and in writing.

What is the 'real' or the 'truth' in such cases? The record or Shields' later anecdote? Can they, as Taylor advocates, work 'in tandem' where they overtly resist each other? Or can access to the past come through an erroneous document? Both archive and anecdote reveal something about that day, the event. This complicated relationship between document and memory requires one to reflect on the manner in which archives perform.

**The Manner in which Archives Perform**

In 2009, cultural historian Robin Bernstein put forward the notion of 'the scriptive thing' in an article entitled 'Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race.' Bernstein defined the 'scriptive thing' as a 'heuristic tool for dealing with incomplete evidence — and all evidence is incomplete — to make responsible, limited inferences about the past.' (76) Bernstein proposed that agency and intention co-emerge through everyday physical encounters with the material world and used this concept to explore issues of race. It is my proposition that in the theatre historian or researcher's encounter with any archive collection, each article of material becomes such a 'scriptive thing'.

Following Heidegger, Bernstein elucidates that the essential difference between a 'thing' and an 'object' is situational; a thing will assert itself within a field of matter. (69) It follows that each item of archival material is not a 'scriptive thing' by virtue of having been catalogued and stored for posterity, but it becomes so through the encounter with the researcher. That status is not assured until it is examined and put to work. Bernstein says:

An object becomes a thing when it invites a person to dance. [...] At the deepest ontological level, then, performance is what distinguishes an object from a thing. (70)

If it is performance that characterizes a thing, it follows that each article of archival material in becoming a 'scriptive thing' performs; and the 'thing' comes to constitute both archive *and* repertoire. Taylor's binary falls away:

The scriptivity [...] calls into question the very model of archive and repertoire as distinct-but-interactive. (Bernstein 89)

It follows that whether one is considering a dramatic text, an oral interview, an anecdote, tax correspondence or a book of photographs, the form of the thing is moot. One piece of evidence is not distinguished from the other by virtue of having been 'left behind' or by being 'not transposable'. If the researcher chooses to dance with it, to treat each

article as a clue from the past and pledge to the future from that historical moment, it becomes a scriptive thing rather than an inanimate object.

The lyrical concept of 'dancing with things' captures the interaction between researcher and archival material, but it obscures the inelegant, frustrated relationship that often characterizes such research. Bernstein accepts as essential the need to gain contextual understanding, but she also insists that the relationship with archival material takes its own form:

One gains performance competence not only by accruing contextualizing knowledge but also, crucially, by holding a thing, manipulating it, shaking it to see what meaningful gestures tumble forth. (90)

While the researcher may hold, shake or manipulate it, archives conduct their own performance in that encounter: 'the gestures tumble forth'.

Drawing on archives to construct a composite biography such as this, the researcher finds that the 'scriptive things' come to stage their own performance of identity. It may be useful here to revisit some of the *types* of scriptive things this thesis has drawn on. While there is no hierarchy of evidential truth in particular items, it is important to ask if the nature of each 'scriptive thing' shapes the performance in particular ways.

### **The Performance of Archives**

#### **Personal Letters**

My research began with the letters of Aideen O'Connor, written by hand and sent home as she traversed the US for the first time with the Abbey Theatre Company. These letters had already been confined to the periphery: they were collected by Shields's third wife as she researched a biography of her husband and used only for background details about US tours. O'Connor was a good letter writer: passionate, lively and packing her correspondence with intimate thoughts and details specifically for the recipient. The letters dating from 1934-35 and 1937-38 foreground the differences between O'Connor's lifestyle and that of her sisters at home. In tone, they are young, confident and ambitious. They present a professional, successful actress throwing off her middle-class roots and

envisioning a new life for herself in America. Immediate and visceral, they present fleeting moments in her life as a travelling performer.

O'Connor's later letters to theatre producer Eddie Choates, written from Hollywood during World War II, mimic the same tone: upbeat, confident and forward-looking, yet they perform differently. Now typed, letters often begin with formal references to business arrangements before personal details spill out. Work-related news often slips into the wayward fantasies of someone drinking heavily. The loss of O'Connor's belief and passion is palpable in the gap between the formal type of the letters and the personal situation of the writer, as expressed in her private journals.

### **Scrapbooks**

In the case of Frolie Mulhern, there are no archived letters in her handwriting, giving us her voice and telling a story in which she is central and driving the action. Rather, there are scrapbooks of press cuttings: articles, social columns, theatre reviews and photographs. Mulhern constructed for posterity a 'scriptive thing' where the story, the information, comes only from outside sources and circles around her absence. The section on her life in this thesis begins and concludes in a similar way, with her death detailed in formal obituaries rather than in personal accounts. The obscure anecdote in Mooney's autobiography about a premonition of death delivered by an Asian woman in San Francisco also appears to deal with Mulhern's death at a formal remove, and can be seen to perform the loss felt by a colleague and friend.

### **Anecdotes**

Formally recorded in autobiographies (such as that by Vincent Dowling) or transmitted orally, anecdotes abound in Irish theatre history. Rather than dismiss these as fables, or attempt to 'verify' their accuracy (often impossible), I embrace the mythic status of these scriptive things, and work to dislodge their emotional or historical weight. The questions become: what does this anecdote express about the subject? What is the



inference, the joke, pointing up or at? What does this tale tell about the audience? How does it reflect their understanding of the subject?

A key example is the ubiquitous story of how, on being cast as Rosie Redmond in O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, Mooney had no knowledge of how a prostitute earned money. Evidence suggests this story emanated from Mooney herself; many claim it is a falsehood. But the deeper truth may be that Mooney understood Catholic society in Ireland, and the importance of stressing her virtue. The story served to defend her honour and that of her family in the face of hostility. In addition, it served the section of Irish theatre-going society of the time that refused to accept O'Casey's depiction of Dublin and its unsavoury inhabitants.

### **Business Records**

Often deemed to be devoid of personal or artistic input, the business correspondence and financial records of the theatre company (such as the collection of Elbert Wickes, American producer of the Abbey tours in the US) perform in a different fashion to the evidence listed above. The legal correspondence, tax records, box office figures and financial accounts; all of the practical details of his business, including a detailed inventory of the contents of his office on Boylston Street in Boston, stack up into a framework within which the historical characters are swirling so fast that they are invisible. Such details may perform by stealth, with financial strains hidden in columns of figures, or they can set out the inequity between company members, in the composition of wage packets.

All archives, then, perform as 'scriptive things'. In innumerable ways, they perform an absence, a disappearance. To repeat Schneider: 'The archive *performs* the equation of performance with disappearance, even as it *performs* the service of 'saving'. (99) But in equating performance with disappearance, it follows that we equate performance with loss. The performance of the archive becomes always a performance of loss, unless one makes of that performance a narrative that not only endures but extends into the future.

**A Defence of Narrative in Biography**

Given my focus on imaginative speculation, on dancing things and ephemeral fragments, it may appear my use of chronological narrative is out of step with my thinking. Therefore, I'd like to set out a defence of the structure. In the study of history, narrative has for some time been viewed as a 'fictional device used by the historian to impose a reassuring order on randomly arriving bits of information about the dead.' (Schama xvi) Rather than use narrative to impose a reassuring order, I have sought to find, and impose, a pattern that corresponds to the lives of these women. Indeed, in his discussion of the limits and possibilities of narrative that precedes *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*, historian Simon Schama says:

As artificial as written narratives might be, they often correspond to ways in which historical actors construct events. That is to say, many, if not most, public men see their conduct as in part situated between role and models from an heroic past and expectations of the judgment of posterity. (xvi)

The 'actors' referred to here are the performers on the stage of world history, but the statement is equally applicable to theatrical actors and actresses. Reiterating Fouéré's belief about the status of actors quoted in my introduction, performers consistently see their lives in this light and construct their life story accordingly. The women of the Abbey Company during the 1930s performed the position, career and the social role of 'actress in the National Theatre'. My writing seeks to emulate that formulation; it proposes that all accounts of a life (including this one) are a performative narrative and are not 'the truth' or verifiably 'real'.

In writing about 'fever' induced by archival research, Steedman was drawn into the discussion on validity of narrative as a form. She asserts:

The grammatical tense of the archive is not, then, the future perfect, not the conventional past historic of English-speaking historians, nor even the present historique of the French, but the syntax of the fairy tale. ('Something she called a fever' 1177)

Fairy tale syntax, beginning always 'Once upon a time' and choosing to conclude at a point where 'they all lived happily ever after', underpins the fact that the history we speak of or write about is no longer there (it has

disappeared into the past) but also that it never was; that is to say, it never was in such a way as it has been told.

To narrativise these lives is, in some small way, to shift the axis of power from the telling of Irish theatre history through the lives of men to a more balanced depiction of events: performances and backstage events that may have impacted on those performances as experienced by the female players in that history.

While Davis has insisted that history itself is a narrative form, Bacscheider insists that the best biographies deliver a 'narrative' of the life trajectory. She insists on the need for 'the transformation of instinct into patterns of action, into character, into style—into an identity with a core of integrity', to produce a successful and satisfactory biography. (Bacscheider 124) The term *transformation* implies the imposition of an external form, the application of something that is not there. However, other biographers argue that it is essential to find the ideal literary form to express each life, thus forcing the writer to go beyond the restrictions of cultural models and narrative expectations. (Bacscheider 103) Transformation becomes *transmutation*, where the base substance (or evidence) is presented, or made visible, in another form.

In *Reflections on Biography* Bacscheider quotes Catherine Bowen when she claims that: 'a biography is not an encyclopaedia, it is the story of a life'. (85) In his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Italo Calvino pronounced: 'Each life is an encyclopaedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable.' (124) It is this dialectical tension, that of the encyclopaedia and the narrative, the evidence and the pattern, the archive and the life that drives the narratives of the life stories I've written and forms the core of this thesis.

## **Chapter 2: Eileen Crowe (1898-1978) and May Craig (1889 – 1972)**

### **Chapter 2: Eileen Crowe (1898-1978) and May Craig (1889 – 1972)**

#### **Actualizing an Absence: The Life of Eileen Crowe**

Eileen Crowe was true to her travelling tradition and did not appear at all, she was on the train but unseen.  
(George Yeats qtd. in Saddlemyer 491-492)

Archival searches have yet to produce a substantial amount of material relating to Eileen Crowe's personal life, or any documentation revealing her own thoughts about her career.<sup>2</sup> This kind of absence poses significant difficulties for the theatre historian or biographer, particularly when, as in this study, she is the only woman in the group to present a lacuna of this order. It brings, for this researcher, a sadness for a loss that can't be articulated, as there is no discernible shadow of what has been lost. On her retirement in 1970, Crowe had played one thousand and thirty four parts on the stage of the Abbey Theatre. She was a key figure in the Company from the 1920s onwards, originating many of the best-known characters in Irish drama, and her wholesome, maternal persona was a long-established feature of the Company at home and abroad. Yet little has been written about her career as a whole, or her contribution to Irish theatre history. Reviews are plentiful, anecdotes from others abound; but, in the case of Eileen Crowe, a sense of the woman herself is absent.

Such methodological problems are a known entity within the wider fields of performance studies and theatre history. Enmeshed here with the issue of the ephemerality of performance is the fact that, 'Historically, the figure of the actress has often been marked by absence and exclusion.' (Gale and Stokes 1) This chapter, and indeed this thesis as a whole, moves between the personal and the performance in a constant, fluid manner. It incorporates the material facts of Crowe's work to show the economic realities for Abbey actresses, and explores how these intersected with gender roles more broadly. Before concentrating on the carefully

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<sup>2</sup> This is true for archives in Dublin, the rest of Ireland and America, including the Abbey Theatre's own digital archive housed at NUI, Galway.

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modulated presentation of the self in the life and career of Eileen Crowe, I'd like to consider the wider background and theoretical issues around the provision of context to a narrative account of her life.

In 'The Context Problem' of 2004 (previously mentioned in my introduction), Davis explored the process of contextualization, and how theories of performance and feminist historiography intersected with this process in the study of theatre history. Davis compares historical context to an optical trick, by which writers produce a multi-dimensional effect; in effect, where they aim to make something appear complete, where completeness is not possible. But the process of '*passage*', as Davis outlines, can be used in an alternative fashion. By placing the object of study differently, lacunae surrounding it can 'pull [the object] into the foreground'. ('Context' 204)

Davis drew on the work of Italian historian and proponent of micro-history, Carlo Ginzburg, who first focused attention on the historian's use of '*rigatino*'. Ginzburg said the following of this art restoration method, which involved '*hatching*' in colour and detail:

The context, seen as a space of historical possibilities, gives the historian the possibility to integrate the evidence, often consisting only of scattered fragments, about an individual's life. We are obviously far from a judicial perspective. (90)

'*Rigatino*' leaves its mark on the page. For future art restorers and for viewers, it makes the nature of the reparation visible; it leaves an outline of or statement about the decisions made. With such a technique, specific evidence can be integrated into a bigger landscape. Details are used to supplement the context and the context is aligned to fit with the details. The following section on Eileen Crowe works in this fashion. The lack of specific archival evidence shifted from being an obstacle to being a statement about how Crowe led her life.

Davis states, '[I]n writing theatre and performance history, we utilize theory, logic, surmise and induction.' ('Context' 204) This thesis as a whole may work by induction, i.e., inferring a general law from particular

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instances. However, this section works by *deduction*: inferring the particular from the general. I stress that this section works in this manner because of the limited amount of specific evidence available. On integrating particular evidence into the wider social context, I found that the result suggests the life of this particular actress is most usefully considered within the model of Irish womanhood promoted by the Irish Free State. The undocumented nature of Crowe's career led me to consider what social historian Caitriona Clear has termed the 'visible but silent' character of Irish women in the period before World War II. (49) The existence and social reality of women during this period was not concealed, but their social and political power, their voices, were occluded.

As already indicated, Crowe played over one thousand parts on the stage of the Abbey Theatre during her career, with Juno Boyle in O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* her most frequent role. (Abbey Archives Database) After playing Mary Boyle five times, Crowe went on to play Juno in thirty-seven separate productions of the O'Casey play. Thirty-five times she appeared in separate productions of *The Shadow of a Gunman*, also by O'Casey, as Minnie Powell. Other repeated roles were Peggy Scally in George Shiels' comedy *Professor Tim* (32 productions) and Marian in Lennox Robinson's *The Far-Off Hills* (31 productions.) She played Pegeen in *The Playboy of the Western World* seventeen times, between the mid-1920s and mid-1930s. Here, I'd like to trace the parts for which she was best known, even where they weren't her most critically successful.

The lack of documentary evidence makes an exhaustive study of Crowe's life and career impossible. This chapter is, instead, an exploration of the work she did in the 1920s and 1930s, and how those performances set the model for the rest of her career. It explores her acting style and persona, the influence of her forebears on that style of performance, the key parts she played as her career developed and the material facts of her labour. By exploring *both* the depiction of women in the play texts of this period and the manner in which Crowe interpreted and performed these roles, we can come to a more nuanced understanding of the on and off-

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stage roles of Irish actresses during this period.

This chapter also serves to illuminate Crowe's position in the Abbey Theatre Company as a comparison to the other actresses, and particularly to the actress May Craig. Of a similar age and also married with children, Craig is an insightful comparison and details of her career extracted from her personal papers in Irish theatre archives are included here. It becomes evident that Crowe's work presents a particularly telling study of Irish womanhood on the stage of the Abbey Theatre and on tour in the United States during the Irish Free State period.

### **Gender and Class Structure in Ireland during the Free State Period**

Historian Mary E. Daly has highlighted that the history of women in Ireland in the twentieth century is unique, but also very similar to that in other countries. All across Europe after the first World War, dominant ideologies confined the role of women to the family. With mass unemployment and economic stagnation, most labour movements were ambivalent on the question of females in the work place while falling birth rates concerned all national governments, for various reasons. Between the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 and the Second World War, the partition of Ireland and the restoration of public order were key political issues for the government. The social ideologies that emanated from the religious and political spheres during this period had long-standing implications for women.

In an essay entitled 'Church, State and Women: The Aftermath of Partition', Liam O'Dowd draws out the reciprocal relationship between the Protestant churches in the North and the Catholic Church in the Free State, but demonstrates the 'substantial theological differences' between the churches on women's role in society. O'Dowd argues that the prominence of Marian cults in Irish Catholicism from the nineteenth century onwards separated sex from sexuality, and contributed to the Catholic idealization of motherhood. (13) Such theological differences created practical differences, whereby Protestant clergy emphasized the spiritual contract of

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marriage and the individual conscience, while the Catholic clergy sought to police the family from without.

Commentators, such as Maria Luddy and Mary Daly, have written of how the Free State and the Catholic Church shaped the function and place of women through issues relating to sexuality. As Luddy points out, 'the politicization of sexual behaviour had been a feature of Irish nationalism from the late nineteenth century,' but from the 1920s, it was believed that the bodies of women threatened the morality of the State. (80) Moral regulation lay in the imposition of standards of idealized conduct for women. The imposition of these standards arguably also impacted the Abbey acting style immeasurably.

The extensive writings of social historians and scholars of women's studies (such as Caitriona Clear and Myrtle Hill) have proved time and again that attempts to define Irish womanhood during the early part of the century are riven with problems. Assessing the political and economic status of Irish women is, however, possible by drawing on historical and political facts. Irish women over thirty years of age and those owning land won suffrage in December 1918, with restrictions being lifted ten years later to allow all women over the age of twenty-one to vote. While Irish women were allowed to express their views in the polling booth earlier than in most European states, they were forced to choose between working and marriage by a number of legal measures.

The Free State Act of 1935 gave the Minister for Industry and Commerce powers to prohibit women from working in some industries, and to prevent employers taking on more women than men. The Employment Act, in the same year, extended the marriage bar to all civil service posts, requiring women holding state employment to resign upon marriage. While paid work was considered appropriate, and even healthy, for single women, it did not reflect well on a husband to have a wife in the workplace. The rate of married Irish women in paid employment remained around 6% until the 1960s. (Hill 99-100) Crowe, Craig and the other married women of the Abbey were in that minority.



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In the new Irish Free State, public order relied heavily on the Catholic Church and the adoption of English Common Law to restore and maintain stability. While Celtic Brehon laws, which preceded the Common Law, gave women an egalitarian role in terms of marital and property rights, English Common Law awarded them only a subordinated role to their husband when it was first implemented in the seventeenth century.

Historian Joe Lee argues in his essay 'Women and the Church since the Famine' that the socio-economic status of women reduced sharply after the Famine of the 1840s, when the emergence of a dominant class of strong tenant farmers transformed the class structure. (MacCurtain and O'Corrain 37) The emergent system of land inheritance and the resulting migration of women had grave implications for their prospect and status. By the 1920s and 1930s, while women had acquired the right to own property, they could not make a valid legal contract and their domicile was legally regarded as that of her husband. In a society based on property ownership, they retained little or no political power. One effect of the idealization of family, marriage and motherhood in both parts of Ireland was to obscure the distribution of resources *within* the family between men and women. (O'Dowd 29) In the property-less working class, the income-earning potential of women was of greater importance but long working hours and family responsibilities kept most of them from being involved in political activism or influencing state policies in any significant way.

As O'Dowd observes, 'Both Church and State [...] were committed to ideologically consecrating the small property-owning, rural-based social system'. (29) In such a system, the male property-owning farmer was the central figure of power. Single women had little status while the status of married women was ideological rather than material. The conservatism of the states (both nationalist and unionist), the ideology of the Catholic Church and the laissez-faire political ideology of the time all militated against the participation of women in public life. Tom Inglis has explored the social grounding of loyalty to the Catholic Church and demonstrated

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the close link between religious capital and social acceptance and respect. (68) He insightfully suggests that it is an error to interpret the position of women as victims, as hopeless or powerless. But their gender made their power radically different. In fact, women could gain and hold power only by virtue of their display of sexual morality.

The fact remains that the ideological separation of public and private (familial) spheres, which was enforced by the material and class conditions of the time, has obscured women's subordination, in terms of class and gender, as well as the full dimensions of their social role. (33) The role in society of an actress in the National Theatre, therefore, provides a particularly complex but nonetheless illuminating case study of the operations of gender and class in Irish society during this time.

The index of Caitriona Clear's extensive survey *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922 – 61* skips directly from 'Abortion' to 'Advice to women: beauty and appearance'. (274) Actresses don't figure in Clear's study and there is a notable lack of information on this particular form of labour during that period. In an interview in 2012, writer and editor Val Mulhern (who attended the Abbey from the 1930s) referred to McCormick and Crowe by their married names, 'the Judges'. She remarked on how the Judges' two children (a boy and a girl) were never seen at the theatre. Crowe, more than any of the other women in my study, took on the contradictory positions of professional actress and mother. She somehow combined these roles to come to exemplify the respectable and humble mother prized by the Irish Free State.

### **The Private Life of Eileen Crowe**

'I am not a dancer. I am not a singer. I am not anything,' Crowe told a journalist from the *Boston Evening Transcript* in 1933. (*Scrapbooks NLI Mss 25,511-23*) She spoke effusively about the work of her actor husband, F. J. McCormick (also a member of the Abbey Company), but played down her own career. F.J. McCormick was the stage name of Peter Judge. Until his death in 1947, husband and wife often appeared on the stage in Dublin

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and on tour as a couple, before going home together to their two children in their suburban home on Palmerstown Road in Rathmines.

Crowe was a private woman, who strove to conceal the stress of motherhood in her public work as an actress. It is known she had two children, a boy and a girl, but extensive searches failed to find any documentation in the public domain recording when she gave birth, or how she and her husband arranged childcare while they worked and toured. There are no clues as to how she balanced professional and domestic life; she kept such details private. (Craig's family arrangements, conversely, were easy to source.) As quoted above, Crowe's traditional approach to touring was to avoid all unnecessary publicity and be there but unseen. When the actors gathered for photographs and rowdy farewells, she often kept herself and her private life concealed.

### **Background**

Crowe trained at the Abbey School of Acting and Lennox Robinson was enamoured by her talents at her audition for the Company. Robinson later claimed that, 'Five minutes' audition from Eileen Crowe was sufficient.' (*Curtain Up* 114) As well as casting her as Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, he cast her in many leading roles in his drawing room comedies. These plays include *The Far-Off Hills* (1928), *Drama at Inish* (1933), *Church Street* (1934), and *Killycreggis in Twilight* (1937). (Her appearances in Robinson's comedies are discussed separately.)

In 1923 the Dublin Drama League presented a play titled *The Kingdom of God* by Gregorio Martinez-Sierra at the Abbey Theatre. The play had been translated from the Spanish by Helen and Harley Granville-Barker and was produced by Arthur Shields. In November of the following year, Crowe revived her central role of Sister Gracia with the Abbey Company in a production of the same play directed by M.J. Dolan.

This quiet drama traces the three stages in the life of a girl from a prominent family who enters a religious order at the age of nineteen. She serves old men in an asylum, unmarried mothers in a home and finally

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abandoned children in an orphanage. Despite the pleas of her family and a marriage proposal from a doctor, she holds fast to her Catholic faith and devotion to servitude. The character of Sister Gracia stood out in the cast from 1923, with *Evening Herald* critic F. J. O'Donnell noting on 22 October:

The greater glory of the acting belongs to Miss Eileen Crowe. As Sister Gracia she gave a perfect interpretation of the mental oscillations of a young religieuse. ('Kingdom of God')

One might surmise that these were oscillations Crowe personally understood. By her own admission, she was a moody, dissatisfied teenager. She joined a convent as a postulant in 1922, only to leave four months later. Taking to the stage, she claimed, eased her temperament. Gradually, she became the 'demure' woman known to Dublin audiences. (Higgins NLI Mss 27,883 (7)) This chaste, religious and homely nature was a strong feature of Crowe's career and was the persona she later chose to build her theatrical reputation upon. Yet, early in her career certain casting choices allowed for the possible emergence of a different kind of actress. The manner in which

### **Marriage, motherhood and morality**

In December 1925 Joseph Holloway reported in his diary:

We had a very romantic marriage of two players at the Abbey on Wednesday last at Dalkey, when FJ McCormick (Peter Judge, to give him his right name) wed Eileen Crowe. None of the company knew of the coming event until the evening before when they were invited to the wedding the next morning.  
(Hogan and O'Neill 248)

As sociologist Tom Inglis has pointed out, the key difference between Irish Catholics and other Western European Catholics of this time was 'the general acceptance of the Church as the legislator and arbiter of morality.' (138) Inglis outlines the link between religious capital and social acceptance and respect in Ireland, particularly for women. Education for girls (formal and informal) prioritized the development of modesty and virtue. For women to maintain moral power, these features were essential, particularly after marriage. Inglis further explains:

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Once a woman got married and gave up her dowry (economic capital) and her occupation (political capital), her ability to attain other forms of capital became dependent on being well-respected, civil, and moral. (72)

One of Crowe's most repeated roles was that of Peggy Scally in George Shiels' match-making comedy *Professor Tim*. She appeared in the part in thirty-two productions. According to Shiels' text, Peggy is 'an attractive girl of about twenty-six.' (67) As the play opens, she is sitting alone at home 'doing laundry-work at the table.' (Shiels 67) While the play is, according to Christopher Murray's introduction, 'bound up with Shiels' lasting interest in the Irish land question', it centres on the loving relationship between Peggy and her neighbour Hugh O'Cahan. (Shiels xvii) The plot demonstrates the economics of Irish marriage at this time.

O'Cahan has fallen into debt, and his family estate is about to be repossessed. Because of this, Peggy's mother has insisted she end her relationship with O'Cahan and marry Joseph Kilroy. As the head of the family's finances, Mrs Scally is strategic in affairs of the heart; her husband always acquiesces to her demands. Kilroy is the son of local landowners and this union will allow for a wealthy alliance of farms and families.

The action of *Professor Tim* traces the arrival of Mrs Scally's wayward brother Tim, the auction of O'Cahan's home 'Rush Hill', and the Scallys' attempts to convince the Kilroys that Tim is an academic of good social status. Events unravel when Mrs Scally wants the couple to marry as soon as possible, but Mrs Kilroy wants the academic at the wedding. The resolution of affairs is summarized by Murray in his introduction: '[Professor Tim] buys Rush Hill himself and gives the keys to Hugh O'Cahan to enable him to marry Peggy after all.' (Shiels xvii) However, the scene bear a subtle yet important difference to this summary. Tim hands the keys to Peggy, granting ownership to his niece. The following dialogue ensues:

PEGGY:           Can I do with these things whatever I like, uncle?  
[...]  
PEGGY:           Can I give them to Hugh?  
[...]  
PEGGY:           *(hands them to O'CAHAN)* You said you'd come

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back home, Hugh, didn't you? (*No reply*) You were a good prophet: without going away, you're coming back. ... Now, say something.

(Shiels 127)

Peggy is given the keys but chooses to give her husband-to-be ownership.

Crucially, this is not subordination. The conversation continues:

PROFESSOR: [to O'Cahan] With Peggy the undisputed boss of the show. You hear that, Peggy?

PEGGY: I do, uncle. I hope Hugh hears it too. I want no more double-banks or stone walls ... [...]

O'CAHAN: Before all present, Peggy, I hand you the whip and the reins.

(Shiels 128)

On one hand, this resolution, for all its theatrical play, echoes the social reality for Irish women in the Free State period. But, to take a more nuanced view, the drama's conclusion presents a social fantasy that masked the oppressive reality for women. Clear explains, 'The woman was the real head [of the family], but she had to indulge her man's comparative powerlessness by giving him certain privileges and freedoms.' (184) Despite their lack of economic resources, women were perceived to set the tone in moral and social matters in the home. They were the decision-makers and leaders in planning the future of all family members. Shiels shows this to be the case for Mrs Scally, and then, on receipt of her own home, Peggy takes up 'the reins' of her husband. Later, I will discuss how Crowe's economic privileges outweighed her husband's but she acquiesced to his superiority, in a neat mirroring of Peggy and O'Cahan's union.

In the Irish context, generally 'marriage and motherhood put an end to financial independence and to "going" (independent movement and activity).' (Clear 184) Within the company that travelled to the US in 1934, there were two married women: Crowe and Bazie Shields (nee Magee, known as Mac). Shields relied heavily on family to help raise her only son, Adam, while she performed and travelled. By the 1937 tour, Arthur Shields was in a relationship with young actress Aideen O'Connor and Magee stayed at home to care for her child. (Shields T13/A/512) There was also a widow with five children on that tour: May Craig. Craig's sister moved into

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her home following the death of Craig's husband, to help raise the children. Craig never stopped working and three of her children appeared in small parts on the Abbey stage before they reached their teenage years. The other women travelling were single: Maureen Delany; Ria Mooney; Frolic Mulhern and Aideen O'Connor. Abbey director F.R. Higgins describes the first dinner aboard the *Samaria* as the Company left for New York in September 1937. A bugle called them to dress, and at 7.30pm they were seated by a steward; there was one attendant for every two tables. Higgins sets out the table plan:

Boss, Paddy and I sat at one table, Delaney, Crowe, Craig, McCormack at a table next to us and then Mooney, O'Connor, Mulhern—further down... (NLI Mss 27,883(7))

Management (Higgins; Arthur Shields and PJ Carolan) were separated from the married Judges, who sat with the widow May Craig and the mature, unmarried Maureen Delaney. The single women: Mulhern, Mooney and O'Connor were last in the pecking order.

All of these women had lifestyles that were, by Irish standards, unorthodox. Yet there were degrees of respectability, and this loomed large on Crowe's list of priorities. Her position at the centre table meant something to her. Crowe, unlike the majority of Irish women, never gave up her occupation, but the necessity to appear in society as civil and moral remained crucial to her. This moral responsibility formed the keystone of her career, while other actresses chose to prioritise their own personal happiness or their craft.

### **Cathleen ni Houlihan**

In July 1927, Crowe took over the now-iconic role of Cathleen or 'the Sean Bhean Bocht', from Sara Allgood, who had left for Hollywood. At the premiere of this one-act play in 1902, the role was played by Maud Gonne, then President of Inghinidhe na hÉireann and the Vice-President of the Irish National Theatre Society (INTS). In 1902, Gonne was at the height of her fame in Ireland as a political campaigner. She was known as an

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ardent nationalist and a beautiful woman, who brought to every appearance an erotic charge. The history of the role is necessary to an assessment of Crowe's later interpretation and other career choices.

Set in Mayo in 1798 (the year of a major republican rebellion), the play was written by Yeats in collaboration with Lady Gregory. It sets two narratives of Irish peasant womanhood in conflict: Mrs Gillane represents the realist, maternal order. Into her family home comes a poor old woman (Cathleen ni Houlihan) who has no worldly goods, but retains her dignity and belief in a united Ireland free of English rule. As the eponymous heroine, Cathleen appeals to her children to offer their lives to Ireland. Accounts of the first night reveal that the audience struggled to understand the shift in mode from realist peasant play to allegory. This shift was, in fact, made more complex by Gonne's appearance; arriving late and in costume, she dramatically swept through the audience to take her cue. Mary Trotter considers this performance and states that 'Gonne's ability to play on her political identity as nationalist activist and founder of Inghinidhe na hEireann [...] made her performance one of the most remembered in Irish theater history.' (95) Cathleen ni Houlihan had a propagandist function. She was a political symbol and a figurative role, as well as being a dramatic character. Once understood as a parable and nationalist call to arms, the play became both popular and controversial.

Scholars such as Trotter and Antoinette Quinn have written convincingly of the interplay between the new Irish theatre movement and Inghinidhe na hEireann (daughters of Erin), with regard to the staging of Irish women. (Quinn 39) They explain that the inscription of femininity within the nationalist movement was contested from the start. (Quinn 40) Sean Ryder has also written of how 'cultural nationalism produced an idealised version of national identity which identified subjectivity exclusively with masculinity.' (210) It has long been observed that real Irish women are overshadowed by the nationalist icon of Cathleen in the play (Quinn 47). A year after the staging of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Inghinidhe na hEireann broke from the Irish National Theatre Society and the split



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between the two bodies remained steadfast. However, the imprint of that particular mode of femininity shaped the play and its character indelibly.

### **A Doll's House**

And besides – he's so proud of being a man – it'd be so painful and humiliating for him to know that he owed anything to me. It'd completely wreck our relationship. This life we have built together would no longer exist. (Ibsen 36)

In the first act of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora Helmer warns Krogstad, 'If you speak impertinently of my husband, I shall show you the door.' (46) From there, her life becomes increasingly complicated, until she bangs the door on middle-class marriage to seek personal actualization elsewhere. In 1923, Lennox Robinson directed the first Abbey production of Ibsen's play, in a version by English writer R. Farquharson Sharp.<sup>3</sup> As Nora, the central character and infantilized 'doll', Robinson cast twenty-five-year-old Crowe. Indeed, Robert Hogan has claimed that, 'This [production of *A Doll's House*] was largely a showcase for Eileen Crowe.' (Burnham and Hogan 143)

On its premiere in England in 1889, *A Doll's House* sent shockwaves through English society for its exploration of the status of women generally; but the play had serious consequences for actresses in particular. Ibsen was the first playwright to affect a shift in the perceptions of the English Victorian actress. Victorian scholar Gail Marshall asserts, 'Ibsen was also a dramatist who changed actresses' perceptions of themselves and of their own work.' (142) Marshall elucidates, in relation to *A Doll's House*:

What is at stake is clearly the whole theatrical illusion of the actress's doll-like status, an illusion in the sustaining of which critics and audience were alike complicit. (139)

Furthermore, Marshall writes, in relation to the character of Nora Helmer:

[A]ctress and role are conjoined in a dynamic which can even seem to effect a physical transformation of the actress. (139)

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<sup>3</sup> This was not the first Irish staging. Edward Martyn had previously staged the play in the Players Club in 1903. See Ritschel 80.

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In his own theatre work, Ibsen regularly collaborated with actresses, allowing them to engage with the textual aspects of the work and thus, for women, to exceed their role as purely a visual spectacle for the first time. In his plays, Ibsen created roles that were not dependent on physical, statuesque appearance. These physical attributes Marshall terms the 'qualifications' for Victorian actresses to gain success in the 1880s. (141) At the Abbey, Shiels' presentation of marriage and gender roles in *Professor Tim*, as outlined above, remained more comprehensible to an Irish cast and audience. But it is in the light of these shifts on the English stage that one must consider Nora's first appearance on the Abbey stage, and her portrayal by Crowe.

Crowe had already played in a number of productions on the main stage but the part of Nora was her most significant role to date. The *Irish Independent* thought it a 'remarkable, if not very interesting, play' that demonstrated the harm caused by the 'moral depravity, duplicity, and secret intriguing of a clever and resourceful wife'. ('Ibsen Play' 4) Crowe, it was said, showed 'much ability' in 'a rather difficult part.' ('Ibsen Play' 4) The *Irish Times* critic considered her performance to show 'genuine feeling.' ('Abbey Theatre' 4)

Of playing the character of Nora, Crowe recalled only the terror and awkwardness of her dance with the tambourine, which she accidentally flung at the head of W. B. Yeats, who was sitting in the front row. (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,489-523) The 'hysteria' she experienced on her first night, the actress reasoned, helped her characterization, particularly in her tarantella dance. She said, 'Yet that very hysteria helped; it was in character.' (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,489-523)

The term Crowe chose to describe Nora's character in this scene, 'hysteria', is telling. The medical connotations suggest that she concurred with the view that women's 'hysteria' was an illness. In her study of feminism and comedy, Regina Barreca has written of female hysteria: 'She has seen the boundaries created in order to delineate the real from the imaginary', but Barreca notes that the hysterical woman 'refuses to

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acknowledge what others construct as reality.’ (16) Crowe presented a woman that would not acknowledge the reality of her place as a woman in the household, as against her imaginative realm. The dance becomes, then, a symptom of a disorder rather than an instant of personal liberation.

According to Christopher Murray, ‘Yeats was openly hostile to Ibsen and the modern movement in realism.’ (23-36) W. B. Yeats hated *A Doll’s House* when he saw it in 1889 in London and resented the modern educated speech that eliminated stylistic features. Yet he admired Crowe’s interpretation of the part: he said she plays it ‘young’, and that in doing so she ‘transforms the play’. (Burnham and Hogan 143)

A young, naïve and hysterical Nora belied the threat of the assertion of female power. If Nora displays nothing but childish tantrums that can be castigated and shut down by ‘rational’ male figures, then it’s not female liberation but a sham that can be ridiculed and dismissed. Also, if the performance is stylistic, then it moves away from any kind of realism that could be construed as a social message. Rather than stressing the validity and truth of Irish women’s oppression, Crowe’s interpretation of Nora as infantilised and hysterical colluded with the misogyny of the state and the theatre’s directorate.

### ***Nora of In The Shadow of the Glen***

It is no coincidence that Synge’s first play *In the Shadow of the Glen* also has a central female character called Nora. Its premiere, with Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh in the central role of Nora Burke, took place in 1903, mere months after Martyn’s production of *A Doll’s House*. (Ritschel 80) With identical themes of loveless marriage and female independence, it can be read as a direct response to Ibsen’s work.

Nelson O’Ceallaigh Ritschel argues that with *In the Shadow of the Glen* ‘Synge advocated a social change for Ireland that exposed the conservative, paternalistic attitudes of those nationalists who objected to his work.’ (85) Ritschel examines the critical and popular reaction to the play in 1903 and asserts that, ‘Synge’s Nora counters, even negates, the

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19th century Colleen tradition.’ (88) Synge rooted Nora (and many of his other female characters) in pagan traditions, with pre-Christian beliefs, superstitions and a celebration of the natural world. He also made Nora a strong, reflective woman who escapes the tyranny of her husband, in a manner a Catholic woman could not. When Nora leaves her home with the Tramp, there is a sense that Nora is not entering another union with a man, but is surrendering herself to the natural world: its dangers and its rewards. The Tramp urges her to leave saying, ‘it’s not my blather you’ll be hearing only, but you’ll be hearing the herons crying [...] but it’s fine songs you’ll be hearing when the sun goes up...’ (Synge 94)

Much of the critical outcry had dissipated by the time Crowe first played the part of Nora Burke in December 1925. She was then less than a month married to fellow actor Peter Judge. (Hogan and O’Neill 248) Crowe’s marriage to McCormick arguably played a significant part in the success of her career because audiences grew attached to watching husband and wife perform together. Despite their use of different names, the relationship was well known and often publicized. In this way, audiences felt an intimacy with the ‘real-life’ couple. They became something of the ‘poster couple’ of the Abbey Players, presenting a devout Catholic union with a glamorous edge. Robinson continually favoured them and for the 1931 tour to the US, Barry Fitzgerald noted with chagrin how the couple ‘had been heavily starred in the preliminary notices and handbills.’ (O’Casey *Rose* 151) Fitzgerald adds that the other players, himself included, thought it unfair; but, he adds, ‘we have been secretly comforted by the fact that McCormick has failed to live up to the reputation made in Dublin.’ (O’Casey *Rose* 151)

The couple presented as equally devoted to the stage and to each other, living ‘a life together of utter bliss.’ (De Búrca 114-115) When they appeared in New York over Christmas in 1934, it was reported by the *New York World Telegraph* that Crowe ‘kept open house today in her Whitby Hotel apartment with husband’, like a kindly maternal figure drawing her theatre family around her. (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,489-25,523) Writing in

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the *Dublin Historical Record* in 1989, Seamus de Búrca insisted: 'If this couple had been English or American, they would have been as famous as Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontaine, say.' (114-115) De Búrca also claimed that after McCormick's death in 1947, Crowe made only one appearance in the Abbey because 'she died from a broken heart.' (114-115) In fact, the widow regularly appeared on the main stage and in the Peacock Theatre between 1947 and 1970, when she was over seventy years of age. De Búrca holds to the narrative of the devoted Irish wife, unable to work without her husband by her side.

### **Minnie Powell and Mrs Henderson in *The Shadow of a Gunman***

Although she did not appear in the 1923 premiere of Seán O'Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman*, Crowe took over the part of Minnie Powell in April 1924 and continued to play it in Abbey Theatre productions for fifteen years. Again, it's important here to consider the nature of female characters being presented.

Minnie is a twenty-three-year-old Dublin woman, sharing a tenement with poet Donal Davoren. Davoren, who's approximately thirty years old, is thought by his neighbours to be an IRA gunman on the run and he is enjoying the notoriety this rumour brings him. Minnie has a 'well-shaped figure' and is 'charmingly dressed' when she calls to chat and flatter him. (O'Casey 89) It becomes apparent that she is a warm-hearted girl with a romantic interest in Davoren. Other characters in the play dismiss her as ignorant; Seamus calls her a 'bitch that thinks of nothin' but jazz dances, fox-trots, picture theatres an' dress.' (O'Casey 109) At the end of the first act, Minnie is just a 'flapper'. However, O'Casey's female characters are rarely straightforward and in the second act, Minnie throws off shallow concerns to reveal her bravery. She hides a case of explosives to save Davoren and is arrested when it's discovered. Her act of devotion and love for Davoren is conflated with romantic belief in national ideals.

May Craig first appeared in *The Shadow of a Gunman* in the minor role of Mrs Grigson 'one of the cave-dwellers of Dublin, living as she does

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in a tenement kitchen.’ (O’Casey 113) However, Craig became known for playing Mrs Henderson. This kindly soul assures Davoren that she understands and remembers what it’s like to be in love. Mrs Henderson is:

a massive woman in every way; massive head, arms, and body; massive voice and massive amount of self-confidence. She is a mountain of good nature. (O’Casey 96)

Mrs Henderson is also taken away by the Black and Tans, although it is Minnie that is killed. Minnie is carried off, ‘shouting bravely, but a little hysterically, “Up the Republic!”’ (O’Casey 126) Like Nora’s dance, Powell’s singing in O’Casey’s *The Shadow of a Gunman* demands hysteria. Again, Crowe portrayed a passionate female as hysterical. Minnie is shot and killed in an attempt to escape her arrest.

O’Casey’s heroine can be read as a sardonic reflection on *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, the personification of Ireland first presented in 1902. In setting the character of Cathleen alongside O’Casey’s Minnie Powell, one can observe subtle shifts in gender politics in Ireland between the turn of the century and the Civil War of 1922-23. As a woman and an actress, Crowe was pitched between the dangerous figure of the flapper and the respectable orthodoxy of a Catholic mother pledged to her country. She was at the epicenter of these shifts in gender politics.

Crowe trained and first appeared at the Abbey Theatre in the shadow of republican activists such as Maud Gonne and Helena Moloney (another member of Inghinidhe who acted at the Abbey). Without the power to choose the roles she played, she nonetheless retained the ability to choose her interpretation and influence how the female figure was communicated to her audience. She was poised between the political demonstrators of the past, who used the stage as a political platform and presented icons rather than women, and the Irish actresses of the future, who were beginning to use psychological techniques and to emphasise the distinction between their personal lives and those of the characters they portrayed.

Minnie Powell’s republicanism (in *The Shadow of a Gunman*) is just

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as ardent as Cathleen ni Houlihan's, but it is far more problematic in its motivation and ideals. After the Civil War, Irish womanhood could not be as clearly demarcated as the figures of Mrs Gillane and Cathleen in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. Where Cathleen represented pure and noble femininity, Mrs Gillane stood for selfless maternal striving to protect and provide. The character of Minnie Powell problematised this easy distinction. O'Casey showed that women could embrace their sexuality but the impact on their fate could be life-threatening, metaphorically and otherwise.

Crowe came to the role of Cathleen ni Houlihan *after* appearing as Minnie Powell; she knew the contemporary complexity before the historic myth. There is virtually no newspaper coverage of Crowe's performance as Cathleen; much of the criticism focused on *The Emperor Jones*, which was presented the same night. This may reflect that Irish audiences had grown weary of the play, or show that Crowe failed to distinguish herself in the part. The *Irish Times* noted that Crowe 'put new life' in the part, but this comment can be read as a statement of fact rather than a qualitative assessment of her interpretation. ('The Emperor Jones')

In a study of what she terms the problem plays of the urban repertoire in the Abbey Theatre, Elizabeth Mannion claims:

[T]he Cathleen ni Houlihan trope undergoes dramatic alterations as she travels toward Dublin, the center of the revivalist movement. The closer Cathleen gets to the environment that elevated her to a stage-based, tangible figure, the more she implodes. (72)

It may also be that the reality of life for Irish women became more distanced from the ideals of Cathleen ni Houlihan, and that the 'tangible figure' of the Irish actress after the civil war led to the implosion of the dramatic trope. (Mannion 72) Crowe, one could argue, had an opportunity to re-configure this emblematic figure after such an implosion. The choices Crowe made in style and interpretation had the potential to impact the representation of women on the stage of the National Theatre for years to come. She had a similar opportunity in 1923, with the figure of Nora Helmer, but *A Doll's House* was, for her and for the Abbey, a radical

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departure that didn't yet fit into the narrative of the theatre. The public personae and reputations of Gonne and others that appeared in Irish classics provided Crowe with a style to reject, or to emulate. Her choices in the depiction of this wife and mother, and their wider impact, were crucial.

### **Acting Persona and Style of Performance**

It's clear from his autobiography that Robinson adored Crowe, but her acting wasn't unanimously praised. (Robinson 114) Holloway thought her 'fine in many parts'. (Hogan and O'Neill 229) Newspaper critics were less effusive, often dismissing her as a minor part of the ensemble. When the Company performed *The Playboy of the Western World* in Belfast in 1934, Maureen Delaney was deemed 'excellent', May Craig 'gave a splendid performance', while Crowe was 'good'. ('Abbey Players in Belfast') On her appearance in Shaw's *Candida* in 1935, Holloway described how she 'mothered her husband and the poet in the gentlest and most feminine way.' (Hogan and O'Neill 49) The consensus from critics and Holloway's records appears to be that Crowe charmed in comedies and had a delicate presence when presiding over a dinner table, but rarely rose to the challenge of great tragedy.

Physical appearance is the stock-in-trade of actors and of female performers in particular. Crowe was small and delicate, with gentle curves and dark curls. She presented a stark contrast to the statuesque Gonne (who measured over six foot) or the plump, plain Allgood. In photos from the 1930s, Crowe appears little older than the youngest actresses and is often dwarfed by the men. There was an innocuous element to her physical presence that she capitalised on at various points in her career.

Reports of Crowe's performances deemed her to be 'amateurish in movement and gesture' and critics 'thought her musical voice monotonous – a fault which if anything, was to increase over the years.' (Burnham and Hogan 92-3) Playwright and board member Brinsley MacNamara told Holloway, 'There is a great diversity of opinion about Miss Crowe's acting; some raved about it, while others can't see any merit in it at all.' (Hogan



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and O'Neill 229) MacNamara held to the view that Robinson's sobriquet, 'Genius', spoiled her. Holloway recorded their conversation:

'She had a great facility for learning parts without letting their meaning sink into her,' [Mac] thinks, 'that was fatal to her work being ever great, and also her face was very expressionless.'  
(Hogan and O'Neill 229)

It may be that these suggestions of 'monotonous' and 'expressionless' are indicative of Crowe's training in the Abbey School at the turn of the century. Working with the lyrical and poetic drama of Yeats, she practiced the still stature and melodious voice work then prized. Writing on the performative imaging of Irish women in *Cathleen in Houlihan*, Nelson Ritschel has suggested that, 'the Fay [brothers] acting style helped the text to create a fantasy image that a nationalistically leaning audience was able to embrace.' (Ritschel 90) He explains how this representational style emphasized language and rhythm and was more suited to the portrayal of mythic figures or 'types'. It didn't translate into urban comedies and plays closer to realism.

As previously noted, Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, Nora in *In The Shadow of the Glen*, recalled how in rehearsals for the 1903 premiere Frank Fay told her: 'Be the *mouthpiece* of Nora Burke, rather than Nora Burke.' (qtd in Ritschel 90) Fay's advice suggests that actresses were cautioned against embodying these women, or indeed working with them as psychological characters. Instead, they were asked to portray a figure or type.

Crowe may have unconsciously defined herself against the assertive, outspoken politicians of Inghindhe na hEireann, but in establishing a creative distance between herself and the part, she retained a feature of their performances. She maintained their mode of performing: embodying a respectable woman who only ever presented the actions of independent-minded females in the protected space of the stage. As her career and craft developed, she suited her mode of performance and her public persona to the demands of the time, fitting into the narrative of Catholic Ireland.

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### **Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars***

Christopher Morash has claimed, 'Irish politics in the 1920s was a continuation by other means of the Irish Civil War.' (*A History* 163) The city had not fully thrown off the hushed terror of the Civil War when rehearsals for O'Casey's play *The Plough and the Stars* started in January 1926. In the actors' account of the first production, the fracas in the theatre and the threats of physical attacks and kidnapping, there is the atmosphere of latent violence from that traumatic period. Chapter 5 will discuss how Ria Mooney traces the root of her 'professional' career to this seismic moment, but others in the company struggled to separate their personal lives from the parts they were asked to play. Only a few months married, the devout Judges quickly sided with Lennox Robinson against O'Casey. They were perturbed more by the language and the blasphemous elements in the script than by the anti-nationalist sentiment that others found so objectionable.

In initial readings, Crowe played Mrs Gogan, a resident of the top floor of the tenement house where Jack and Nora Clitheroe have set up home. (Hogan and Burnham 285) Mrs Gogan has lost her husband to TB and is nursing a consumptive daughter, Mollser, as well as the baby that she carries around in her arms. There is an elegance in O'Casey's description in the script of *The Plough and the Stars* of the forty-year-old woman: 'Her heart is aflame with curiosity'. (137) But Mrs Gogan is an uncouth charwoman who mocks Nora's ideals and aspirations. Instead of being caught up in maternal duties, Mrs Gogan prefers to distract herself with gossip. She is known as a busybody and is often to be found in the pub, squabbling with others. Her language is coarse and often ribald, and it was this aspect of the character that Crowe objected to most.

According to the account of Gabriel Fallon, who played Captain Brennan, the actress refused to say, 'any kid, livin' or dead, that Ginnie Gogan had since [her marriage] was got between th' bordhers of th' Ten Commandments.' (89) Her objection, it appears, was to the allusion that there were children *not* born between such religious borders. When the

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actors confronted O'Casey with their objections in early January, Crowe was staunch in her criticism of the language. O'Casey found this objectionable because, as he pointed out in a letter to Robinson:

Miss Crowe's hesitation over part of the dialogue of Mrs Gogan seems to me to be inconsistent when I remember she was eager to play the central figure in 'Nannie's Night Out', which was as low (God help us) and, possibly lower, than the part of Mrs Gogan. (Hogan and Burnham 285)

The premiere of O'Casey's play *Nannie's Night Out* had been held in September 1924; Crowe lost out on the leading role to Sara Allgood.

Yeats thought the actors' objection to the dialogue in *The Plough and the Stars* 'an aggravating comedy behind the scenes', and when Robinson asked Yeats for advice, they agreed that Crowe was not to be told about O'Casey's thoughts. Instead, the actress was to be 'given her choice of shirking this line or giving up the part.' (Hogan and Burnham 286) Crowe took some hours to think it over and consult her priest. The decision was taken to replace her with May Craig as Mrs Gogan. Or, as some commentators describe, Crowe 'suggested changing parts with Miss Craig.' (Hogan and Burnham 286) The level of power the actress wielded, implicitly or explicitly, is ambiguous. Eliminating the loyal company member and Robinson's protégé was not an option. Instead, O'Casey was tasked with penning a character more appropriate to the actress. The result: the 'woman from Rathmines,' a delightfully discordant note in the play.

In the third act of *The Plough*, a 'fashionably dressed, middle-aged, stout woman' wanders into the chaos that has broken out in the city centre, desperate to find her way back to her middle-class suburb. (O'Casey 189) She tells Fluther, 'I'm so different from others... The moment I hear a shot, my legs give way under me – I cawn't sit, I'm paralysed.' (O'Casey 189) The men are indifferent; she wanders off again. The character's name (or, rather, title) may be a reference to a 1923 comedy by M. Brennan entitled *The Young Man from Rathmines*. O'Casey gave Crowe the respectability she demanded in this cameo role, but arguably also wrote a part that

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insulted her cowardice and abilities. He used the actress for his own ends: to demonstrate a different side of Dublin and enlarge his dramatic canvas. Crowe acquiesced. There was no adjustment to her wage for the role change. She continued to take home £10 a week; May Craig earned £4 a week for playing the role of Mrs Gogan. (*Bound Volume 4384: 4*)

Although self-effacing in public, certain records Crowe couldn't redact reveal a different side to her personality, and show a woman unafraid to make demands and fight for what she believed her due. This facet of her personality is hinted at in O'Casey's comments about her eagerness to play Nannie, but is clearly set out in archived minutes of the board meetings. In February 1936, a board meeting was held upstairs in the Abbey, with Ernest Blythe in the chair and Frank O'Connor, Higgins and Dr. Richard Hayes in attendance. After some financial and practical issues, it was explained that Crowe was appealing the casting in *The Plough*, as she no longer had the part of Nora. The minutes from the meeting recorded:

On the basis of information at their disposal the Board had selected Miss Richards for the part of Nora Clitheroe, as she was considered better than Miss Crowe. (*Minute Books NLI Acc 3961*)

If behind the scenes, there was some debate about Crowe's acting talent, the actress still arranged a hearing from the board and presented herself to put her case. She then temporarily withdrew to allow private discussion on the matter. Minutes for 14 February were typed up:

Mr Higgins said it appeared that Miss Richards used the theatre when it suited her and that under circumstances such as that it was unfair to the established players that work should be given to others. It also appeared that Miss Richards was anxious to play the part owing to the fact that a casting director of a film company was likely to see the play during the week, and that she had canvassed with this in view. (*Minute Books NLI Acc 3961*)

The Secretary recorded:

After some discussion it was decided on the motion of Mr O'Connor seconded by Mr Higgins that Miss Crowe be restored to the part. It was then explained to Miss Crowe that she had been restored to the part because Miss Richards had canvassed for it, and canvassing by Players was not allowed. (*Minute Books NLI Acc 3961*)

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There is no evidence that Richards canvassed to play Nora, although she had been lauded for her performance in the premiere. Rather, Crowe appears to have known of the casting director's visit and was not prepared to miss a chance so used her influence. Her direct appeal to the board was successful and she was recast, without any mention of her opposition to the play a decade earlier. Richards' response is not recorded; 'Miss Crowe thanked the Board and withdrew.' (*Minute Books* NLI Acc 3961)

This incident is extraordinary not just for its outcome, but for the manner in which the board justify the decision and commit it to the historical record. There is no evidence that Richards campaigned for the part, but there's a suggestion that the board felt her ambition and confidence a sign of potential insurrection. They prize Crowe's loyalty and devotion to the theatre (an 'established player'), as well as her chaste public persona. They may also have feared that in refusing Crowe's demands they risked losing her husband, F. J. McCormick. The extent of the Abbey's investment in the couple became clear in negotiations for the film of *The Plough and the Stars*. All of these possibilities are set out in the minute books. Crowe's age, persona and assumed cachet gave her not just a sense of superiority but a power that management would not challenge.

### **The Hollywood Film of *The Plough and the Stars***

Crowe's determination to be recast in the 1936 production of *The Plough and the Stars* did reap benefits. In February of that year, a letter from a London agent of RKO (Radio-Keith-Orpheum) Pictures, Miss Reissa, was read aloud at a board meeting. (RKO Pictures was an American film production and distribution company.) Miss Reissa had come to Dublin and discussed terms with the Abbey Company for their travelling to Hollywood to appear in a film version of O'Casey's play. The salaries offered were: Mr Fitzgerald US\$ 750; Mr McCormick and Miss Crowe at a joint salary of US\$ 900; Mr Shields US\$ 500. All these amounts were per week of filming, with all of the actors guaranteed six weeks work and their return passages by boat paid. (*Minute Books* NLI Acc 3961) In addition, RKO offered a fee to

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the theatre of US\$ 750, for the use of the theatre's name and as compensation for the players' absence. Walter Starkie was the chair of the meeting, but Robinson dissented. He insisted that at least five thousand dollars should be requested in compensation. (Frazier *Hollywood Irish* 82) Eventually, Hunt negotiated with the actors, who agreed that 10% of their salaries would go to the Abbey for loss of their services.

The joint weekly salary of FJ McCormick and his wife for this period of filming would today be worth approximately US\$ 15,000 or € 14,000. It was a huge financial boon for temporary work. The following month, O'Casey sent a letter to John Ford. He advised:

I shouldn't recommend you to choose Miss Crowe for the part of 'Bessie Burgess.' She wouldn't look the part, and in my opinion, couldn't possibly put the feeling and earnestness in the part that it needs. One of the actresses in the [A]bbey is a Miss Craig whose name seems not to have been mentioned. I feel sure she would play this better than Miss Crowe, or make a fine Mrs Gogan. [. . .] I don't see Miss Crowe as a success in this part.  
(O'Casey Lily Mss)

It's not clear whether O'Casey's opinion of her acting was truthful, or whether he simply wished to remain loyal to the actors that had supported him during the initial fracas. It may have been something of both. In any case, despite the playwright's advice, Ford kept Crowe in the role of Bessie Burgess, and cast Una O'Connor as Mrs Gogan.

In the autumn, the players returned to Dublin and had some free time before acting resumed at the Abbey. Holloway paid a visit to Crowe's home in Rathmines. There, he had tea in the garden with the actress and her sister. Crowe was not enamoured of Hollywood, disliking the women's extravagant habits. Holloway described her account of the lifestyle and, although lengthy, it deserves quoting in full:

Eileen spoke of John Ford, the producer of the film, and his great kindness to them, and of the hospitality of Digges and his charming, gracious wife, and of Una O'Connor and her great kindness to them. 'But, oh my! How she talks of herself and of her successes. She never ceases. It has become an obsession with her. She also spends a great deal of money on dresses,' Eileen added. [...] Eileen showed me the 'stills' for the film, *The Plough and the Stars*. She spoke of the ups and downs of film players'

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lives and mentioned that many who took part in the crowds were stars of former times. The film fame of heroes and heroines was very brief indeed. Those who played character parts were all right; they held on for many years. All save one or two of the film stars were nice to them. She was taken to a first night of a film when all the stars attended, and the whole place was aflame with excitement. It was Una O'Connor took them. She afterwards heard that tickets were 27/6 each.

(Hogan and O'Neill *Volume 2* 60)

Unlike the other actresses, Crowe was not taken with the enticements of Hollywood and the salaries offered there to accompany the lavish lifestyle. She remained acutely conscious of financial matters.

At Christmas that year, the censor's office in Dublin held a private screening of the movie for the Abbey actors involved. Holloway recorded general disappointment, with the consensus being that it was a successful, if sentimental, film but it didn't capture the characters of O'Casey's writing. (Hogan and O'Neill *Volume 2* 63)

Adrian Frazier, who analyzes the details of the film and how it contrasts with the play, notes, 'If McCormick shows off the best of the Abbey style, [Barbara] Stanwyck's performance [as Nora Clitheroe] demonstrates what Hollywood had and the Irish theatre did not: the self-conscious controlled eroticism of star-power.' (*Hollywood Irish* 87) Crowe never displayed such eroticism. She consistently underplayed her sexuality, unless using her femininity to emphasise a Catholic purity. Putting her foray into Hollywood movies behind her, Crowe returned to rehearsals at the Abbey, where her virtuous persona ensured her popularity not just with the board but also with many of the audience of the time.

### **The Comedies of Lennox Robinson: *The Far-Off Hills* and *Church Street***

Robinson's affection for Crowe is inextricably linked to her contribution to his playwriting career. A summary of the pertinent plots and Crowe's role in a number of Robinson's hugely popular comedies reveal the playwright's concept of drama, and demonstrates how Crowe's stage persona contributed to his particular notion of theatrical magic.

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For the 1928 premiere of Robinson's domestic comedy *The Far-Off Hills*, Crowe played the part of the sensible eldest daughter in the Clancy family, Marian. (McCormick was cast as her ailing father.) Marian's dress is 'markedly plain and dark', and she has been prevented from fulfilling her dream and joining the convent by family obligations: her mother's death left her responsible for her invalid father and younger siblings. (Robinson *The Far-Off Hills* 1) Crowe continued to play the part of in 31 subsequent productions (with the last in 1943).<sup>4</sup> The youthful antics of Pet and Ducky (played by O'Connor and Mulhern) in this play are detailed in Chapters 3 and 4. And, as Robinson's biographer observes:

though Marian appears to be the central figure, her sisters steal the limelight from her, especially in the bedroom scene of the second act, the first of its kind on the Abbey stage, when they dominate the play as they conspire to encourage their father's wedding. (O'Neill 148)

Marian chastises her sisters for reading 'romantical novels' and talking of nothing but marriage. (Robinson 52) However, when her father's second marriage to neighbour Susie Tynan is confirmed Marian takes a husband for herself. Her responsible actions and moral rectitude make her a dull but important character, not least in how she can separate real-life from fiction.

In the opening lines of *The Far-Off Hills*, Marian is 'directing operations', as her sisters tidy the room for their father. (Robinson 1) This stage direction is a telling description of Crowe's role, in and outside of Robinson's dramas. Robinson continually played with notions of 'reality' and 'theatre', sending up the acting profession as often as he mined parochial village life for drama.

*Church Street*, from 1934, was one of his most experimental works. At the centre of this drama is frustrated writer Hugh (played by Arthur Shields) who is coaxed back to creative production by Aunt Moll (played by Crowe). The play is set in the drawing room of the National Bank, Knock.

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<sup>4</sup> While these were not strictly 'revivals' of the production, it was a feature of the Abbey to interfere as little as possible with such classic and popular hits. Casting changes may have been required, but little else would be altered.



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Robinson described Moll in *Church Street* as ‘a little old woman, over seventy, plainly but not eccentrically dressed.’ (261) She is often forgotten and ignored; she asks for little but has much wisdom. Moll advises:

[T]here’s comedy and tragedy trailing their skirts through the mud of Church Street if you’d only the eyes to see them.  
(Robinson 262)

She urges Hugh to observe those around him, and to use his imagination:

Of course you’d have to select, choose what you’d take and what you’d leave aside. [...] You’d have to – sort of shape your material, just a little, a very little would be enough. (Robinson 269)

Moll doesn’t dictate; she thoughtfully advises and, later, admonishes Hugh:

But God Almighty, boy, that’s your job. [...] As a dramatist. To put some shape, some stage shape, on real life. (Robinson 270)

In the first half of the twentieth century, the founding and managing directors of the Abbey Theatre defined their artistic aesthetic in opposition to conventional realism, and yet such realism was a force that could not be eradicated. As Morash and Richards explain:

What evolved on the Abbey stage, then, was a curious kind of hybrid realism, one of whose defining features was its explicit (and often vehement) renunciation of any connection to the conceptual foundations of realism (much less naturalism) as modern, urban forms. (*Mapping Irish Theatre* 49)

Synge openly opposed realism, while Robinson was a proponent of this form without directly advocating modernism. As Christopher Murray observes in his introduction to the edited collection: ‘one of the effects of Robinson’s method is to force on his audience a fresh consideration of what reality is.’ (Robinson 49) The playwright proposes a version of reality, or truth, but is always teasing and playing with notions of the type of reality an audience expects. His hybrid realism or stage ‘shape’ is something unique; it is not to be confused with the shape of social reality in Ireland. (Robinson 269)

For Morash and Richards, Robinson’s notion of putting stage shape on real life echoes the French Marxist Henri Lefebvre’s notion of

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'representational space', a theory explored in the Irish context by the authors of *Mapping Irish Theatre*. (7) Completing the triad of space, Lefebvre posits alongside perceived (spatial practice) and conceived space (space of representation), this *representational space*. Coded, often heavy with symbolism and metonymy, representational space can realize the social imaginary within a separate sphere. It has a force that is only unleashed when the perceived space of the spectators and the represented space of the writer and performers come together. It can be passively experienced by an audience and does not directly, or overtly, impact on perceived space or social reality.

In such a liminal space on the stage, a space that mirrored but was entirely separate from 'reality', women could gain and yield power that was not 'truthful' in the Irish context. For example, Crowe's performance of Nora Helmer, then, was an imaginative and entertaining construct for an audience to observe and comment on. The archival traces and evidence of her performance suggest that she did not embody a liberated woman in the play's closing moments, but represented a young, hysterical woman. Therefore the performance never posed an actual threat to social order. Similarly, in *Church Street* and *The Far-Off Hills* Crowe stood as a symbol of the boundary between 'theatre' and 'real' and how one could negotiate the known world and the spectre of greener hills. Spectators could observe her behaviour, comment on and discuss her motivations and the possible outcomes of her action, at a safe distance. But this illusion of 'safety' conceals that such explorations are heavily coded with long-standing beliefs about Irish women, femininity, and how it could or should be expressed. This style of acting from the 1930s can be examined in the context of the training provided for actors at the Abbey Theatre and the methods used at the Abbey Theatre since its inception.

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### **Acting Methods and Training at the Abbey Theatre**

In the early decades of the National Theatre, Frank and William Fay trained the Abbey actors in deportment and elocution. To discover a 'characteristically Irish' style of performance, Fay encouraged his charges (including Sara Allgood and Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh) to emulate French stars such as Benoît-Constant Coquelin (Coquelin the Elder).<sup>5</sup> Derived from the French Conservatoire and André Antoine's company, the Théâtre Libre, their style promoted restraint and kept the focus on the language of the text. (Frazier 59) Like the Abbey Theatre, the Théâtre Libre originated as a company of idealistic amateurs. In their acting style, they set themselves against the melodramatic and 'busy' style of performing then prevalent on the English stage.

In his writings on the theory of acting, Constantin Stanislavsky also used Fay's example of the great Coquelin the Elder. Stanislavsky adopted the term Coquelin himself used for his art: 'representation'. (Carnicke 2865) The theatre of 'representation' occupies the penultimate rung in Stanislavsky's hierarchy of acting styles. Such theatre places the actor at the creative nexus of theatrical production, and thus values the actor as much as Stanislavsky does, although there are particular issues. (Carnicke 2883) In this mode of performing, the actor strives to reveal the inner life of the character and to communicate genuine emotion, by selecting specific details. Stanislavsky says of the characters created by representational actors:

The spectator immediately sees that these are not just ordinary people whom we meet in life, but personages, whom we see in paintings and about whom we read in books. (Carnicke 2924)

Thus, they are 'types'; the actors' performances are reproducible works of art. Such work can give rise to great heights of virtuosity. However, this mode also creates the risk that the personality and charisma of the actor may detract from the performance. In extreme cases, the level of emphasis on the person of the actor (or 'star') may entirely obscure the character.

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In representation, Carnicke explains, ‘the actor juggles both a “first self” (the artist) and a “second self” (the canvas); in acting, the first self shapes the second.’ (2873) In the Irish context of the 1930s, this ‘representation’ of types while retaining the presence of the performer’s own personality on stage was crucial to maintaining respectability in the eyes of society. With ‘representation’, the distinction between actor and character is maintained by the performer and acknowledged by the audience throughout. This acceptance by the audience of the two ‘selves’ was key to the theatrical experience of visiting the Abbey in the 1930s. It was fostered by the familiarity between the audiences and the performers, much like they were watching people they knew personally perform privately in their own home. Such a mode of working allowed women in particular an opportunity to present certain behaviour deemed unacceptable off stage, without any besmirching of their personal reputation. Thus, the acting style of ‘representation’ gained particular importance for women performing on stage in the repressive atmosphere of the Free State. When younger actresses, notably Ria Mooney, experimented with more psychological modes of working and immersion into character, this had consequences for their reputation.

This notion of a theatrical ‘representational’ space for women to emote fully, to ‘play’ with ideas of choice and experiment with liberation, without ever embracing it or posing a threat to social order, is most usefully explored through a specific example. The work of one of Robinson’s protégés, Teresa Deevy, serves to exemplify this dynamic particularly well.

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<sup>5</sup> Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh qtd. in Fallon 12.

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### **Teresa Deevy and Katie Roche**

You're not taking part in theatricals now.

(Deevy *Katie Roche* 63)

Given Crowe's career demands hitherto, it is worth considering that when Deevy's full-length play *Katie Roche* was programmed, Crowe may have canvassed for the lead role. Ria Mooney had played many of Deevy's heroines previously, but this time she was passed over by Robinson and cast as the aging spinster Amelia Gregg. Crowe was cast as the young bride, playing opposite her real-life husband (McCormick) as Stanislaus Gregg.

At the same board meeting at which Eileen Crowe was granted the role of Nora Clitheroe, the directors noted that playwright Teresa Deevy was not happy that the production of *Katie Roche* had been postponed until after Lent. (*Minute Books* NLI Acc 3961) Deevy (whose plays are rich with detail of Catholic observances) felt that this period of abstinence and penance was not a good time to open. The board overruled her complaints and kept to their original schedule.

Given a previous disappointing experience at the first night of *The King of Spain's Daughter*, Deevy was anxious about this full-length production. Rather than wait until the premiere, she travelled to Dublin in March 1936 to spend a few days in rehearsal with the Abbey Company. There, she was struck by the industry and friendliness of the cast, and although she lamented that Robinson was not producing it, she thought Hugh Hunt very professional. When she saw the production, she confided to Florence Hackett:

I liked their way of doing 'Katie Roche'. [...] McCormick - as the husband - was splendid. And they were all so eager to have it just as I had wanted it. (Deevy TCD Mss 10722/15)

As the violent husband Stanislaus Gregg, McCormick had her full approval. There is no record of her feelings on Crowe's performance, and no indication that the playwright felt the loss of Mooney in the central role.

Deevy's text is rooted in her contemporary society, where domestic

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arrangements were subject to certain ideological pressures. While exploring these pressures, the production was clear in its statement on social mores. Unlike Ibsen's Nora, Katie is a product of disadvantage: of illegitimacy and poverty. The product of an erotic dalliance, Katie has wild blood in her veins and is a free spirit. Her illegitimate status also marks her as a dangerous threat to the community status quo. Working as a domestic servant has sustained her, and thus she is expected to view the proposal of marriage from a respectable hard-working man as both liberation and a reward. Cathy Leeney has observed, 'Deevy dramatizes marriage, very often, as a possibility for transformation, through the other.' (162) However, while Leeney argues this transformation is an allegory for political change related to Ireland's colonial position, the message of the play can be read more simply.

*Katie Roche* explores the same themes as *The King of Spain's Daughter* in protracted form. It traces Katie's life from consideration of the idea of marriage, to the reality of an alliance with Stanislaus Gregg and finally to her realization that she has traded one form of servitude for another. She is encircled by abusive men, from the violent Reuben to the quiet persecution of Michael Maguire and the condescension of Stan.

The second act of *Katie Roche* opens with the couple in married bliss, sitting by a roaring fire and admiring Stan's work. Katie tells him, 'I am the proud woman this night. I know now for sure you're great.' (Deevy 44) She is his 'little wife' who consistently seeks his approbation. (Deevy 45) But when Katie shares a drink with Michael and insists it was a romantic gesture Stan warns her about her behaviour with the admonition, 'You're not taking part in theatricals now.' (Deevy 63) Her notions of romance and personal fulfillment are banished to the realm of theatrics. Such displays of emotion are shown to belong in the fantastical space of the stage; they are not part of respectable Irish femininity.

Deevy shows the new wife struggle with society's expectations, as well as with her own hopes and desires for marriage. But the play's ending, while echoing the triumphant departure of Ibsen's Nora, is a 'whitewash',

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in the words of theatre director, Judy Friel. ('Rehearsing Katie Roche' 117-125) The spirit of independence, imagination and resilience Katie displays at earlier points is quashed and the playwright does a complete turnaround. With the support of the stoic spinster Amelia, Katie opts for compromise and submission. Thus, the same actress that walked out of marriage thirteen years earlier in *A Doll's House* resigns herself to the power and condescension of her husband and accepts she must 'make it grand'. (Deevy 113)

Crowe was thirty-eight years of age when she played the 'not quite twenty' heroine of *Katie Roche*. (Deevy 8) She had played numerous lead roles, but critics had commented on her lack of power and 'inability to dominate' on the stage. (Craig UCD Mss LA28/219) In the spring of 1937, Crowe appeared in *Juno and The Paycock* at the Arts Theatre, Cambridge where the critic was complimentary about the cast, but remarked: 'Miss Crowe acted well, but without sufficient power.' (*Gownsmen* Craig UCD Mss LA28/219) Her small, delicate physicality made for a naïve and unthreatening Katie, occasionally vivacious or sullen. With such an interpretation, Katie is never dangerous; her lurches for power and independence are histrionic performances of a type that belong in melodrama.

Critics attending the New York production in late 1937 show a perceptive reading of the play and of Crowe's performance. Richard Watts Junior, in his column *The Theaters*, quickly recognized that the character was meant to be 'a sort of Irish Hedda Gabler'. (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,511-23) But he asserted that '[Deevy] is never able to present her knowledge of the woman in the dramatic terms' and castigated the play for 'vagueness, obscurity and a bleak kind of dullness.' (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss. 25,511-23) Watts admitted that Crowe 'brings to the part the lovely, haunting voice that is so effective in Irish poetic plays,' but went on to assert that, to his regret, 'psychological characterization is not one of Miss Crowe's greatest gifts.' (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss. 25,511-23)

Brooks Atkinson of *The New York Times* described how as Katie

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Roche, Crowe 'acts the outline of a part without the physical or emotional energy of a headlong young lady'. ('The Play' 17) In fact, Crowe rejected psychological characterization to give an 'outline', or in Fay's terms, to be a 'mouthpiece.' Crowe suggested rather than embodied the emotional energy of a rebellious woman. She demonstrated *how* such behaviour *might* look, and the play showed how it would be beaten down. In these productions, Deevy's play was not a celebration of female liberation; it was a moral and didactic tale for Irish women.

I will argue in chapter five that Ria Mooney strove to inhabit the romantic idealism of Deevy's heroines and also knew the reality of the harsh treatment of single Irish women. This time, when *Katie Roche* ended, a real-life husband and wife took their bows together, presenting themselves as the fictional reunited couple. As argued here, Eileen Crowe never inhabited her characters. She was a symbol of the loyal Catholic Irish wife standing alongside her husband as Katie Roche, and the embodiment of that position as Mrs Judge, or Eileen Crowe the actress.

### **The Playboy of the Western World**

In 1937, W. B. Yeats put Ria Mooney into the central role of Pegeen Mike in J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*. This surprised many; not least Crowe, who had been playing the part since 1925. (She was initially cast by Lennox Robinson.) Crowe's performance of the part was in marked contrast to other depictions of the sheebeen-owner's daughter. In New York in 1937, Mooney was ill and Crowe temporarily reprised her role. One (unknown) newspaper described her performance:

Miss Eileen Crowe was a capable and homely Pegeen, but she spoke all her passages of sentiment in a maudlin over-pitched tone of voice; this certainly brought out the weakness in the character, the sentimentality that invested her Playboy with a halo of false romance, that infuriated her when she discovered his deceit, and that finally made her cry out for a man who had not exactly justified her affection. 'O my grief...' [...] Miss Crowe overdid these passages, and her tone was slightly out of control. (Shields T13/A/560)



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As the enduring nature of the play has demonstrated, Synge's female characters are complex. According to the newspaper quoted, however, Crowe's interpretation focused on Pegeen's weaknesses, her sentimental and homely qualities. Her small frame belied the idea of a 'fine, hardy' woman that could wrestle sheep. There was a real sense of danger at her being left alone in the shebeen over night. (Synge 102) These choices to underscore Pegeen's vulnerabilities are as valid as any interpretation of the role, but are telling of Crowe's sensibilities.

It is notable that Crowe was cast in the role for the American tour that began in 1934. Prior to the Company's departure that year, there was controversy over the inclusion of Synge's play in the repertoire because of protests from Irish Americans about its propriety. This dated back to the controversy in America in 1910-11, when certain actors were arrested, and to the consequent fears of the Irish government that such sentiments might be re-ignited. As Lionel Pilkington has described, matters came to a head in 1933 when the government decided the Abbey's American tour 'was to be denounced for its humiliating representations of Ireland.' (115)

After a period of tension, the government capitulated but the repertoire and details of following tours display a new sensitivity to Irish-American relations by the board of directors. By choosing a homely and sentimental Pegeen, with a deferential presence, the directors positioned Synge's *Playboy* as a historical, mythical piece with little potential for offence. By 1937, with success assured, it was time to re-envision the role. In this key casting decision, Yeats allowed Mooney take a radically different interpretation from Crowe's traditional performance of an Irish colleen.

### **Financial Matters**

With the proposed introduction by the Irish government of the Children's Allowance in 1943 came a robust debate about paying this money (for each third and subsequent child) directly to mothers. But an awareness of the responsibilities borne by women didn't translate into a political acknowledgment of their role. Fears that such payments would

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isolate fathers and lead to the nationalization of mothers and children won out. The father's place as head of the Irish family unit was underlined when the payments were awarded to him. This decision is significant precisely because, as Caitriona Clear deduced from her widespread investigations, 'it is notable that in a variety of locations and household economies [...] the woman was seen as the person who controlled vital resources.' (187)

There was a clear contradiction between the social reality and the national ideal, which one must bear in mind when considering the lives of individual women. Piecing together the fragments of Crowe's life, money recurs as a pre-occupation, both within and outside of her marriage. The material facts of her career offer a useful case study to show the economic realities for Abbey actresses, and how these intersected with gender roles more generally.

In 1925, Crowe was hired by Lady Gregory at a salary of £10 a week. (Murphy 13) Her husband, F.J. McCormick, Crowe discovered, was earning £5 a week. In one interview, she recorded her disgust at discovering that her earnings were higher than her husband, echoing Nora Helmer's sentiments about the humiliation experienced by her husband. (Mikhail 182) According to actor Pat Laffan, as Judge lay dying in a Dublin hospital years later, manager Ernest Blythe insisted that his wages be reduced to sick pay. His wife intercepted the envelopes and prised them open, inserting the difference to protect her husband discovering his pay packet was reduced. Crowe could never accept the role of major wage-earner in the family; she believed this was a role for the male head of the household and thought her husband's talents were worth more than her own.

A survey of the financial records of the Abbey Theatre from 1923 to 1927 shows that the differential in wages extended through the company. (*Bound Volume* 4384: 4) The accounts show that in 1923, F. J. McCormick was earning £4 15d a week, May Craig £3 a week and Eileen Crowe £2 a week. In comparison, Sara Allgood was taking home £12 10d. These salaries seem commensurate with the actors' years of service and experience. (*Bound Volume* 4384: 4) In July 1924, when Crowe was cast in

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George Shiels' *The Retrievers*, her weekly wage was increased to £4. The salaries of McCormick and Craig didn't change. In August 1925, Crowe earned £5 a week for appearing in *Playboy of the Western World* as Pegeen Mike and by the end of the month, her wages were doubled. She was now earning the same salary as the Abbey's star Sara Allgood, £10 a week. McCormick was earning £5 10d and Craig was taking home £3 a week. (*Bound Volume 4384: 4*)

Even after the debacle over *The Plough and the Stars* in February 1926, Crowe earned £10 a week for her brief appearance as 'the Woman from Rathmines'. Craig took on the larger role of Mrs Gogan with a wage increase of only £1, to £4 a week. McCormick was still on £5 10d. (*Bound Volume 4384: 4*) There may have been an intervention during that year, for by the time Crowe played Nora Helmer in *A Doll's House* in December 1926 her wages were reduced to £7 10d. As her on-stage husband, McCormick was finally earning more: £8 a week. (*Bound Volume 4384: 4*) While she played an independent woman on stage, the typical earning pattern for Irish gender roles was eventually restored in their real-life marriage.

Crowe's preoccupation with earning continued after her husband's death, and she carefully negotiated fees for occasional film work. Many of the Abbey Company sought leave to appear in films as the business of making films in Ireland expanded; this was far more lucrative if undemanding work. A telegram in the papers of John Ford, dated 6 June 1951, includes the following message:

AT REQUEST OUR CLIENT EILEEN CROWE SINCE YESTERDAY HAVE REPEATEDLY TRIED WITHOUT SUCCESS TO CONTACT YOU TO DISCUSS MISS CROWES SALARY TELEPHONE GROSVENOR 3080.  
(Parker to Ford Lily Mss)

The outcome of the negotiations is not recorded, but Ford did speak with Crowe and the following year she appeared in his film *The Quiet Man* as vicar's wife, Mrs Elizabeth Playfair.

Crowe was also involved with pay negotiations for radio broadcasts of the Abbey Theatre repertoire made from Radio Eireann. In 1954, Equity

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(the Irish actors' union) approached Blythe to discuss arrangements for remuneration. The players requested a flat payment of £20 each, which Blythe considered excessive and he elected instead to divide the group of actors by insisting that all players (regardless of the size of part) received £10. According to Barry Monahan, the first to object were Eileen Crowe and Harry Brogan, because they 'as senior members of the company, would have preferred payment proportionate to weekly salary.' (Monahan 184) Within weeks, the notion of flat payments was dropped by the union.

By the early 1950s, Crowe and Craig (along with actors Michael Dolan, Eric Gorman and Harry Brogan) had experienced many changes in the Abbey. They were now surrounded by a whole host of young newcomers. Craig's presence and her generosity still impressed. Actor Vincent Dowling recalled appearing with her and Michael Dolan and described them:

Always the same, yet always fresh; the minimum of movement; as if for the first time; never taking away from the other actor.  
(Dowling 198)

The older generation clung to some of their traditional ways. As one example, Vincent Dowling and others led a campaign to allow each actor to see the whole script. But Dowling soon discovered that the 'old guard' were re-typing their scripts to include only their own part or 'side'. (Dowling 158) There was increasing dissatisfaction over conditions and salary levels, and a Players' Council was established to negotiate with management. (Dowling 162)

As a vocal member of the newly-established council, Dowling was aware of the enduring issue of the differential in pay terms between Craig and Crowe. When elder Company members refused to give their salary details for negotiations with Equity and the theatre management, Dowling arranged a 'private ballot box' where they could anonymously provide their years of service and terms of pay. It was an exercise in politeness; given the size of the company, details could be easily matched to players. Dowling's memory is that Crowe was earning twelve pounds weekly while

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Craig was earning seven pounds.<sup>6</sup> (Dowling 163) At a subsequent meeting, Blythe dismissed their argument stating that Craig was ‘really retired’ and giving her ‘small parts from time to time was charity’. (Dowling 245)

It might be expected that as mature women with a wealth of shared experience, Craig and Crowe would be friends, or at least allies in their opinions and demands. However, all accounts suggest that Craig and Crowe did not get along. On tour, they had separate dressing rooms and didn’t speak to each other unless on stage. (Laffan) The most likely cause of rancour is the disparity in earnings. Dowling recalls:

May Craig, after 47 years with the Company, had seven pounds a week. Eileen Crowe had maybe twelve. While she richly deserved to be in the top echelon, it was because she was the widow of the great ‘F.J.’ that Blythe deigned to put her there. (Dowling 163)

In his memory of the material facts of her life, Dowling reveals that Crowe’s talent and her social role as wife and then widow to a distinguished actor remained entangled.

Craig had joined the company over a decade before Crowe and had performed as many lead roles. There’s no suggestion that she lacked money or suffered any deprivation as a result of this pay discrepancy. In fact, it may have been felt that Craig’s inheritance from her husband meant she didn’t need to earn. But the disparity insulted her professional talent and likely led to a rift. Both women were character actresses, and had gained their early experience working with actors taught directly by Synge and Yeats. Yet, while they retained the Catholic faith, on closer examination their values are notably distinct.

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<sup>6</sup> Later in the same chapter (244) Dowling says that, to his recollection, Eileen Crowe was earning nineteen pounds, not twelve.

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### **May Craig – Background**

In notes on her own life prepared for a lecture or other public discussion, May Craig recalled the poem *A Memory* by British poet L. A. G. Strong. ('Reminiscence' Craig UCD LA 28/238) The opening lines are:

#### ***A Memory* by I. A. G. Strong**

When I was as high as that,  
I saw a poet in his hat.  
I think the poet must have smiled  
At such a solemn, gazing child.

Choosing this ditty to capture her childhood encounter with Synge suggests a creative mind with a sense of humour, which Craig showed herself to have throughout her working life. She was, like Crowe, a devout Catholic who followed the Church's teachings and observances. Lennox Robinson notes in his memoir how Craig told him that he was in her prayers, after he lost his job with the Carnegie Library. (*Curtain Up* 136) It's not clear whether she was praying for his career, or for his soul. (Robinson had written a tale about a girl falling pregnant and been sacked for publication of the story, which was deemed salacious.) Craig was discreet enough to ensure her meaning was opaque. In addition to her faith, repeated challenges in her life made Craig a stoic and compassionate presence in the Abbey Company.

It was a priest (named Eugene McCarthy) that introduced Craig to the two dominating loves of her life: the Abbey Theatre and her husband. When she was barely eighteen, the priest and family friend had called to the house to see Mrs Craig. May arrived home from school, and Father McCarthy asked if she would take a silent role in a play being staged at the Abbey Theatre. The teenager accompanied him the following morning at 11am, where she watched a rehearsal of *The Playboy of the Western World* from the stalls.

Overcome by the strangeness and beauty, Craig started to cry silently towards the end of the performance. J.M. Synge was also in the

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auditorium, watching, and he took the sorrow in her mournful eyes as a compliment. She was soon on stage in the silent role of Honor Blake, a 'little laying pullet' in her hands, with instructions not to look out at the audience or to use her hands too much. (Synge 117) It would be nine years before she appeared on the Abbey stage again although she attended acting classes. In October 1916 (when Craig was twenty-seven) a prominent actress was unable to fulfill an engagement in George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*. As she was familiar with the part from scenes learnt in the Abbey School, Craig was asked to step in. Thus, her acting career began.

That same year, Craig was in the original cast of Lennox Robinson's *The White Headed Boy* as Jane Geoghegan. She would continue to play this part for 34 subsequent productions.<sup>7</sup> One of the six Geoghegan children, Jane in *The White Headed Boy* is a 'nice quiet girl', long promised to Donogh Brosnan. (Robinson 67) Like the other sisters, she panders to her brother Denis and 'knows how to humour him' but beneath the patient façade is a growing dissatisfaction that gradually reveals itself. (Robinson 76) The playwright notes in the directions at one point, 'You wouldn't think JANE could be so bitter.' (Robinson 78) Jane demands that there are changes, asserting that she can't wait forever for marriage. Craig was already establishing herself as an actress with subtle, but expressive features, capable of using modulated restraint to empower her emotional climaxes.

It was in the house of Father Eugene McCarthy that Craig she was introduced to Vincent Power-Fardy, who had been born in America, of Wexford-born parents. His father was a journalist who worked in Albany, but following the early deaths of both parents he and his two sisters were sent back to Ireland. While his sisters were brought up by a maternal aunt, Vincent was old enough to join Craig Gardner and he embarked on a career as an accountant and auditor, with specific responsibilities for the Irish

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Sweepstakes. Along with his financial qualifications, he tried his hand at playwriting. Craig's papers lovingly preserve three programmes for productions of his plays in the Empire Theatre in Belfast. In 1930, while rehearsing for *Mrs Grogan and the Ferret*, Craig jotted down on the back of her script bus times from D'Olier Street and addresses. (Craig UCD LA28/226) Between rehearsals, she was busy making arrangements and looking for a house; she and Power-Fardy were now married with a growing family.

Craig continued to perform until 1968, playing in a total of 915 productions with the Abbey Company. This does not include her film work, nor does it account for any maternity leave while she had five children in quick succession. Reviewing the meta-data from the Abbey Theatre Digital Archive, it becomes apparent that she was a character actress, often playing significant roles without appearing in leading parts. (Abbey Theatre Database) She appeared in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, for instance, in nineteen productions but only played the eponymous heroine once. This was on a Sunday evening in February 1941, for a special memorial performance of works by W. B. Yeats. In *The Playboy of the Western World*, with which she began her career as Honor Blake, Craig appeared as one of the village girls twenty-six times, without ever playing Widow Quin or Pegeen Mike. Her most frequent roles were as Mrs Scally in Shiels' *Professor Tim*, Jane in the Robinson's *The White Headed Boy* (34 times) and Ellen in Robinson's other popular comedy *The Far-Off Hills* (32 times). The part taken from Crowe, Mrs Gogan in *The Plough and the Stars*, she played 31 times. In 25 productions of O'Casey's *Shadow of a Gunman* she played Mrs Henderson.

Craig displayed an impressive range, from Irish servants to old English ladies. The *Irish Times* noted her blossoming in 1930 when she appeared as ex-school mistress, Mrs Scally, in *Professor Tim*:

One actress who is very often miscast or overlooked, Miss Craig, is here the perfect domineering wife. For a long period in the third act she gives growing anger a force that it has rarely seen on

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<sup>7</sup> As noted previously, these were not strictly 'revivals' of the production, but the Abbey Theatre tended to interfere as little as possible with classic or popular hits.



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stage. (Craig UCD Mss LA28/116)

The *San Francisco News* deemed her a 'Lady of All Ages' in April 1935 for her skills. (Craig UCD Mss LA28/116) Many of the American critics were struck by how much younger and more glamorous she looked off stage, when she had removed the heavy greasepaint and kohl wrinkles. An audience in Cork in October 1935 were 'thrilled through and through' by her 'sheer humanness and realism'; this being a striking comparison to Crowe's lyricism and lack of psychological characterization. (Craig UCD Mss LA28/116)

*The Words Upon the Window Pane*, W. B. Yeats' one-act play about a supernatural séance in an Irish boarding house, premiered in November 1930 with both Craig and Crowe in the cast. Craig was the Dublin-born medium that has been living in London but returns to spread the spiritual movement in Ireland. She is described as 'A poor woman with the soul of an apostle.' (Yeats 156) Crowe was Mrs Mallet, the widow that comes seeking to connect with her husband from the other world. The play is full of subtle suggestions of the mercenary objectives of spiritual mediums and other skeptical visitors. The climax comes with Mrs Henderson's 'possession' by a number of spirits as her visitors observe with bated breath. These include Lulu, a six-year-old girl, along with Jonathan Swift, and two of his romantic interests, Vanessa and Stella.

As Mrs Henderson, the actress must shift deftly between the characters, voicing their arguments, while the medium remains 'asleep' in her chair. After the séance, sceptic John Corbet tells her she is an 'accomplished actress and scholar'. (Yeats 170) He insists that, although he remains to be convinced of supernatural powers, 'I have been deeply moved by what I have heard.' (Yeats 170) In case the audience had any questions about the veracity of her 'performance', Yeats leaves them with the image of Mrs Henderson struggling to come back to reality and prepare some tea for herself. Alone on the stage, May Craig moved '*aimlessly about the stage and then, letting the saucer fall and break, speaks in Swift's voice.*

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“Perish the day on which I was born!” (Yeats 172)

It’s a powerful ending and the part of Mrs Henderson demands of an actress a stately presence and ferocious intensity. Reviewing the first production for the *Irish Independent* on 18 November, D.S. said that it was a ‘wonderful personal triumph’ for Craig. He continued: ‘Her playing of this part is a remarkably fine piece of restrained, emotional acting.’ (‘The Words’) As one of the few occasions on which Craig held the central role on stage, she displayed her versatility and majestic presence. It was a role she repeated in eleven productions over the years, in the USA and at home.

In 1931, Craig spent her first Christmas away from her young family and for much of the following decade, she travelled with the Abbey Company to the US each year from September to July. Unlike Crowe and McCormick, who were reliant on their touring income to raise their family, Craig had a comfortable lifestyle due to her husband’s position. Yet her career on the stage remained crucial to her. While she was away, Power-Fardy was in Dublin with the children. She was shocked and hurt to read in the US papers while travelling on the train between venues that the journalists had learnt that she had lost a sixth child during pregnancy. (‘Reminiscence’ Craig UCD Mss LA28/240) However, she talked openly to US newspapers about balancing an acting career and family life. She said:

The Irish actress never has to face the problem of a home or a career ... We don't worry which one comes first, because they blend together ... There is no conscious placing of either home or career above the other ... (Boston Craig UCD Mss LA28)

Craig spoke in general terms, but it could be argued her circumstances were unique. Her adoration for her husband is evident as she describes how, ‘He understands my interest in my professional work and encourages me in it.’ (Steigler Craig UCD Mss LA28/219/1) In Detroit, she said:

I consider [my husband’s] wishes before anything else. If you don't consider each other and if you don't love each other enough, marriage is left holding the bag. ... My husband never forces his will on me. He considers me capable of making up my own mind and he is a darling. Know why? He's an American!

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(Warfel Craig UCD Mss LA28/231)

Craig enjoyed travelling, bringing presents home to her children, along with tales of 'cherry blossom time in Washington' and parties where she met the US President and Mrs Roosevelt; George Gershwin and the author of the musical *Porgy and Bess*, DuBose Heyward. ('Reminiscence' Craig UCD Mss LA28/240) Her notes about one party read:

Millionaire had big plantation and invited players out to it on a Sunday. Lake in grounds. Moon an enormous orange in the sky. Coloured workers came and sat carrying torches singing spirituals. An unforgettable experience. ('Reminiscence' Craig UCD Mss LA28/240)

Craig was grateful to be married to an American man, who accepted their unconventional arrangement. Less than four months after speaking publically of her 'darling' husband, Craig found herself a widow. With startling intensity, Craig's professional and personal life overlapped, and events had the potential to test her devotion to the theatre.

### **The Widow – *Margaret Gillan* by Brinsley MacNamara**

In the summer of 1933, May Craig played the title role in Brinsley MacNamara's new play *Margaret Gillan*. As the curtain rose, she was in place, seated behind a table laden with paper. The stage directions show that Gillan's parlour is part-home, part-office, part-extension of the shop at the end of the unseen corridor stage left. It is well-furnished, if old-fashioned and tending towards shabby. A large portrait of Mr Gillan (recently deceased) is prominent among the other family pictures. The stage directions read:

Margaret Gillan is looking over some account books spread out on the table before her. On the table too are various papers and sheaves of bills on wire files. She is busy and apparently worried by her calculations. She is still a handsome woman of about thirty-seven. (MacNamara 9)

Craig was forty-four, but she was still a handsome woman. In photos, she stands a head taller than Crowe; she showed off her height, standing with shoulders back and chin high. She wore her dark hair tight around round

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cheeks and her eyes were blue and 'sad in repose'. (Craig UCD Mss LA28/219) There were a dozen curtain calls at one performance of *Margaret Gillan*. ('Abbey Theatre')

There was, perhaps, no more fitting leading lady to play the grief-stricken Margaret who has been struck by tragedy. Craig's husband had been laid to rest on the 30<sup>th</sup> June, less than three weeks before the opening night. At forty-one, Power-Fardy died at his home on Clonliffe Road, on Dublin's northside. ('Auditor Laid' Craig UCD Mss LA 219/4) He had taken ill at his desk that morning, two weeks after greeting his wife at the boat on her return from a US tour. ('Acting With') Brinsley MacNamara attended the funeral, along with many of the company. ('Auditor Laid' Craig UCD Mss LA 219/4) They stood in the church and shared their condolences with May and the five Power-Fardy children: Reggie, Raymond, Edna, Vera and Una. The production of *Margaret Gillan* proceeded as planned.

Late in the first act, Mrs Gillan is joined by her long-time housekeeper, Ellen Ledwidge. MacNamara describes her as 'about the same age as Margaret, but looks older.' (17) Mrs Gillan wants to order her to 'hurry up something nice for tea this evening,' but Ellen likes to give advice. (17) Ellen was played by Eileen Crowe, who was ten years older than Craig and not used to playing lesser roles. The character has a practical, slightly condescending manner towards her boss. She says:

Ah, it was a pity, a great pity the time before, when you didn't marry John Briody, but took Peter Gillan, and he such a lot older than you too. (MacNamara 17)

Mrs Gillan wants none of her prattle, but Ellen continues:

Like a child you were, for I saw it all. And I saw it all after. And I'm seeing it still. The way a thing like that goes on and on. (MacNamara 17)

These doyennes of the Abbey Company during the 1930s shared many experiences, personally and professionally, yet there is no evidence they supported each other off stage. They were radically different in performance style and in approach to a theatrical career.

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After her husband's death, Craig bought a house in Booterstown and her sister Madge came to live with her to help raise the children so that Craig could continue with the Abbey Company. In the heap of yellowing papers that University College Dublin are guarding in their archives, there is a description of the forty-four-year-old widow attending a first night at the Gate Theatre less than a year after her husband's death, accompanied by her sixteen-year-old son. The social columnist for the *Dublin Evening Mail* describes him as 'very manly', standing erect and gallantly by his mother, in the place of his father. (Craig UCD Mss LA 219/1) Putting grief behind her and keeping her children close, Craig continued to perform.

The *Evening Mail* encountered Reggie again in September 1936, when Craig took advantage of a mild Sunday afternoon to throw a garden party. She served cocktails, mixed to a special recipe she had picked up in America, and her daughters handed around plates of 'dainties'. In one of the drawing rooms, music was playing while members of the Abbey Company mixed with the guests of honour, visiting American friends, in the garden. (Craig UCD Mss LA 219/1) It was an elegant and sociable affair, much befitting its host. Craig refused to be seen as the tragic widow, or the struggling actress and mother. She continually presented herself to Irish society (and the world) as a dignified, glamorous performer off the stage, to be admired and respected.

### **Mother and Martyr: Crowe and Craig in O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock***

As previously described, the concluding scene of Deevy's *Katie Roche* echoes Nora Helmer's departure from her marriage at the end of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. It was not the only Irish play in the Abbey repertoire to replicate the final notes (albeit in a different tone) of the Norwegian modernist drama. In his 1924 play *Juno and the Paycock*, Sean O'Casey created the quintessential mother of Irish drama: Mrs Boyle. In this installment of his Dublin trilogy, O'Casey used the complicated ideology of the mythic Roman goddess Juno to explore Irish femininity and

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motherhood within the context of the nation state in post-1916 Ireland. As both Crowe and Craig began to age and to take over the roles of Irish mothers, it is useful to consider the maternal models on the Abbey stage from the late 1920s and to ask how these particular actresses re-configured the roles over the following decades.

With inter-related roles in fertility and war, the goddess Juno was a symbol of strength in childbirth, marriage and national war. Transplanted to the tumultuous years of the Irish civil war, O'Casey's Juno is a tough Irish mother, fighting for her family's survival. At the opening of the play, Juno describes her lot: 'I killin' meself workin', an' he sthruddin' about from mornin' till night like a paycock.' (O'Casey 10) At the end of the play, she is worn down by poverty and grief, but chooses an independent life. She instructs her daughter, 'Let your father furrage for himself now; [...] we'll work together for the sake of the baby.' (O'Casey 71) The irony of this final scene, in contrast to Ibsen's, is that the feckless Captain Boyle has no idea that his wife has left with her daughter, to bring up her grandchild without any male figures.

In the cast for the first production, Sara Allgood presided over the family while Eileen Crowe played the role of Mary Boyle, Juno's daughter who becomes pregnant out of wedlock. But by March 1926, Allgood had left for Hollywood and as the presiding matriarch of the company, Crowe took over the role. She would play the part in 37 productions, with her last appearance as Juno in 1957 taking place at the Queen's Theatre on Hawkins Street, during the Abbey Company's sojourn there after the fire in the theatre. (At that time, Philip O'Flynn played her husband and she was directed by Ria Mooney.)

Commentators have largely agreed that motherhood 'constitutes the most significant element in Juno's characterization', although scholars differ on how they read and interpret the material in regard to her representation of motherhood. (Keaton 85-97) Bernice Schrank sees Juno's 'doctrine of free will' as the antithesis of Boyle's 'deterministic world view' and argues that these dialectical polarities structure the play, making it a

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performance about Juno's private triumph under oppression. (Schrank 439 – 454) Others, including Krause, believe Juno is O'Casey's example of the universal mother, a realistic and compassionate woman. (68-99)

Rather than choose to deify or to destroy the character, Maria Keaton examines the script and Mrs Boyle's character development to reveal the 'formation of a type of matriarchal ideology'. (86) In her reading, Juno is neither goddess nor villain. She is a dissenting voice that exposes the hollow nature of nationalism and is an 'agent in her own education' as she comes to an understanding of how to face the future. (Keaton 87)

If Juno's children and husband are caught up in the intellectual ideas of nationalism and the labour movement, her concerns are practical and financial. Throughout the action, she feeds her husband and urges tea on her son. Early on, she remarks to Mary:

Yis; an' when I go into oul' Murphy's tomorrow, an' he gets to know that, instead o' payin' all, I'm goin' to borry more, what'll he say when I tell him a principle's a principle? What'll we do if he refuses to give us any more on tick? (O'Casey 8)

Juno's concern for her family's welfare is admirable, yet it blinds her to the experiences of those outside the family unit. Her callous remarks about Mrs Tancred's loss of her son, for example, ('In wan' way, she deserves all she got') jar with her protectiveness for her own offspring. (O'Casey 47)

The tragedy of O'Casey's play is that, for all her stoicism and common sense, Juno cannot save her family from ruin. She fails to stop her husband's profligate ways and when their inheritance transpires to be invalid, they are plunged again into poverty. Her son Johnny's betrayal of a neighbour leads him to a death that is not heroic, but is overshadowed by shame of his behaviour. Juno fails to meet the national ideal of a mother who maintains moral order and financial stability, despite her efforts.

O'Casey never allows easy interpretation of the motives and emotions of his characters and all of the female parts in *Juno and the Paycock* are complex and demanding of actresses. Coming after the adored star Sara Allgood, Crowe had a particular battle to win over audiences. In

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November 1927 Lady Gregory attended a performance and noted, 'At Juno last evening a wonderful house and it went as well as ever in spite of Miss Crowe, a poor substitute for Sally.' (Murphy *Journals* 217) The substitution did not bother the general public: Gregory went to seven performances that week, and recorded 'crammed houses' for Juno with 'last night the longest queue I have ever seen there, a pity so many had to be turned away.' (Murphy *Journals* 217)

At the same time, critics again often drew attention to Crowe's dainty presence and one in particular found that her portrayal of the battle-worn mother destroyed the impact of the final scene with a deserted Boyle and Joxer. Of the 1937 production in Cambridge, this critic described how: 'The astonishing last drunk scene [ ... ] missed fire in the present production owing to Miss Crowe's inability to make her monologue convincing.' (*Gownsmen* Craig UCD Mss LA28/219-3) The other women were more successful, in his eyes. He said of Aideen O'Connor, as Mary Boyle: 'The character becomes more complex in the course of the play, and Miss O'Connor showed a full understanding of every aspect of it.' (*Gownsmen* Craig UCD Mss LA28/219-3)

In the figure of neighbor Mrs Tancred, O'Casey depicts Irish motherhood in a different guise. Juno is working and striving for her children from the opening moments; from her first entry, Mrs Tancred is a figure of grief, broken by the loss of her child. She enters 'a very old woman – obviously shaken by the death of her son' and continues to relive the scene of his death. (O'Casey 45) Craig frequently played this part and a critic said she 'made the episode of Mrs Tancred very moving and spoke beautifully.' (*Gownsmen* Craig UCD Mss LA28/219-3)

If they initially come into conflict over their sons' involvement in the civil war, ultimately the play forges a bond between both of these mothers, showing that an essential humanity can unite women. A note of hope rises from Juno's repetition of Mrs Tancred's prayer, and her subsequent escape with her daughter, determined to raise Mary's child with 'two mothers'. (O'Casey 71) Off stage, the contrasting personalities of these two real-life



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mothers never allowed for such easy union. On stage, the polarities of mature femininity they embodied and presented to the Irish public enriched and enlivened the Abbey Theatre Company for decades.

Crowe and Craig devoted their lives to the Irish stage. They continued to perform through pregnancies, bereavements, their own illness and that of their children, perhaps for financial reasons as well as for their own fulfillment. They gained from their work resilience, strength of character and mind that saw them both into old age. Craig continued to perform until 1968; she died four years later. Crowe performed for the last time on the stage of the Peacock in 1970 and died in 1978.

May Craig came to the Abbey Theatre as a sensitive, serious child and matured into a stately presence on the stage, a glamorous if tragic figure that was loved on the streets of Dublin as much as she was admired on the stage. Crowe was at the epicenter of shifts in the staging of Irish femininity on the national stage. Her career brought her from the portrayal of modern woman Nora Helmer to Synge's lonely Nora and eventually to the part of Nora Clitheroe in *The Plough and the Stars*. One commentator has observed how, O'Casey's Nora is 'weak and faces back to the previous century's helpless Colleens.' (Ritschel 163) Crowe was familiar with such colleens and how they had been represented on the Irish stage since the turn of the century. She experimented with Ibsen's 'new women' but ultimately succumbed to the ideological pressure (or chose) to present a particularly Irish form of femininity that was chaste, obedient and discrete.

When she demanded the role of Nora Clitheroe in 1936, Crowe was choosing to present a weak, melodramatic heroine in furtherance of her own career and material gain. This is a curiously paradoxical position for a woman to occupy, while it's entirely comprehensible as a pragmatic choice for a working actress. Furthermore, the material facts recorded in the archive prove that the Abbey Theatre, with its contentious position in the apparatus of the Irish Free State, valued the chaste, demure wife and mother figure more highly than the ambitious young artist (Richards) or the rich versatility of an accomplished character actress (such as May Craig).

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### **Conclusion**

The development of any artistic career is the product of many factors: training, dedication, chance and ambition but it is also marked by personal ideals. It's difficult to measure the extent to which the careers of Eileen Crowe and May Craig were ultimately shaped by institutional and societal pressure, but their ideals brought them to where they were at the end of the 1950s. They were by then actresses of esteem performing regularly, but they were also respectable women with orthodox middle-class families and financial stability.

In the following chapters, I will detail the life stories of three other women who emerged from the same tradition at the Abbey, but took very different routes. In the conclusion, I will return to issues of longevity and success. However, it's not useful to directly compare these women. Rather, to consider all five of the life stories as one narrative is both fascinating and necessary to a full understanding of the status and position of an Irish actress in the National Theatre of the 1930s.

**Chapter 3: Aideen O'Connor (1913 – 1950)****Introduction**

As stated before, this thesis builds on the work of Gale and Stokes in *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress*, in aiming to expose 'the construction of the actress'. (2) The chapters examine the factors that come to bear on the personal ideals of any actress: familial, societal and industry pressures that must be negotiated endlessly to make a career as a performer. If Crowe's biography demonstrates the development of a respectable Irish performer, Aideen O'Connor's life shows a single-minded devotion to acting, but also illustrates how off-stage behaviour came to determine the fate of certain Irish actresses.

A photograph of Aideen (Una Mary) O'Connor was taken in the green room of the Abbey Theatre before she went on to the main stage for the first time in 1933. (Shields T13/B/130) In the picture, she barely raises her eyes to the camera, as she sinks into the corner of a flowery couch. Her hair is pinned back to reveal an elfin face and on the wall behind her head is a photograph of the Abbey Players on a recent American tour. In her lap, her right hand grips the fingers of her left; both hands hover above the swathes of gingham that make up the too-large costume. To my eyes, there's a determination in her face as well as an anxiety. She has the air not of someone who doesn't want to be there, but of someone who is terrified because she so badly wants to be there.

O'Connor had grey eyes, a button nose and hair of 'a copper colour ... a mass of tiny ringlets'. (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,511-23) She was five foot two and a half inches tall and of slight build (weighing approximately 106 pounds). (Shields T13/A/469) She was a Catholic girl, living at home with her father and working as a secretary at Polikoffs' clothing factory during the day. On Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> September 1933 she turned twenty and the following Monday, she made her first professional appearance in Brinsley MacNamara's *Margaret Gillan*. She was replacing the actress Kitty Curling, whom she had seen perform as Esther Gillan one month earlier.

'Una Mary' was aware of the actress Una O'Connor, born in Belfast and a member of the Abbey Company from 1912. The latter left for Hollywood in the 1920s, but her name remained known in Dublin. To differentiate herself, Una Mary chose the name Aideen. The name comes from Irish legends of Fionn McCool and means 'fire'. It has connotations of jealousy and passion. For a few years, she would be Una at home in Ranelagh and Aideen in the theatre. Gradually, Una was lost entirely.

MacNamara's play centres on the relationship between a mother and a daughter: a recently widowed woman is dismayed when the only man she ever loved asks for her daughter's hand in marriage. The script was familiar to O'Connor from classes and performances in the Abbey School. *Margaret Gillan* is a play full of repressed passions, showing a woman struggling with aging, with financial and practical realities, along with the death of her own dreams and a burning jealousy of her daughter's youth and beauty. May Craig played the title role. Tentatively entering Margaret's Gillan sitting room late in the first act, Aideen O'Connor raised her head and asked, 'Did you want me, mother?' (MacNamara 12) In the telling of any life story, a mother is a good place to begin.

### **Family Background**

I traced the letters on the screen of the Irish Census of 1911 (publically available on the Internet) with my finger. I compared the Fs with the Cs, one in 'O'Connor' and the other in 'Roman Catholic', denoting the religion of the household. The genealogist from the National Library believes that the name on the Enumerator's Form is 'Flora Crowley O'Connor'. I lean towards 'Clara Crowley O'Connor'. It's not possible to be definite. But in this tracing, this guessing, I am again aware that I am inventing someone in 'Clara', or obliterating somebody by the name of 'Flora'. Such conundrums and decisions are an intrinsic part of archival research. I cannot be certain of this woman's name, but there are other documented facts that can be pieced together.

Mrs Flora-Clara Crowley O'Connor was twenty-two years old when the Census Collector called to the door of 56 Hollybank Avenue on the south side of Dublin city. He canvassed the entire 'Avenue', which is a grand title for the neat cul de sac of terraced, red-bricked houses in this long-established suburb. Number 56 was considered a large house (three bedrooms and an outside privy) for a couple with a single domestic servant. Another Catholic family lived on one side; on the other side were Methodists. (*Census 1911*) The girl, from Cork City, had been married for less than a year to Vincent De Paul O'Connor, who worked at the Mercantile Office in Dublin Port. It was April 1911. It was spring. If Mrs O'Connor was already expecting her first daughter, Eileen, this pregnancy wasn't recorded. The Census heralded the start of something: the O'Connor family proper.

At 9.40am on the 26th August 1913 the trams stopped running, leaving idle the fifty miles of track that linked the centre of Dublin with the suburbs of Clontarf, Rathmines, Blackrock and Kingstown (now Dun Laoghaire). (Yeates 1) The absence of trams and bells announcing their arrival left the streets quiet. Four days later, rioting broke out in Ringsend (a working-class area close to the port) and the disturbances spread rapidly to other working-class districts. An industrial dispute over workers' rights to unionize began to unravel and some of the city's employers threatened a lockout.

On the first Saturday of September, the *Irish Catholic* newspaper described events on the streets of the capital as 'Dublin's Peril,' saying that 'most self-respecting and educated men and women' were 'heartily ashamed' of the rioting and disputes spilling out from various industries. (Yeates 131) Many believed an unbridled class war was on the verge of breaking out. At the same time, according to Pádraig Yeates, Irish nationalists (such as Vincent O'Connor) opposed the Lockout and the influx of goods from overseas it would encourage. ('The Dublin' 31-36) The weather was mild for autumn and the city re-assumed a relaxed, weekend air as the threat of violence remained at a remove. *A Sunday Independent*

journalist observed that 'the usual harmony and good humour prevailed in every quarter, the police were not obtrusively visible in any quarter.' (Yeates 134-6)

That same Saturday, 6<sup>th</sup> September, Vincent O'Connor learnt that his second child was another daughter. Any parent would fear for such a child, born into a city threatening to descend into lawlessness. From his desk in Dublin Port, he could see the men on the docks collecting to unload the ships arriving with food supplies and (as the crisis developed) boats leaving for Liverpool where children were promised Catholic homes with food and schooling. Later, official documents would claim that Mr O'Connor was the Superintendent of the Mercantile Marine Office. (Shields T13/A/465) It is an unlikely title, given that he was an Irish Catholic working in the civil service at a time when promotions or leadership roles were denied to many of his faith. He was a lower-middle-class man striving to raise a young family in a city under siege from industrial disputes, from poverty and from endemic diseases.

Aideen O'Connor was born in the midst of the 1913 Lockout. By the end of the last quarter of 1913, infant mortality would have risen by almost 50%. (Yeates 'The Dublin' 31-36) Flora-Clara would have another daughter within two years but she didn't survive to see her children grow. It's tempting to say that O'Connor was born with the defiant energy of the Lockout in the air; the malevolent despair that found its way into every nook of the city in the dark winter of 1913 shaped her personality. It's tempting to say this, but it's a theory I can't prove or support with evidence. As much as I'd like the idea of this shaping force to linger in the reader's mind, it was simply a moment: in the life of the city and for O'Connor.

The Lockout did happen but the city moved on, with the widower Vincent O'Connor bringing up his daughters as middle-class respectable women alone. He was an Irish speaker, but in the Dominican Convent in Donnybrook where she attended school, his daughter learnt to speak French, to play tennis and to compose elegant business letters. In the early 1930s, William Fay of the Abbey Theatre was taking afternoons away from

Marlborough Street to coach young convent girls around Dublin in elocution and Shakespeare. (Finlay 97) If he included Muckross College on his weekly rounds, O'Connor came under his watchful eye. She liked attention, this middle child who considered herself the plain sister. (Shields T13/A/436) She found out about the evening classes in the Abbey, even as the Muckross nuns educated her for a job in an office with prospects and a steady wage. Polikoffs' Factory was an achievement for O'Connor, a job in the office above the factory floor where men and women stitched and sewed all day. But she already had her eye on a different life, and was taking the tram into the city a few evenings a week to be tutored by Lennox Robinson and M.J. Dolan in classes at the Abbey Theatre.

Dolan kept one of his adjudicators' sheets: a typed sheet of names on which they made handwritten notes as they auditioned scores of hopeful performers for the Abbey School of Acting on the Peacock stage. O'Connor's notes are not recorded but others were considered with the following observations:

Miss Rose O'Shea  
I don't think so: weak and uninteresting.

Eleanor O'Connell  
Anxious & nervous. Not bad voice in reading.  
Recitation: Gesture bad and not so good in reading: - enunciation.

Nora O'Neale  
Made sense of what she was reading. Robust: good strong voice.  
Clear enunciation (often) Dramatic sense  
Recit[ation]: flexibility and word painting good. Face expression.  
(*Adjudications* NLI Mss 22,556)

There is much emphasis on voice and recitation, on the strength of voice and enunciation. Little else is revealed about the qualities they required from students.

In April 1933, O'Connor received her certificate in acting from Robinson at a small graduation ceremony. (Shields T13/A/445) At home on Hollybank Avenue, her sister Eileen was already taking the position of mother figure, of moral and religious guardian. One morning, Vincent Paul O'Connor noticed a postcard addressed to his middle daughter in the post.

He was presented in writing with a formal indication of her hard work in the evening classes. He could simply turn it over to see the typed request for 'Una' to call to the theatre as soon as possible to see Mr Arthur Shields. He wrote 'Go n-eirí an t-áidh leat. Daidí,' in pencil across the card, to wish her luck in Irish. (Shields T13/A/446) Soon after that meeting O'Connor began to prepare for her first professional appearance.

Her siblings, Eileen and Maeve O'Connor, were 'not Abbey-goers'. (Shields T13/A/155(15)) There was one friend and mentor who celebrated O'Connor's every performance, although she could rarely travel to Dublin. Sr. Mary Monica Hanrahan (whose real name was Martha) was born in Cork City and joined the Sisters of Mercy convent in Cobh six months after O'Connor was born. (Cosgrave) Hanrahan was then eighteen and it's possible she was a friend or relative of Mrs O'Connor (also from Cork city), who stayed in touch with the children of her dead friend. Living close to O'Connor's family in the centre of Cobh and teaching at the local primary school, Hanrahan took pride in O'Connor's work and growing fame.

According to an email from the Congregational Archivist for the Sisters of Mercy, Marianne Cosgrave, this 'handsome' woman was 'cultured, gracious and ladylike.' She spoke with a 'fine accent' and taught speech and drama to all her students. (Cosgrave) As well as the standard elocution and verse-speaking lessons, Mary Monica encouraged her students to produce their own plays, tableaux and sketches. (Cosgrave) However she felt about O'Connor's future decisions, Sister Mary Monica loved her like a mother.

After a six-night run of *Margaret Gillan*, O'Connor returned to work at Polikoffs' factory and attended rehearsals in the theatre in the evenings. Two weeks later, she had a small part in *The Plough and the Stars* as Mollser, a fifteen-year-old teenager who looks little more than ten because consumption has 'shrivelled her up. She is pitifully worn, walks feebly, and frequently coughs'. (O'Casey 179) She subsequently played Delia, the young sweetheart of Denis, the doctor-to-be, in Robinson's hit *The Whiteheaded Boy*. With little stage time, O'Connor had the opportunity to



watch the others, to read plays closely, and to learn technique and habits not taught in an acting class.

At the end of her first year with the Abbey Company, O'Connor was cast as Helena in Robinson's comedy about a theatre company visiting a small Irish village entitled *Drama At Inish*. After its uproarious first night at the theatre the year before, Robinson made a speech explaining the play:

I wanted to confound the critics. It's really an absurd play based on an impossible situation. The critics would have described it as such, so you see I am saying it before them. (O'Neill 149)

There's a note of self-pity and desperation beneath the eloquence. Robinson's alcoholism had reached dire conditions. Playwright Teresa Deevy, then a protégé of Robinson, said at his time that she 'felt like crying when [she] saw him' because he was 'very bad'. (Deevy TCD Mss 10722/5) Robinson was growing rapidly thinner, more morose, and increasingly unreliable. Much of the cast knew this play well, and could cope with his erratic attendance at rehearsals. Arthur Shields was designated Assistant Director to help the cast learn the meta-theatrical jokes.

Unlike the ingénue parts she had played to date, Helena in *Drama at Inish* was a soubrette, a 'neat little servant' unused to the ways of theatrical people. (Robinson 201) In the first act, she voices the shock of an Irish girl at the sleeping arrangements for the couple leading the theatrical troupe. Lizzie explains that she's keeping a double room for Mr de la Mare and Miss Constantia; the salacious idea alarms her servant:

Helena:            (*shocked*) Mr --- and Miss Constantia! Glory, miss!  
Lizzie:            It's quite all right, Helena. Actresses they are -- I mean, she's an actress and so is he -- I mean, he's an actor and so is -- well, anyhow, they're man and wife these years and years. O'Hara or some name like that I believe they are really.  
Helena:            I see, Miss.  
(Robinson 202)

The servant obediently swallows her shock at the ways of theatrical life. She took it all in, saying little but learning the secrets of the clandestine arrangements, much as O'Connor was doing backstage.

Despite her apparent naivety, Helena in *Drama At Inish* has a troubling secret: a baby that she gave birth to out of wedlock and that subsequently died. Stills from the production show a frenzied Helena, her arms around the neck of a startled man. Her face isn't visible; the context for the physical situation is not clear to those unfamiliar with the plot. The man is the honest, good-looking Michael, the 'Boots' in the hotel; he was played by the Assistant Director, Arthur Shields. Helena's problems are neatly resolved when she disappears off to the church for a wedding to fellow servant, Michael. Respectability was restored as O'Connor tucked her arm into the tall, reedy figure with the sensitive face and gentle manner. O'Connor was already fond of the kind and fatherly figure of Shields, who enjoyed her talent as he offered advice and the benefit of his experience. They bowed and left the stage together.

For O'Connor, the negotiation of her social and theatrical life with her job in Polikoffs' and as the daughter of a Catholic widower would be harder to resolve than Helena's wedding resolves the plot of *Drama at Inish*. But already, her strong and determined personality was shaping the life that she wanted.

### **The American Tour of 1934 - 1935**

The same month that O'Connor played Helena, whispers began backstage about an upcoming tour of America and the members of the Company to be included. O'Connor wanted the adventure, but was practical-minded enough to consider the impact of leaving Ireland. She negotiated conditions with the Abbey management, or was assisted in doing so, and her weekly wage was increased to £3 10s when she resolved to give up her job to go on the tour. (Shields T13/A/117) The veteran actor William O'Gorman agreed to Mr O'Connor's request that he be an unofficial 'chaperone' to O'Connor on her travels, regularly sending notes back to confirm that his daughter was 'as happy as when she was at home and unchanged'. (Shields T13/A/117) She had set in motion her dreams of life as a full-time actress.

It was publicly announced that the Abbey was transporting 'fourteen players, three stage hands with the necessary scenery, costumes and property' to the United States and Canada. (Shields T13/A/106(1)) A press release from Fred W. Jordan given on 17 August 1934 stated that this would be 'one of the largest theatrical tours on record'. (Shields T13/A/108(1)) As assistant producer of the Abbey Company, Arthur Shields was in charge of the company, while the American producer Mr Elbert Wickes was granted 'personal charge' throughout the tour. (Shields T13/A/108(1)) After arriving in Boston in October 1934, the company would spend November in Canadian and eastern cities including Montreal, Toronto, Ohio and Detroit before appearing on Broadway. The return journey took them to San Francisco, Seattle, Minneapolis and St. Paul before finishing in Boston in early June 1935.

O'Connor joined the company in Westland Row train station in Dublin, where they took the train to Belfast and then a boat to Liverpool. Their liner, the *Scythia*, sailed from there, with one hundred and seventy seven passengers on board. Frolic Mulhern and Aideen O'Connor, already firm friends, became affectionately known as 'the babies' of the company. (Shields T13/A/437) Many of the company already knew this journey with its boredom and occasional bouts of seasickness. For O'Connor, it was all new: the glamour of dressing for dinner in the evening, the dancing, the drinking and the sun bathing on deck. At dinner, the actors spotted the British toffee magnate, Sir Harold Mackintosh, and his wife. ('*Scythia*' 13) Gales held back docking for an entire day but they eventually managed to dock in East Boston as darkness fell on an autumn evening. ('*Scythia*' 13)

The *Cincinnati Post* mentioned on 15 December 1934 that while there was a 'crusade against salacious stage plays launched by the Catholic Church in New York', the Abbey Players were one of only four theatre companies to be put on a 'white list' by the Church. (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,511-23) This 'white list' confirmed they provided respectable entertainment and the endorsement bolstered both the prestige of the company and audience numbers. Recalling their tour two years earlier

when 'through the fog of that ominous period the actors from Dublin played on', *The Sunday Tribune* in Chicago in December 1934 declared the Abbey Company to be 'heroes of [the] bank panic period' and urged theatre-goers not to miss a chance to see a performance. (*Scrapbooks NLI Mss 25,511-23*)

As for any touring theatre group, resilience was a feature of the company, and O'Connor was getting a true experience of the touring life and its demands. There were long and uncomfortable train journeys and sometimes disappointing houses as well as enthusiastic reviews. In some cities, notably the Cass Theatre in Detroit, the audiences were 'regrettably small'. (*Scrapbooks NLI Mss 25,511-23*) Their visit to the Harris Theatre in Chicago was more successful, with the run extended from two weeks to three. Playing minor roles such as the young girl Honor Blake in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, O'Connor began to hone her acting craft. While doing so, she was also learning the art of presenting herself off stage.

Against the mature talent and sophistication of many of the Abbey players, O'Connor sparkled like a 'child of nature' straight from the mist of Yeats' Celtic Ireland. (Shields T13/A/437) Or rather, the newspaper articles suggest this Celtic colleen role was imposed on her by the American press who described her this way and, noting its publicity value, O'Connor embraced it. (Shields T13/A/437) A photographer convinced her to sit for an art exhibition, and he took photographs of her in character without even 'a bit of lipstick'. (Shields T13/A/437) She complained to her sisters of weariness from the demand 'to be "nice" and "sweet" to everyone I meet.' (Shields T13/A/437) Yet she obligingly told journalists stories of fairies in the bogs of Connemara and:

she talked reverently of William Butler Yeats ... and described him as a SO handsome gentleman with snow white hair, one lock of hair which is always dripping over his forehead ...  
(*Scrapbooks NLI Mss 25,511-23*)

On 22 January 1935, the *Detroit Times* featured a head-and-shoulders shot of O'Connor with the caption: 'Hollywood already has its

collective eye on this new and bright-eyed colleen from the Abbey Players'. (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,511-23) Judy O'Grady, social columnist of the *Detroit News*, caught her sweet and innocent persona eloquently in the same month. After having tea with the Company, O'Grady wrote of O'Connor on 24<sup>th</sup> January:

Her blue eyes sparkled as she talked of the American impressions ... she wore a sparkling afternoon frock that exactly matched those dancing eyes, too, she talked of tea in Ireland which is composed of homemade cake and heavily buttered scones (pronounced scones) ... she talked of how Irish girls walked so much more than we Americans, but admitted that there wasn't a city in Ireland where one couldn't be right out in the country after walking for ten minutes ... (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,511-23)

Early in the new year, the *Detroit Press* deemed O'Connor, along with Frolie Mulhern, to be 'mere novices' alongside the rest of the established company. (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,511-23) Some of the papers recalled Kate Curling, the Abbey actress who had left the Company and Ireland to marry an American businessman; yet O'Connor was beginning to make an impression. While they lacked the experience of the other actors, the *Chicago Herald* pronounced both she and Frolie Mulhern to be 'pert and capable'. (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,511-23)

Since their arrival in New York in November, O'Connor and Mulhern had been playing frolicking teenagers in Robinson's comedy *The Far-Off Hills* to the delight of audiences. By the time they arrived in San Francisco in the spring, they had added American touches to the set of the girls' bedroom that opened the second act. In the 'simple, pretty room' where the two beds are 'side by side, their ends towards the audience' there is the refraction of the hotel bedrooms O'Connor and Mulhern shared while on tour. (Robinson 33) On the walls of the set, posters of American heartthrob Ramon Navarro now hung alongside the holy pictures. (Craig UCD Mss LA28/116) The girls were made up in shadow, rouge and lipstick, which they preferred to bring from Ireland. (Craig UCD Mss LA28/116) Ducky, played by O'Connor, was the seventeen-year-old elder sister who is reading in bed while sixteen-year-old Pet (Mulhern) brushes her hair by

candlelight. Amid girly gossip, they are secretly trying to plot their father's second marriage.

'All this silly wait-till-you're-asked business,' Ducky grumbles in *The Far-Off Hills* about women awaiting an engagement, while Pet bemoans the shape of her nose. (Robinson 33) Eventually, Pet blows out the candle, kicks off her slippers and makes for bed. Ducky is quick to ask, 'Have you said your prayers?' Pet tartly responds, 'Mind your own business.' (Robinson 34) As the sisters settle down to sleep, whispering to each other in the darkness and recalling the events of the day, there is an outbreak of giggles and they cannot conceal their laughter. The stage directions read: 'They both laugh until the beds shake.' (Robinson 35) A similar sense of youthful exuberance marked Mulhern and O'Connor's friendship on their first American tour. Newspapers of the period contain not only play reviews but gossip columns packed with descriptions of cocktail parties and dinners being held in honour of the Irish players.

While her chaperone O'Gorman may have seen her as 'unchanged', the press attention and the glamour clearly began to alter O'Connor's perception of all that she could achieve in her stage career. (Shields T13/A/436) She wrote home to 'My Dear Daddy', and joked, 'It will be funny to go home and settle down as the least good-looking of the family'. (Shields T13/A/436) The letters to her father are polite and innocent; she is the child of nature and the girl of the Celtic twilight that was a darling to the US press. To her sisters, O'Connor revealed more of the private changes in this naïve Catholic girl.

By the spring of 1935, the Company had arrived on the West Coast to glorious sunshine. O'Connor believed that she had grown taller, and gained seven pounds, although she retained 'a pale face' with 'hollows in the cheeks' from all the hard work. (Shields T13/A/437) When not performing, shopping and socializing took much of her attention and energy. Despite the innocence of her press interviews, she was meeting and dating American men. After a dalliance with a 'concert and radio' tenor called Alban Knox in Chicago, she met a divorced man called Bob. This

mysterious man, with an unknown surname, was the first serious relationship of her life. Bob planned to visit Dublin for the horse show, after she returned to Dublin. She was relieved that her sisters didn't abhor the idea of him, saying 'I'm glad you both don't have a fit at the idea of a divorced man, it cheers me up.' (Shields T13/A/437)

O'Connor was also being exposed to modern ideas about femininity, in various guises. As she commiserated with elder sister Eileen, who was suffering from menstrual pains, she scorned Irish ideas and advised her:

I've given up that silly old-fashioned idea and bath[e] the same as usual, it's much more hygienic and all the [docto]r's here tell you to. [Y]ou feel much better too after a bath with plenty of bath salts and a rub over with Eau de Cologne, just you try it.  
(Shields T13/A/437)

Some of the actors arranged to see a production by Eva Le Gallienne during their stay in Chicago. O'Connor was 'crazy about her' and corresponded with the actress/director briefly, entertaining the idea that if she were sacked by the Abbey Theatre she would approach Miss Le Gallienne for a job. (Shields T13/A/437) Le Gallienne's work proffered the role model of an independent professional career for a woman in the theatre. O'Connor's suggestion that she could easily be 'sacked' suggests she knew that her position with the Abbey was precarious, or at least was dependent on her behaving in a particular, obedient manner. This was to prove prescient in the years to come.

For all her sophistication, O'Connor remained devoted to her sisters, leaving herself 'financially embarrassed' by spending her earnings on gifts for them and clothes for herself in Los Angeles. She sent letters packed with the minutiae of Hollywood – which actor had said what to her, how shy Maureen O'Hara was, the colour of the 'bathing suit' she had bought. (Shields T13/A/437) In March 1935, she wrote home from San Francisco:

This city is glorious. I am typing this at an open window of my bedroom, Frolic has just left the room like a young hurricane to have her hair done, and when she comes back we are going to do a bit of shopping, a movie and dinner somewhere before the show. (Shields T13/A/437)

The 'babies' were becoming accustomed to the life of a professional actress, albeit with the family support from the rest of the Company. As well as the friendly chaperoning of O'Gorman, Arthur Shields and his wife Bazie (known as Mac) acted *in loco parentis* to the young charges. Mac fussed over them when they were sick; she dosed O'Connor with painkillers for period cramps and gave advice on future contracts and salaries. But for the most part, Mulhern and O'Connor were firm allies, shopping and dancing, discussing work and their dreams for the future.

At her open window in the Sir Francis Drake Hotel, O'Connor made a decision about the trajectory of her life. Ranelagh and Polikoffs' factory belonged to a dull and distant world. Yet, she had also turned down opportunities in the Hollywood film industry. What she wanted was nothing more than for the Abbey Company to keep her on permanently. She declared, 'I shall stick to the stage for good or evil now'. (Shields T13/A/437) If Una Mary, self-conscious novice and ingénue, left for her first professional tour that September, it was Aideen O'Connor, ambitious young lady, that disembarked from the train in Westland Row in June 1935.

### **Between the Tours**

O'Connor spent the months after her return from the United States writing to her new friends in Chicago and getting used to life as a full-time actress. The theatre closed for the usual summer break and for additional renovations, but Arthur Shields was busy casting eighteen actors for a new play and finding places to rehearse while the theatre was inaccessible. There is no record that her American beau Bob did arrive in Dublin for the horse show in August. An ocean lay between them and he may have cited business reasons, or O'Connor lost interest and told him not to come; but this is speculation. In any case, the early weeks of August were packed with work and she had little time to mourn his absence.

The main events of Horse Show Week were held during the day in the Royal Dublin Society, a large green space on Dublin's southside. Abbey



management annually arranged social outings for the Company, bringing the actors and board members to watch the equestrian events. (Higgins NLI Mss 27,897(2)) If the days were full of porter and laughter, the evenings of Horse Show Week brought the Company promptly back to the theatre. The events of the week attracted wealthy, often sophisticated visitors to Dublin, and the RDS was close enough to raise attendance at the theatre in the evening. The repertoire was always carefully chosen for the influx, and in 1935 the board of directors decided to use the event to coincide with the premiere of *The Silver Tassie* by Sean O'Casey.

Early on Monday 12 August 1935, 'HOUSE FULL' notices were displayed on the exterior of the theatre. The first-night invited audience would include the American, French and German ministers with their wives, Consul for Sweden and the Netherlands, the Earl and Countess of Longford, Senator and Mrs Blythe, as well as a host of literary and theatrical celebrities. (Shields T13/A/560) The playwright himself did not attend.

Seven years after the Abbey Theatre had rejected his script, O'Casey and Yeats had managed a tentative reconciliation. Finding himself ill in London, Yeats invited O'Casey to visit him for dinner, where they seemed to overcome their differences on *The Silver Tassie*. They continued to correspond by letter, and at some point Yeats asked O'Casey for permission to stage his 1934 play *Within The Gates*. At O'Casey's urging, Yeats got permission to present both plays, although it seemed his only interest was in *Within The Gates*, and this play was put into rehearsal immediately. However, Brinsley MacNamara, now a director and a devout Roman Catholic, took exception to *Within The Gates* and stopped rehearsals. He was no more in favour of *The Silver Tassie*, but failed to prevent its opening the new season.<sup>8</sup> The Protestant Arthur Shields was asked to direct. He had the advantage of being able to discuss the play with his brother, Barry Fitzgerald, who had a lead role in the London premiere.

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<sup>8</sup> There are various versions of events at this time. This reflects the account by Christopher Murray in his biography *Sean O'Casey: Writer at Work*. 242

This controversy over the play electrified the atmosphere for those arriving at the theatre that night, and made for a high degree of anxiety back stage. O'Connor had had her first taste of success and fame in the US, but such scandal was a new experience. Michael Scott's newly-designed theatre lobby and modernized auditorium, as described in the newspaper columns, added to the sense of anticipation. The black and gold hallway, where portraits of the theatre's stars had hung in semi-darkness, had been replaced. Now there was a bright, spacious lobby where the celebrities could more comfortably mingle. In the auditorium, there were new cushioned seats and the orchestra, under the direction of Dr. Larchet, was warming up to play. As permission had been granted by the directorate after years of a smoking ban, many of the audience could enjoy the novelty of smoking throughout the performance. (Shields T13/A/560)

O'Connor had acted for Arthur Shields on numerous occasions, but her casting as Jessie Taite in this production suggests he was beginning to look at her in a different light. The part, though minor, represented a significant change from the young ingénue she had played on the American tours. Jessie is the young woman in love with Harry Heegan, a successful footballer and handsome hero, at the opening of the play. Later, when Harry returns maimed from World War 1, he finds Jessie in the arms of another man. One of the newspapers described the character as 'a mindless little minx'. (Shields T13/A/560) O'Casey introduces the character in the script of *The Silver Tassie*:

Jessie is twenty-two or so, responsive to all the animal impulses of life. Ever dancing around, in and between the world, the flesh and the devil. She would be happy climbing with a boy among the heather on Howth Hill, and could play ball with young men on the swards of the Phoenix Park. She gives her favour to the prominent and popular. (38-39)

In original notes for this play, Jessie Taite was 'Sara', and was a year younger, at twenty-one. (Berg V6 39) The final line of the published description is more tame and circumspect than O'Casey's vision of the character. (He had hoped Sara would be played by Shelah Richards.) In his

notebooks, O'Casey recorded how 'Sara' loved playing with the boys, and when one caught her in his arms:

she recognizes in the struggle the pleasures of this young man's desire for her. [A]nd she thrills when she sees their lightning glances at the frills and [things] she shows in the ardour of the expression. (Berg V6 39)

This is a confident woman, her sexuality bringing powers of manipulation and desire. Later in *The Silver Tassie*, at the local dance, two observers describe her allure:

Simon:           And Jessie's looking as if she was tired of her maidenhood, too.  
Mrs Foran:       The thin threads holdin' her dress up sidlin' down over her shoulders, an' her catchin' them up again at the tail end of the second before it was too late. (O'Casey 95)

On her very first entrance to the stage a bystander comments, 'look at the shameful way she's showing her legs'. (O'Casey 38) With her appearance as Jessie, O'Connor stepped out onto the stage as a sexualised Irish woman, and portrayed a danger to her respectable Catholic community.

While Rosie Redmond partly triggered the upset about the morals of *The Plough and The Stars*, objections to Jessie Taite and her morals were almost lost in the greater furore about other aspects of *The Silver Tassie*. The character of Jessie is intricately drawn; she is both more complex and nuanced than Rosie. Both support themselves with their sexuality, but Jessie does so in covert ways. She adores Harry for his athletic prowess, his medals and popularity. She has good work in the war ammunitions factory, and has been squirreling away every penny in her savings book to secure her independence. She remains unperturbed by Mrs Heegan's feelings about her. When her childhood sweetheart comes back from the trenches paralysed, Jessie throws him over for his best friend and better prospects.

In O'Casey's indictment of violence and war, the men are irreparably damaged; the women fare better. They use both their intelligence and femininity to forge a different life for themselves. Jessie isn't afraid to display her sexuality and to enjoy it. She earns her financial

independence and seizes happiness for herself, despite how society turns on her for it. In one of the final scenes of the play, Jessie Taite stands her ground before the seventeen characters at a party, feeling their full scorn but demanding the right to make her own decisions. In playing this part, O'Connor experienced the sensations of public humiliation. It was an insight into how life could be for a Catholic woman in the Irish Free State that dared to cross certain societal boundaries.

By curtain fall that Monday, the cast knew the production was an abject failure. The reviewer from the *Irish Independent* expressed distress that some of the country's best performers had been forced to take parts in such an 'epileptic fit of cleverness'. (Shields T13/A/560) The play was pronounced a 'vigorous medley of lust and hatred and vulgarity' by the Church, a description which, according to O'Casey, terrified theatre-goers who had procured tickets for the sold-out run but wouldn't attend. (Rose 51) Many never saw it; it closed after six performances and was hastily replaced by Shaw's play *John Bull's Other Island*. 'M.B.' reported that 'Arthur's Shields's production was without fault', but it was to be the last play he directed at the Abbey Theatre. (Shields T13/A/560)

Following *The Silver Tassie* debacle, it was back to business for the Abbey Company. They toured to the Cork Opera House in October 1935 staging *Autumn Fire* by T.C. Murray (which is set in Cork) and the old reliable *Drama at Inish*. O'Connor now took on secretarial duties in the theatre when she wasn't rehearsing – acting as an administrative assistant to newly-appointed manager Hugh Hunt. (Holloway NLI Mss 1969) This was financial necessity for O'Connor as well as serving the theatre; she no longer had a day job. Hunt appreciated her work; later events suggest other directors objected to having an actress privy to administrative affairs.

At the beginning of August 1936, Hunt gave O'Connor permission to go to London briefly for an audition, but the other directors subsequently decided O'Connor's excursion was insubordination. On 14<sup>th</sup> August, the board 'considered the position of Miss A. O'Connor in relation to the office work and decided that her services be dispensed with.' (*Minute Books*

3558) However, their chosen replacement (Miss Ann Clery) refused to take the post 'owing to the circumstances under which Miss O'Connor had lost the position.' (*Minute Books* 3558) Frank O'Connor then demanded a statement from Miss O'Connor, 'as to her behaviour.' O'Connor acquiesced, and her letter was read at a meeting on 1 September 1936. In it, she stated that she went to London briefly with Hunt's permission and under the impression that she was not required the following week. (*Minute Books* 3558) Ostensibly, the board accepted this explanation and restored Miss O'Connor to her position, but by 11<sup>th</sup> September she had been replaced by Eric Robinson, a brother of Lennox. (*Minute Books* 3558)

Higgins said at one meeting that Miss O'Connor was not 'sufficiently efficient' but Ann Clery's minuted response suggests that for the board, O'Connor's real felony was daring to consider a career for herself outside of the Abbey. (*Minute Books* 3558) At this point, O'Connor was fighting for greater recognition in the Company and the London audition was an opportunity to show her potential. According to Laurie Shields, it was in 1936 that Arthur Shields and O'Connor began their affair. (Shields T13/A/512) Thus, it may also have been that the directors were aware of her personal life and, to compound this, her appearance as Jessie Taite was impacting her reputation. Where Eileen Crowe insisted on 'being the mouthpiece', on presenting rather than embodying women viewed as unsavoury and immoral, O'Connor was being seen to embody them, on and off stage. Her removal from the position was to be her first experience of dealing with the Abbey directorate effectively punishing her for how she behaved outside of her appearances on the stage.

By August 1936, Holloway was recording that 'bombshells still continue to be exploding'. (NLI Mss 1971 342) The administration staff were in 'a mild panic' at the re-structuring that was taking place, as a result of a long-standing conflict on the board between Frank O'Connor and F.R. Higgins. (Holloway NLI Mss 1971 342) O'Connor and Higgins were vying to succeed Yeats, and on Higgins' appointment as managing director, O'Connor was effectively pushed out of the theatre. (Matthews 145)

The Company left behind the chaos for an engagement at the Grand Opera House in Belfast. There, they showed their affection for O'Casey by re-staging *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars*, along with *Drama at Inish*. O'Connor, however, was reconsidering her circumstances. She had been re-cast in *The Plough and the Stars* as fifteen-year-old Mollser: possibly a cautionary demotion by the directorate. Against this background, newspapers in Belfast broke the news that Aideen O'Connor was to leave the Abbey Company to grace the London stage. (Shields T13/A/560) With no public comment by Abbey Theatre management, she left for London shortly after her return from Belfast.

### **On the London Stage**

On the stage of the Embassy theatre in Hampstead, London in November 1936, during a new play entitled *The Dominant Sex*, a character gave a heartfelt rendition of *The Londonderry Air* in Irish. Afterwards, journalists speculated about the scene. One was adamant that the tune was sung by an invisible substitute in the wings, not by the actress that played the part, O'Connor. (Shields T13/A/560) Others praised O'Connor's vocal talent.

Reading through theatre reviews, one sees only refractions of the real performer, much like watching actors through glasses belonging to somebody else. This image of the journalists craning their necks, trying to get a proper sighting of this woman in the wings, is the only image available of O'Connor at this time, a shadowy figure with a crystal-clear voice, a woman still exploring and revealing her talents, preparing to step out onto the world stage.

When the newspapers announced O'Connor's departure for London, the move was not a surprise to her family and colleagues, who had been aware of the prospect. It was said that the playwright Michael Egan had come to Dublin specifically looking for an Irish accent and had seen O'Connor perform. After her London audition, O'Connor agreed with her

family that she would play the part and then return to Dublin for Christmas. (Shields T13/A/560)

There are press cuttings, but no letters or diaries detailing her emotions as she left for London and set up temporary home there. It's possible that O'Connor only wanted to broaden her horizons while earning some money. There is no evidence she saw it as a permanent move, although her prospects at the Abbey were being diminished. Given the dates provided by Laurie Shields, by now O'Connor's affair with Shields had begun by this time. (Shields T13/A/512) Nonetheless, O'Connor left for London alone, to focus on her craft and on her future.

Egan's play *The Dominant Sex* opened on 23 November 1936. Set in a studio in Chelsea, the play centres on a bohemian artist, Maurice Holmes, who is trying to choose a wife from a trio of female types. As Sheila, O'Connor played the convent-educated daughter of Mr Holmes's butler, who is on her first trip to London. Once again, she plays the wide-eyed and demure colleen. The reviews of the play itself are mixed, but they all note her stage presence. One of the London papers said:

Miss Aideen O'Connor, the young Abbey actress, whose first part in London this is, made everybody feel her charm and admire her grace and the deftness of her art. She has moreover obviously much talent that is still latent. Her personality is winning and her power will grow with her technique, which is already remarkable for such a young actress. (Shields T13/A/560)

There were rumours of a West End transfer but, as promised, O'Connor came home to spend Christmas with her family. She had kept up to date with friends in Dublin. Reviews of *Wind from the West*, in which both Mulhern and Shields appeared, made their way to her lodgings and she glued them into her scrapbook, alongside her own reviews. (Shields T13/A/560) London offered opportunities, but she was drawn back to the comfort and stability of the Abbey Theatre. She had also been cast in Paul Vincent Carroll's play, *Shadow and Substance*, due to open in January 1937.

Audiences and actors alike were clamouring to see the new script by the tubby, bespectacled Carroll. Advance notices of the play declared that it would be controversial. Critics said of Carroll:

Not since O'Casey has there been an author who gave such vital characters to the Abbey stage and who moved them with such effect. (Shields T13/A/560)

Despite the predictions for scandal, *Shadow and Substance* proved a huge and popular hit. The production was deemed to be 'The most remarkable play produced at the Abbey for many years.' (Shields T13/A/560)

*Shadow and Substance* is set in County Louth, in the home of an elderly canon. Canon Skerritt finds himself out of harmony with two young curates and an agnostic schoolmaster over the declarations of a young girl who insists she has been visited by the Virgin Mary. He questions his own judgment when confronted with the mystic servant, played by a sixteen-year-old from the Abbey School, Phyllis Ryan. Shields took the pivotal role of Canon Thomas Skerritt, and O'Connor played his niece and namesake, Thomasina Concannon.

Production photographs show the tall French windows of the set and imposing Sacred Heart ideograph over the heads of O'Connor and Shields. She has her head cocked in a smile; his black robes swish around his feet and his face is startled as if disarmed by her attitude. (Shields T13/B/202) O'Connor and Shields developed a close friendship with Carroll over the course of rehearsals. For Carroll, the urbane, intellectual Skerritt was a calculated attempt to bring Dean Jonathan Swift back to life and to 'throw him into the modern mental turmoil in Ireland'. (Doyle 30) While much of the press focuses on the mesmeric performance of the young Phyllis Ryan, it was also held to be Shields's strongest performance on the Abbey stage. Most of the comments on O'Connor's performance focus on the character's behaviour. She was again stepping into the roles of young Irish women and her depiction of such figures was being watched for its expression of Irish femininity.



Thomasina Concannon is described in Carroll's text as 'a "bunty" girl of about twenty-two' with 'full animal spirits, a round fat face, all dimples and given to giggling laughter'. (9-10) She tries the patience of her uncle with her antics, including reading a novel entitled *Love's Purple Passion*, and then leaving it under his pillow. For Robinson, Thomasina was the epitome of a type of Irish female increasingly seen around Dublin. This female type was for Robinson an 'unfaceable problem'. (*The Irish Theatre* 209) Robinson explains:

the perfect type for all time of the desperate and, to me, quite unfaceable problem of the country-girl who has become what we in the Gaelic League call 'Anglicised', what the West Briton would equally unfairly call 'Americanised', what her own neighbours would, I fancy, call simply foolish and what in actual fact is unendurably cheapened, tedious, and embarrassing...  
(*The Irish Theatre* 209)

To imbue such a role with a sense of sincerity, without becoming a simpering fool that disgusts the audience, required a delicate balance.

The cast tramped through the January sleet and flurries of snow each evening to perform in *Shadow and Substance*. O'Connor and Mulhern were again sharing a dressing room, but this time they had been joined by newcomer Phyllis Ryan. Ryan disliked the arrangement, feeling uncomfortable with the women's conspiratorial whispering. She was convinced that 'They felt they were being pushed out by the new arrival and their attitude naturally lacked warmth.' (Ryan 74) O'Connor had little time or patience for niceties with girls; Ryan was correct in her assumption that their roles were threatened by the arrival of a younger, more innocent girl. But O'Connor worked hard under Hunt's expert guidance and imbued the role of Thomasina with a vibrancy that delighted the audiences. One of the newspapers provides a precious description of her physical style:

Aideen O'Connor's rendering of the canon's niece, the only person not afraid of him, was outstanding not merely for her priceless giggle, but for the use of [her] body to suggest a gawky 'flapper' whose mind, clothes, coiffure, and voice were all of a piece with her passion for bullseyes – her best performance for a long time. (Shields T13/A/560)

O'Connor now had the skill and confidence to move effortlessly from demure servant in *Drama At Inish* to flirtatious flapper. The chain of adjectives describing her performances since the American tour of 1934/35 track the emergence of a particular style. The newspapers (previously quoted) describe her as 'pert', talk of her 'grace' and of her 'deft' technique. She was precise in her physicality, each gesture considered and deliberate. Despite her small frame, she could command a stage. Her range was growing, as were her confidence and ambition. O'Connor was thriving under the discipline imposed by Hunt and the gentle attention of Arthur Shields. But despite (or because of) her expanding range, parts available for her in the Abbey Company were diminishing. However, there remained some roles in the Irish classics that could challenge her.

A more self-assured O'Connor found herself on the boat to England in February 1937, but this time Mulhern and Shields were travelling with her as the Company set out for the Cambridge Arts Festival. Hunt had cast her as Mary Boyle in *Juno and the Paycock*, where she'd play the daughter of Juno (Eileen Crowe). She was ready for the challenge, and the reviewer for *The Cambridge Gownsmen* was impressed by her interpretation, calling it 'fresh and sensitive'. He said, 'The character becomes more complex in the course of the play, and Miss O'Connor showed a full understanding of every aspect of it.' (Craig UCD Mss LA28/219) O'Connor continued to be deferential to the other actors: 'She did not let it obtrude melodramatically on the other phases of the action.' (Craig UCD Mss LA28/219)

If she was courteous to her elders on stage, off stage the 'pretty juvenile actress' was playing a more dangerous game. (Ryan 74) On the Cambridge trip, it was impossible to hide her romantic relationship with Shields. Given the Catholic morals of the other actors along with their friendship with Bazie Magee, it was only a matter of time before the affair was public knowledge.

Genevieve (Bazie) Magee, who Shields had married in Chelsea in 1920, was 'quick-witted, reasoned like a man, [was] sharp-tongued and quick tempered.' She was 'more mentally aware than other women of her

day, or perhaps it was just a case of being more outspoken than most.' (Shields T13/A/512) Magee was a reasonably talented actress, despite having no training, and was a practical, maternal figure during the 1934/35 tour of America. But Magee had a 'capacious imagination'. (Johnston TCD Mss 10066/165) Playwright Denis Johnston recalled how, when Magee had visitors, she simply 'talks and talks and talks' until her own mind 'begins to stagger at the conclusions reached.' (Johnston TCD Mss 10066/165) Johnston recognized when her 'dangerous' behaviour began to lose her friends. He described her as having 'a Pirandellesque mind completely divorced from any relation to reality.' (Johnston TCD Mss 10066/165)

By the 1930s, this propensity to lose touch with reality was taking over Magee's life. A tendency to manic moods was exacerbated by her drinking habit. She was performing less and less. The couple had moved to the seaside village of Sandymount, to a house with a garden where their son Adam played and Shields grew vegetables. Yet Shields was finding living with Magee 'impossible.' (Saddlemeyer 460) Aideen O'Connor, for her youth and beauty, resembled Magee in her quick temper and outspoken nature. She was independent and increasingly ambitious, yet nothing prepared her for the fallout from this romantic attachment.

The Abbey green room, with its packed book shelves and stove, its worn furniture and friendly ghosts, had become something of a home away from home for O'Connor. She had taken refuge there one evening in late February 1937 when the door swung open to reveal an irate Bazie Magee (Shields). Magee had once featured as a maternal and affectionate figure to O'Connor. (T13/A/436) Now, Magee slapped her across the face. It transpired that a 'concerned' Company member sent a letter to Magee with the details of her husband's affair. (Saddlemeyer 460) O'Connor was shamed in front of her colleagues; Shields' reputation was unaffected.

The scandal did not end there, for O'Connor fled home to discover that an identical letter had been sent to her father. Vincent O'Connor pitilessly told her to leave the house and she spent two weeks in Cork before daring to return to Ranelagh. W.B. Yeats refused to tell his wife how

he discovered all of the details, although Anne Yeats and many of the other actors had seen the events that had 'reduced Miss O'Connor to such tears.' (Saddlemyer 460)

O'Connor remained resolute in her devotion to Shields, but she would never forgive the interfering Company member or forget the humiliation of Magee's attack. With fellow actress Frolic Mulhern and Abbey scenic designers Anne Yeats and Tania Mosewitch, O'Connor found a small circle of friends to support her, but the sense of ignominy lingered.

Tania Mosewitch, a designer who had arrived at the Abbey with Hunt the weeks after *The Silver Tassie* debacle, occupied the paint room. This was at the far end of the corridor backstage at the Abbey, 'past the greenroom, past the wardrobe room, past the dressing-rooms.' (Treanor) If respite was needed from the green room, O'Connor and Mulhern could come here, to a room 'no bigger than a drawing room' and muse out the sole window onto the laneway behind. It was private, if only because of the pungent smell of size in the air and the crowded untidiness of flats and tools and all the paint-splattered paraphernalia of scene designers. (Treanor) Happy to have company while she worked, Mosewitch kept there, 'an aluminium kettle, a blue jug, a yellow teapot, a small pot of raspberry jam, and a cup and saucer that don't match on an orange tray.' (Treanor) It was a place where O'Connor could seek support and laughter out of earshot of the green room and the offices, but she was learning to be careful whom she trusted with details of her personal life.

Anne Yeats supported O'Connor and visited her family home. There, Yeats could barely hide her horror at the state of the house, which she described to her mother as having 'filthy kitchen, general dilapidation and breakage everywhere.' (Saddlemyer 460) George Yeats lamented that 'there seems to be no female of any sort in charge,' as if this was the root of O'Connor's problems. (Saddlemyer 460)

There is a much-told O'Connor family anecdote that before the actress left Hollybank Avenue for good, Bazie Magee arrived to bang on the door of No. 56 and shout insults. O'Connor cowered upstairs, while her

quick-witted sister Maeve talked down an inebriated Bazie, eventually coaxing her away with the enticement of a drink in Ranelagh. (Christine Shields) The following month, Vincent O'Connor's rage hadn't subsided and O'Connor packed her bags. She went temporarily to Howth, where Hunt offered refuge in his cottage. Mosewitch was also staying there but their stay was cut short when the landlady noticed that two unchaperoned women were staying in the house and complained to the Vicar. (Saddlemeyer 461) O'Connor left for Cork and then to audition in the UK.

Arthur Shields kept thin pocket diaries for most of his life, noting appointments, rehearsal times, production dates. A note on 6 April 1937 reads, 'Marriage 16 years'. (Shields T13/A/372(1)) On the following page, dated 12<sup>th</sup> of April, is the note, 'Aideen home'. (Shields T13/A/372(1))<sup>9</sup> The next few months passed in tantrums and despair, in rows and tears.

For O'Connor, her promotion into female roles demonstrating a more overt and liberated sexuality had coalesced dangerously with developments in her personal life. She no longer wanted to be playing naïve teenage girls but her reputation off-stage had been tarnished and, in Dublin society, this affected the adult parts she was offered as well as her other duties in the theatre. Officially at least, the affair with Shields was now ended. This was the only course of action that would allow O'Connor to travel to the US with the Abbey Company again in September 1937.

### **The American Tour of 1937/38**

O'Connor, Mooney and Mulhern are walking the decks like Russian peasants with kerchiefs over their heads. Delaney is sitting reading with sunglasses. Craig and Crowe are in their cabins, not too well. (Higgins NLI Mss 27,883(7))

The wind was picking up over the Atlantic, and the members of the travelling Abbey Company were doing their best to avoid nausea. They spent the afternoon watching the horse racing, with wooden horses and mock bookies, on the deck, and then dressed for a 'carnival' dinner. The

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<sup>9</sup> Diary refers to real name, 'Una'. All references here altered to 'Aideen' for clarity.

tables were strewn with balloons, bugles and lutes. The women wore the headdresses of Indian chiefs. (Higgins NLI Mss 27,883(7)) O'Connor, Mulhern and Mooney sat together for the meal, separate from the elders of the company and perhaps relieved to be away from the stiff manners of Higgins and the small talk of Maureen Delany and Eileen Crowe. Together, the young women drank and ate, and danced when the meal was over. (Higgins NLI Mss 27,883(7))

The adulterous relationship between Shields and O'Connor was officially over, after the public shaming of O'Connor. On board the ship, Shields used the gym, the library and he played cards with Higgins. O'Connor shared a cabin with Mulhern. When storms whipped up, they huddled in their beds. One particularly choppy night, Mooney and F.R. Higgins called to see them, posing as 'Doctor Higgins and Nurse Mooney'. (Higgins NLI Mss 27,883(7)) Mulhern was 'staring as if her eyes would next come up' and O'Connor had 'gone [as] white' as May Higgins' pet cat. (Higgins NLI Mss 27,883(7)) It was becoming apparent to O'Connor that the bond between Mooney and Higgins was more than professional. The carnival nights and long days of walking the decks (with moments of shark spotting) became tiresome for the Company. All were glad at the end of September when calm conditions created the perfect afternoon for their 4pm arrival into the port of New York. (Higgins NLI Mss 27,883(7))

The tour began on Broadway. Higgins commanded two rooms on the twelfth storey of the Edison Hotel, just off Times Square on West 47<sup>th</sup> street. O'Connor and the others were escorted by bellboys to rooms on another floor. The bedrooms were small and some of them dark. Each had a mahogany desk and a bathroom with an American-style 'tub'. Sash windows opened onto the street and the noise of traffic, crowds of tourists and the occasional wail of a siren created a constant bass line of noise. At the top of twenty-two storeys was a roof garden, with a breathtaking view of the surrounding skyscrapers and river. (Higgins NLI Mss 27,883(7)) The hotel was decorated in Art Deco style, reminiscent of Radio City Music Hall,

with angular lines, gold, deep reds and blues running through the lobby to the restaurant, where guests were escorted up shallow steps to their seats.

Hosted and feted by local socialites, the women took to dining out after the show and dancing until the early hours. Giddily, O'Connor wrote to her sisters of how they performed on Saturday night and then danced all night. On leaving the nightclub, she and Mulhern realised there was no sense in going home before the Sunday sermon and they went straight to four am mass. (Shields T13/A/428) O'Connor was enamoured with one particular dance: the 'Big Apple'. She found it 'really intricate and quite mad'. (Shields T13/A/428) The 'Big Apple' craze had swept across the city.

The dances O'Connor learnt in New York were strikingly different from the postures she had been taught at the Abbey school. The 'Big Apple' was innovative because it was for blacks and whites, men and women, to dance together. The dance involved hand-holding in friendly circles, imitating farm animals and moving in more sultry ways. A 'Caller' cued the moves just before they began. The steps ranged from the sophisticated and sexual to the totally absurd. It was most famously performed by the Lindy Hoppers, but everybody everywhere was encouraged to join in. On the dance floor of these New York nightclubs, the Abbey actresses were cosmopolitan women, holding hands and keeping time with a world of people from diverse backgrounds. The significance of their presence in such places is only fully understood in the context of Ireland's social history of the 1930s.

### **Dance Halls and Liminality**

By the 1930s, the number of Irish women emigrating was at its greatest for decades; the women far outnumbered the male emigrants. There were a myriad of causes: lack of marriage opportunities, lack of employment opportunities, horrendous living conditions, endemic diseases and poverty. These practical social problems were matched by something the Catholic Church viewed as treacherous. In the *Catholic Bulletin* in October 1936, one commentator wrote of:

the general wave of immorality [...] which seems already to have quenched in so many souls every sense of modesty and dignity, conscience and responsibility. (*Bulletin* Vol XXVI)

The chief sources of such immorality were the darkness, motor cars and dancing. Not all dancing, but *particular* forms of dancing. In a Lenten Pastoral in 1924, Cardinal Logue made a speech saying: 'Irish dances do not make degenerates.' (Smyth 51-54) Traditional Irish ceilí dances had strict, rigid postures, which maintained decorum and kept the genders far apart. Unlike the barbarous, sultry movements brought on by jazz music. In the *Catholic Bulletin* McGlinchy explained:

Many of the modern kinds of dance are such as would offend the moral sense of a decent pagan. They deliberately pander to the lower instincts, and are proximate occasions of sins of the flesh. (*Bulletin* Vol XXIV)

It goes further:

If the circumstances mean [...] the form of dance is likely to arouse passion and lead to sin, it is wrong .... Oh, for a general revival of our grand old Irish dances! Dances and dancing as carried on at the present time are, generally speaking, a dangerous occasion of sin for the young. (*Bulletin* Vol XXIV)

Terrified communities took to the streets before the second World War to outlaw the pagan music they associated with a savage nature. The Gaelic League, championing the Irish language and music, were at the forefront of the campaign. At the main anti-jazz rally in County Leitrim, a letter was read out from Cardinal McRory, where he did his best to distance himself from the evil activity: 'I know nothing about jazz dancing.' Although he did understand that they were 'suggestive and demoralizing.' (Smyth 51-54)

In 1935 *The Public Dance Halls Act* made it impossible for a dance to be held in Ireland without the sanction of the clergy, the police and the judiciary. In a survey of this particular legislation in 1938, a Dublin Senior Justice spoke of how a 'nervous and overwrought generation' born during the Great War had an insatiable craving 'to multiply means of excitement.' ('Survey' 4) Such wanton craving led to the popularity of betting houses, picture houses and public dancing. In response to the pressure from the



Church and from the public, legislation was enacted to ensure the licensing, supervision and control of dance halls.

When the Abbey actresses arrived in New York and learnt to dance the Big Apple, they were transgressing social boundaries clearly established at home. In America, they found their rhythm and joined in, as equals. They were included, even if their moves were ridiculous. They could be sexual beings, without being dangerous or evil. Like the Big Apple 'Caller' cueing the moves, anything could happen next. What had come before and was to happen next was irrelevant; it was about the 'now'. They were neither here nor there, out of time and out of place. Dancing offered not so much a 'release', nor a 'liberation', from their lives (although it may have been that too) but, most of all, it was a liminal space.

In describing it as 'liminal', I am invoking Victor Turner's concept of liminality, which has been described by Shannon Jackson as 'an in-between state within ritual structures in which individuals and groups temporarily lacked definition and inscription.'(Jackson 161) The liminal has been theorized as an aporia within accepted patterns of behaviour. For Turner, liminality can be 'partly described as a stage of reflection.' (Mahdi 14) He asserted that betwixt and between as the participants were, a liminal break allowed them to experience a 'subjunctive mood' in which they may express desires, hypotheses, suppositions, possibilities: it may or might be so. The dance floor of the New York nightclubs was a space of possibilities for these Irish women. They could express and explore a femininity, a type of physicality and an assertion of their sexuality, not permissible in Ireland.

In the wider field of performance studies, 'liminality' has arguably been overused as a means of describing performance and theatre that provides space out of quotidian life and social reality to explore and even transgress established boundaries. For the Abbey Theatre actresses, the performance space of the national theatre was never truly 'liminal'. As I have explored fully in Chapter 2, in relation to the career of Eileen Crowe, there the stage space was heavily coded in Irish social terms. The dance floors of the New York night clubs they attended, however, arguably

provided liminal spaces for personal expression and for reflection. O'Connor, and some of her colleagues, began to expand their sense of self as women and their ambitions as performers.

**The US Tour Continues**

O'Connor wasn't cast in the play opening the tour, *Katie Roche*. The failure and removal of Deevy's play from the repertory was no loss to her; its hasty replacement brought O'Connor onto the Broadway stage sooner than expected. But by the end of November 1937, O'Connor was weary, running short of money and trying to settle into some kind of routine. She took a week of early nights (avoiding night clubs) and spent time in her room writing home to catch up on her sister's wedding plans. The rain outside was horrendous, but her hotel room was so hot from the central heating that she slept with no covers on. (Shields T13/A/439)

At Christmas, O'Connor sent her sisters stockings. Nor were friends at home forgotten: a book on Van Gogh (including thirty plates of his work) by Walter Pach was dispatched back to Anne Yeats, an expensive gift. (Saddlemyer 511) O'Connor preferred being on the road: it was cheaper and more fun than long stays in one city. (Shields T13/A/439) Besides, New York was only the first taste of the wonders that America could bring.

Business arrangements for the tour were being made and unmade on another floor of the hotel. Shortly after they arrived in Chicago, the actors learnt that Grisman (the initial producer) was pulling out, leaving the West Coast stage of their tour in danger of being abandoned. They were all staying in the Hotel Sherman, a sixteen-hundred room hotel located in the centre of the theatre district. It also housed a vibrant nightclub famous for its jazz music and a restaurant called *The College Inn*. While the players continued to perform, Higgins flew back to New York to enter negotiations with another producer and the actors were on edge for two days. Unless the business issues were resolved, they would be sent home without delay. When a telegram from Higgins announced that they should prepare to leave for San Francisco, the Company celebrated all night. (Saddlemyer

544) Management of the tour on the West Coast had been taken up by American producer Elbert Wickes.

In the US, it was now observed that, 'The Abbey Theatre players are as standard as the nationally advertised brands of cigarette'. (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,511-23) While the actors were feted and fed off stage by audiences, the critics were wearying of the performance style. The Company now played to meet expectations. Audiences were allowed to dictate shows from the repertory, and actors, in their individual performances, went out of their way to please in the anticipated manner. (Greene and Morash 44) Popular success had come, some felt, at the expense of artistic ideals.

Heading his article filed from Pittsburgh *Erin Go Blah*, George Jean Nathan attacked the histrionic acting style he saw on stage. Actors were playing lines purely for comedy and consciously playing the 'Irishness' the audiences came to laugh at. Nathan remembered how the Abbey Theatre had once been one of the finest acting organizations in the world; it was now a 'caricature of its former self.' (Greene and Morash 44) Irish elements of the scripts were 'accentuated in theatrical delivery or consciously stylised for them by the Irish performers.' (Monahan 100)

O'Connor, as the female ingénue, watched as other Company members mugged at and bantered with the audience, often reducing serious plays to farce. Performing each night became a riotous and hilarious game, a game that could continue afterwards in the green room or in the nightclub. The careful pitching of tragic dialogue and deft physical characterization that O'Connor had developed in London and under Hunt was being eroded by the 'improvised self-mocking, meta-theatrical, exaggerated performance style.' (Monahan 100) Her craft was also being eroded by exhaustion.

On their final Saturday night in the Grand Opera House in Chicago, the Company played *The Playboy of the Western World* with *The Rising of the Moon* before packing up the sets, props, costumes and their own belongings to go straight to the train station. The train was held for them,

and they collapsed into sleep once they'd settled into their sleeper carriages. They arrived in Saint Louis for a brief stint the next day at 7.30am. It was a Sunday, but they were performing that night. (Shields T13/A/441)

St. Louis was dreary and damp. The performances were poorly attended and there were flurries of snow to contend with. A doctor prescribed liver extract for O'Connor's stomach and dismissed the doctors in New York, who had diagnosed something more serious. Before they knew it, they were back on the train heading for the west coast. O'Connor always found it difficult to sleep on the trains and now she was also contending with stomach pains. On one journey, she remembered:

I didn't sleep all last night. It is a very rocky route and the train swayed and swerved and banged and clattered and stopped with a jerk and started again. It was impossible to sleep. Frolic came into my berth and we giggled and looked out of the window for hours until Boss heard us and ordered us to go to sleep. Then we were called at 5.30 this morning for customs inspections.  
(Shields T13/A/440)

Shields had given O'Connor responsibility for costumes. They had to be unpacked and re-packed for customs checks and again for the dressing rooms.

O'Connor awoke at six am in the wilds of Colorado. She could look out her window without moving from her pillow and noted:

It was glorious. We were going through prairie lands, the sun was just up and the whole thing looked like a technicolour movie.  
(Shields T13/A/441)

After an early breakfast in the dining carriage with Ria Mooney, Boss (Arthur) Shields, Elbert Wickes and Maureen Delaney, she settled down to write letters until they reached a stop where they could alight for some air and exercise. She captures the Company in their idle hours:

...in the distance are the Rockies with snow-covered tops. Oh, Boy they look grand. The Co. are in various attitudes around the coach. Frolic is writing letters, Joe is wandering about, Austin ditto, Boss is cleaning his typewriter, the stagehands are in a huddle with Elbert. Eileen is still in bed while the others are in the diner having breakfast. (Shields T13/A/441)

There were unscheduled stops, when landslides blocked the train lines, and breaks in 'depots'. If the train pulled up unexpectedly, some of the actors got out to climb around and take photographs, passing time until the blockage was cleared. At depots, they rushed out to buy sweets and magazines, or to walk around. One photograph shows the Company hanging around on a platform. (Shields T13/B/326-27) The sun is shining; Joe Linnane sits on the edge of the platform with Mulhern on one side and O'Connor on the other. O'Connor is demure, her legs neatly folded under her to one side. Mulhern sits with her legs apart, feet on the sleepers. She wears dark sunglasses and is laughing or telling a joke. Shields sits at a polite distance from O'Connor. May Craig, Maureen Delaney and some of the men stand around behind them, as if they're pacing, eager to get going. The family nature of this Abbey Company is perhaps never captured more eloquently than in these images of 'down time'.

During this time, O'Connor's letters start to display a contentment that eluded her in Ireland. In San Francisco, she found serenity. The harbour reminded her of Cobh, and after the fog and snow of St. Louis, everything radiated with the West Coast sunlight. Her stomach cramps had settled; a doctor had diagnosed a pulled muscle and provided medication. They arrived in The New Olympic Hotel late at night and she woke the next morning to streams of sunlight coming through her window and the prospect of a week's rest before they performed again. (Shields T13/A/441)

Mulhern and Mooney were occupied elsewhere, as O'Connor refers to 'the boys and myself' in her jaunts to the beach and the countryside, or exploring the city. (Shields T13/A/442) Arthur Shields was never far away. The other 'boys' were Joe Linnane and Austin Meldon. They took a cable car to Fisherman's Wharf, wandered around Chinatown and for dinner had chicken chow mein as well as cold pork with ginger and fried rice. There were cocktails, as well as Chinese wine and tea. Going to see the cartoon *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* for the first time, O'Connor was the beauty at the centre of this circle of charming actors.

According to intimate letters sent to her sisters, at this time there was no relationship with Shields. A black and white photo of that time shows O'Connor with Shields and another (unidentified) man outside the Mandarin Theatre in San Francisco. (Shields T13/B/320) O'Connor's arm is tucked comfortably into Shields'. He is tall, imposing and clearly older; he was seventeen years her elder. It is the only photograph from that tour that shows them as a couple. There are press shots for *Drama at Inish* (Shields T13/B/303) and for *Shadow and Substance* (Shields T13/B/202) but the photograph of the Mandarin Theatre is the only one in the archive that shows them together out of costume. O'Connor told her sister that she was contemplating marriage to a responsible lawyer that offered a luxurious life. This Boston lawyer was called Madison and she said:

I'm not in love with him. However, my last love affair was so disastrous to all concerned that possibly I can get along without love this time. (Shields T13/A/442)

Off stage, O'Connor adopted a casual, comfortable look, wearing slack suits with sandals and ankle socks. She described one 'natty get up':

I wear my new slack suit, which consists of a very fine worsted material in purpley navy, the slacks are beautifully fitting and have a concealed zipper down the side, a pleat in the back and a buttoned breast pocket. The pants button on the top. It's a cute idea and they're awfully comfy. I'm wearing a red cowboy handkerchief round my neck and red ankle socks (no stockings or girdle etc) and red and green and blue sandals and ditto ribbon in my hair. (Shields T13/A/441)

One morning, she got up early and went out to buy an adornment for her room. Then she retreated there to write letters and enjoy the view:

This morning I went out and bought bluebells, hyacinths, daffodils and marigolds – 4 large bowls full for 75c. My room has two big windows and the sun pours in. I can look right across the bay from where I'm sitting now. There are ships passing all the time. (Shields T13/A/442)

The emotional turmoil and public shame of the previous spring was behind her; she was an actress considering a life in Boston married to a lawyer.

From the relaxed sunshine of San Francisco, the Company travelled by train to the dry heat and glamour of downtown Los Angeles. With Wickes now at the helm, the one dark cloud that hung over them was the ill health of actor P.J. (Paddy) Carolan. Carolan was suffering from TB. As his condition worsened, he began to drink heavily. O'Connor told her sister:

Paddy is all right when he's sober but at times it's been grim. It's awfully hard on Dossie and Boss who have to do his work. I'm afraid he's quite hopeless – nothing seems to have any effect on him. (Shields T13/A/440)

By the time they checked into the Hotel Clarke in downtown Los Angeles, it was evident that Carolan was not going to recover – from his lung condition or alcoholism. His surrogate family rallied around and all of the actors contributed what they could afford to pay for a special train compartment so he could travel home comfortably. They agreed to keep this private until his family were notified and arrangements made. O'Connor then wrote to her sister to say, 'We did all we could for him'. (Shields T13/A/444) The Company waved off the thin, dejected man with real grief, but satisfied they had done all they could to stop him drinking to the point of inebriation. O'Connor watched, it seems, with incomprehension. Her youth and vitality made her feel invincible in the face of such a struggle with alcohol.

O'Connor took every available opportunity to sunbathe on the roof of the Hotel Clarke. In the evenings, there were parties in Hollywood. On consecutive nights in April, the Abbey Company visited RKO and Paramount studios. They had already been hosted at 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. All of the actresses were offered screen tests and promised work, but O'Connor wasn't as naïve as on earlier tours. She guarded against disappointment. It was clear to her how all of the studios were 'retrenching like hell' and doubted if her screen test would materialise. (Shields T13/A/439) Aware there was a strong possibility that 'when the tour will be over they just lose interest', she determined to finish the tour and then return to London to look for work. (Shields T13/A/439) Lying on the sun-

drenched hotel roof, recovering from another party, O'Connor was considering Boston, Hollywood and London – but not Dublin. There was no future for her there, professionally or personally, it seemed. Yet she took the boat back with the Company, bringing with her a small trousseau for her sister Eileen's June wedding.

### **An Emergency Approaches**

By the end of the 1937/38 tour, O'Connor had decided, 'I shall take a room somewhere in Dublin if Daddy wishes to keep up his attitude towards me.' (Shields T13/A/444) Her father was furious with what he thought of as unseemly behaviour: her relationship with an older, married and protestant man. Higgins had also taken against the actress, mainly, it appears, for her off-stage behaviour. In the preparations for the Abbey Festival scheduled for August, she was cast only in a small role in *The Well of the Saints* by J. M. Synge. After years of growing exposure and popularity, O'Connor was returned to the unspeaking chorus.

Coinciding with Horse Show Week, the twelve-day Abbey Festival in 1938 presented seventeen plays to an audience drawn from America, Britain and the Continent as well as Ireland. During the day, the Gresham Hotel on O'Connell Street hosted lectures on the theatre and its dramatists, along with exhibitions and manuscripts on view. The *Spectator* journalist visiting from the UK was so bored that he didn't stay to see Shields reprise his role as Christy in *Playboy of the Western World*, which concluded the programme. (Dent 15) He went to the Gaiety instead. Dent also described the première of *Purgatory* as 'an unsmiling symbolical fragment that gives us parricide and filicide cheek by jowl.' (15)

Neither the *Spectator* journalist nor the Abbey directorate seemed to know or understand the meaning of Yeats' play. At an open lecture on the work of W.B. Yeats in the Gresham Hotel on a Wednesday afternoon, the actress Shelah Richards stood up in the audience. The lecturer was F.R. Higgins and a Reverend Connolly (Head of English at Boston College) had asked a question from the back of the room about the symbolism of



*Purgatory*. Robinson, the chairman, deemed it an unfair question to pose to Higgins; Richards disagreed. According to the *Evening Herald*, she pointed out, 'He had put his question with great courtesy and sincerity, and as he genuinely desired information, he should be answered.' ('What does it mean?') Higgins did not give an answer, either as to what Yeats meant or what he himself thought the piece to mean.

Given the presence of many members of the Company, it's probably that O'Connor was present at that debate. In watching Richards confront Higgins, she saw an established professional actress take on a man whom she detested but had to be seen to obey. But Richards was also challenging the obscurity of Yeats' work, and her social standing meant that she had the power to speak out in a way O'Connor was denied. If O'Connor did wish to emulate the confidence of Shelah Richards, she was acutely aware of the class difference. Where O'Connor had been forced to write a letter to the board apologising for behaviour deemed insubordinate (and lost her secretarial post), Richards could have her say, leave the hotel and drive herself home in her sports car to her large house in Greystones. Richards would go on to become a successful theatre and radio producer, yet she already spoke like somebody with influence. She had money, and she had social status both from her wealthy Protestant background (of Anglo-Irish ascendancy) and through her marriage to barrister and playwright Denis Johnston. Richards herself once wrote, 'We were born respectable. We can't be anything else.' (Johnston TCD Mss 10066/287/2649) Middle-class women such as O'Connor, without financial independence or a family name deemed respectable, were at a distinct disadvantage in power relations.

During the festival, an actress called Josephine FitzGerald from the second company (which performed while the main company were on tour) played the role of Mary Doul in Synge's play *The Well of the Saints*. O'Connor appeared in a minor role; the bit-part was a step back in her career. She would soon be considered too old for the juvenile parts for which she'd become known. Her performance style, too, had been effected

(and arguably affected) by the farcical posturing adopted to please American crowds. Yet, Mulhern and the other women continued in their careers much as before; obstacles were being put in the way of O'Connor's progression.

Two months after the August festival, O'Connor's role in *The Far-Off Hills* was given to newcomer Phyllis Ryan. Mulhern and Ryan now played out the bedroom scene that had been O'Connor's preserve for so long. Her best friend performed with the new starlet, while O'Connor waited to be cast. Both she and Shields were excluded by Higgins from a trip to Cambridge in April 1939. Furious, O'Connor told an American friend, producer Eddie Choate: 'I don't know when I'll be playing again [ ... ] Higgins appears to hate me with a deadly hate!' (Shields T13/A/150(20)) While she tried to remain polite, the strain was showing. She declared, 'One of these days [my tongue] will come unstuck and I'll tell Higgins what I and the rest of the world think of him – and be fired forever from the Abbey!' (Shields T13/A/150(20)) There's desperation behind her fury. Her patience with Abbey management was wearing thin, and she was increasingly unhappy in Dublin.

Staying with Anne and Mrs George Yeats in Rathfarnham one Sunday night, O'Connor told Mrs Yeats 'very solemnly' that 'Mr Higgins has a very good business head.' (Saddlemeyer 544) While to her superiors, she remained polite and respectful, O'Connor had reason to detest the man. Higgins' rancour could have been due to her relationship with Shields, or her earlier perceived insubordination, but other evidence I've uncovered suggests Higgins had a strong streak of misogyny. His relations with the male actors were strained, but there is no evidence that he bullied them in the way women suffered from his mistreatment. Later that year, the actress Josephine FitzGerald politely resigned a part in a play (Carroll's *Kindred*) for personal reasons. The next day, Fitzgerald received a letter at home in Fairview from Higgins. The note is curt and callous, telling her:

I can only say that you will not have it in your power again to discriminate as to what parts you are to play in this theatre.  
(Nowlan-Fitzgerald)

Higgins revelled in his power over these women, his ability to dispense with them at will, and took any suggestion of insubordination to make their working lives impossible. His relationship to the men suggested similar callousness, but he did not view them as despicable and relied on certain men, including Shields, for support. FitzGerald's career at the Abbey was ended by Higgins, although she went on to appear at the Gate Theatre and in numerous films. O'Connor tried to co-operate, but the relationship with Higgins never improved. Ultimately, he was always in control and he used his power to push her out of the company – and out of Ireland to find work.

The 1938 Abbey Festival ended with a large, relaxed party backstage at the theatre after the curtain came down on *Shadow and Substance*. The members of the company acted as hosts and hostesses, greeting guests and offering raffle tickets for sale before inviting them to find a spot to sit in the green room. The 'intimate meeting' let friends mingle with the directors and the actors on the stairs backstage or in the offices and green room upstairs. (Clive) When called upon, P. V. Carroll made a speech 'with a few touching remarks' about the departed Paddy Carolan. (Clive) The Company observed a respectful silence, remembering their dear friend and the difficult scenes on tour as his illness progressed. After the raffle to raise money for the benefit funds, the Company carried on dancing and drinking and talking theatre until the early hours. Few knew that amid the riotous jollity, O'Connor and Shields were planning a new life for themselves as a couple.

Some weeks later, Shields arranged a meeting with W. B. Yeats in the Hibernian Club on Stephen's Green and explained his dissatisfaction with the theatre, along with sharing some details of his personal life. (Frazier *Hollywood Irish* 128) He had been offered a role on Broadway. Yeats assured him there would always be a place for him in the Abbey, but

advised him to go. In October, Yeats left for France. The same month, the London *Times* announced that Shields and O'Connor would be travelling to New York (along with Shelah Richards) to appear in *Spring Meeting*, a play by M. J. Farrell & John Perry. (Frazier *Hollywood Irish* 128)

At this point, Shields was a respected actor and O'Connor was a rising star. He played a faithful servant who first appears in Act 3 of the play; Baby Furze (played by O'Connor) was at the centre of the plot. The lovers may have been looking forward to spending Christmas alone in their lodgings in the Whitby building, but they would be chaperoned by Shelah Richards, also in the cast. The three Irish actors worked throughout January with director John Gielgud, learning the witty text penned by a smart, publicity-shy female writer based in Ireland called Molly Keane.

A few weeks into the popular run for *Spring Meeting*, these three Abbey stalwarts saw a newspaper feature they didn't approve of. The article referred to the 'all-British' cast of the play. Shields penned a letter setting out their patriotism and clarifying that certain of the actors were 'citizens of the Irish Free State' and therefore 'IRISH, not English.' ('From the Drama Mailbag') There's a jovial tone to the letter, signed by Shields, O'Connor, Richards and also Denis Carey. They identify themselves as Abbey actors and stress that the letter was written for the purposes of 'clarification, not rancour.' ('From the Drama Mailbag') Their assertion of nationalism is perhaps less surprising than the loyalty they express to the Abbey Theatre.

Mere days after that letter was published, the three actors and friends heard the news of the death of W. B. Yeats. He had died in France, with his wife George at his side. In their rooms in the Whitby building, looking out on the lights of Broadway, they toasted Yeats and waited for news of funeral arrangements and tributes from home. All three feared for the future of the Abbey Theatre under the tyranny of Higgins; not one of them would return to the stage on Marlborough Street. Far from the mourning in Dublin, they continued to perform. O'Connor was a

professional and she would not let down Philip Merivale, the producer who frequently sat in on rehearsals and often took her for dinner. (Journals)

The production transferred to The Little Theatre in February 1939, where the *Fashion Report* described how 'chiffons wisped airily up and down the aisles', silk wraps reappeared, and 'prints and lighter colours' had begun to appear. (*Spring Meeting Playbill* ITA/128/1/1) Some of the women wore opera-length gloves in black kid and bright-colored evening gloves. For up-to-the-minute accessories, women wore pearls twisted high around the neck, and headdresses of ivory lace 'like a Martha Washington bonnet'. (*Spring Meeting Playbill* ITA/128/1/1) Spring was creeping up Fifth Avenue, and as the fashions changed, blossoms were braving the cold air in Central Park.

I can picture the style-conscious O'Connor peeking out from the curtain before *Spring Meeting* began, admiring the finery and fashion. The scene design, depicting the interior of the Furze household in Woodruff, Tipperary, was lavish and her part was fun. But O'Connor knew Equity restrictions would limit her time in New York. Also, as Shields was supporting his wife at home and she didn't earn much, money was scarce.

As Shields' new partner, O'Connor had learnt not to show insecurities. She gave the impression of being a strong woman not to be cowed, but she knew of Richards' friendship with Mac and of Richards' own marital difficulties with Johnston. The programme notes joke of Johnson's inability to pin down his wife; in fact, the couple were already living separate lives. Richards had two children and aspirations to become a director. Minutes before the curtain went up, the women came together and took positions on the stage for their opening scene. It opened:

Seated on the stool L.C., JOAN FURZE is trying an enormous Dorothy Walker model on to BABY FURZE, who is standing L. in front of her. They both seem despairing. BABY can see herself in a long mirror which is leaning against the table behind the settee. (Farrell and Perry 7)

Baby (O'Connor) scowls at her appearance in the mirror, disconsolate at the ill-fitting and out-of-fashion evening dress. Joan Furze

(Richards) fusses around the dress with pins and a scissors, trying to make the best of it. Joan is the thirty-two-year-old daughter of the penurious Sir Richard, who manages the household. She is bitter about her life: 'Never a drink or a party. Nothing but doing the flowers and fighting with [Aunt] Bijou and growing older.' (Farrell and Perry 9) Both girls are victims of their father's stinginess and rudeness, but Baby retains her youth, energy and determination to find a different life for herself. When Tiny Fox-Collier arrives hoping to marry her son Tony off to Joan for her inheritance of Woodruff, Tony falls for Baby. Meanwhile, Joan's relationship with their groom is ended by her father.

Baby is the most innocent and yet most dynamic member of the Furze household. She charms and flirts her way through life in Tipperary, cheerfully manipulating the servants and her father to get her way. When her spinster aunt insists that no lady looks for a husband, she responds: 'I think of it often and I want one, and I'll have one too.' (Farrell and Perry 11) Tiny Fox-Collier describes her as 'entirely undeveloped mentally' and notes she has 'a brogue you can cut with a knife.' (Farrell and Perry 43) But she seduces Tony with her beauty and wit, and by appearing in the sitting room wrapped only in an eiderdown. At one point she asks him, 'What do you think I am - a child on the threshold of life?' Tony responds, 'I don't know what you'd do on a threshold. You're wonderful in a hay loft.' (Farrell and Perry 37) O'Connor's sexuality was not just on open display, but was the punch line of such jokes.

On stage each night, O'Connor was the pretty coquette, nipping sips from her father's brandy glass and cadging money to pay for cigarettes. The play again allowed her to openly declare her sexuality, and to perform being of a social class where she could talk openly without fear of financial or other penalties. After the curtain fell, the actress was weary from stress. The awkward circumstances with Richards, the career issues, and her money problems were strains on her relationship with Shields. She was coming to realize there was no future for her on the Irish stage. But for all the worry, there was a vibrant group of theatre people in New York. Notes

in her journals show a life packed with rehearsals, dinners and parties. They mention private meetings with Iris Whitney and a new friend called 'Kay'. As life became more complex for O'Connor, a New Yorker called Kay Swift swept into her life like the rousing chords of a Broadway show's opening number.

### **Kinship and Friendship**

In her landmark essay, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', feminist historian Joan Scott set out the four elements of gender as a 'constitutive element of social relationships, based on perceived differences between sexes.' These are: (1) culturally available symbols; (2) normative concepts that set forth interpretations of the meanings of symbols; (3) the kinship system and (4) subjective Identity. (Scott 'Gender' 1067) The former two categories have been considered in relation to Irish theatre since the foundation of the Abbey Theatre, including symbols such as Cathleen ni Houlihan and the characters that followed as normative concepts of Irish womanhood. The kinship system in these life stories, however, must be extended from family and household to include colleagues, and the ensemble of the touring company that became O'Connor's family in a number of ways. It here seems useful to draw attention to the network of women around O'Connor that were providing emotional and practical support and, also, possible role models. While I separate the biographies of each of the five Irish women, the interconnections between their lives, roles, tours and experiences they shared, should be apparent.

The relationships between these women, both in the Company and with other women in theatre they encountered, were key networks in their lives, regardless of their relationships with men. O'Connor defined herself by her position between her two sisters ('the least good-looking one of the family' (Shields T13/A/436)) and the tempestuous nature of her friendship with Frolic Mulhern showed their intimacy and reliance on each other. At the same time, the attitude of the older women (including Bazie "Mac"

Shields) towards the young novices was a crucial dynamic in the Company. Much like Amelia Gregg in Deevy's *Katie Roche*, they formed a model of respectable Irish femininity showing how they could 'make it grand.' (113) The elder generation often deplored the younger women's behaviour, which they viewed as rebellious or simply unseemly. Female friendship is a crucial feature of the biography of any woman, and O'Connor's connection with Kay Swift is fascinating for its apparent unlikeliness, its obvious strength, and for its indelible mark on O'Connor's personality and her conception of herself as an actress and a woman.

Kay Swift was a Broadway composer, a divorcee, and a busy socialite. This small, elegant lady with dark, carefully-coiffed hair and huge eyes was a woman who 'always wanted the works, every minute' and felt entitled to have it. (Lasker Folder 259) She had an infectious energy, as if living constantly to the rhythm of her first Broadway hit *Fine and Dandy*. Swift and O'Connor had little in common in terms of background, but they shared a love of drama and an understanding of complicated love affairs. Swift had a long relationship with the composer George Gershwin; she assisted him in composing the musical *Porgy and Bess*. The Abbey Company saw this musical staged in San Francisco during the early 1930s. ('Reminiscence' Craig Mss LA28/240) However, there's no record that during her first tour in 1934/35, O'Connor saw this work, or that she met Swift. Gershwin's unexpected death in July 1937 was well publicized, but his union with Swift was never official. The women were most likely introduced in 1938 by Swift's new beau, radio star and old acquaintance of the Abbey Players, Eddie Byron.

For all her verve, Swift's life had been beset by vicissitudes. After her father's premature death, she supported her mother with her musical talents, teaching and playing. Marriage to banker (and sometime lyricist) James Warburg brought contentment and a luxurious standard of living, but she abandoned this and gave up custody of her three daughters to continue her work and relationship with Gershwin. She was now living alone, composing music for a number of organizations, including the New



York World Fair scheduled for 1939. While she rarely stopped working on her musical compositions, she relied on girl friends, most especially businesswoman Mary Lasker, for emotional support. She kept Sundays free for 'our good Sabbath gab fests, settling our lives [and] we've really made more progress at that on Sundays than any other days.' (Lasker Folder 259)

Both O'Connor and Swift had ambitions for career success with a man they adored by their side. Swift repeatedly threw over money and security for passion and excitement. Yet while O'Connor despaired in private, Swift kept her mood light and her hopes high. There was always the prospect of another tune, another lover and another paycheck. Swift always had enough money for a visit to the hairdresser: 'No doing of own hair by this hand', and a Sunday always involved a couple of her favorite 'vod-tons', either out or at home with friends. (Lasker Folder 544) Swift was, in fact, something of a 'Pollyanna', endlessly positive, an attribute that would infuriate and assist O'Connor in equal measure. The 'disappointment adjustant' Swift inherited from her mother served her well and brought joy to those around her; O'Connor lacked such a genetic gift. (Ohl 219)

*Spring Meeting* ran at The Little Theatre until the end of February 1940, so that O'Connor was still performing in the city during one of Kay Swift's most memorable and dramatic social evenings. At Hampshire House, the thirty-seven-storey luxurious apartment building south of Central Park, Mary Lasker was living and working on her design business. Lasker held a cocktail party, a habitual event that ended with guests sodden with drink and emotionally spent after a night of dramatic rows and passionate encounters. That evening, Lasker ended her relationship with a married man the women called 'Fiend' to protect his identity. Swift had taken a 'horrible beating' emotionally when Byron dropped her unceremoniously, but that night she met *Time* magazine writer Charles Wertenbaker. (Lasker Folder 259) O'Connor remained sorry that Swift and Byron had parted ways, but the women's friendship endured. (Shields T13/A/150(21))

O'Connor returned to the UK for more auditions after the run of *Spring Meeting* finished, but Shields stayed on, trying to make connections and get further work on Broadway. He met businessman Eddie Choate, and together they set up a production company and secured the rights to produce Paul Vincent Carroll's new play *Kindred*. O'Connor spent more time in England, where she saw much of Hugh Hunt and auditioned where possible. (Shields T13/A/150(28)) With Higgins pushing her out, she had no choice but to seek other work, and in May 1939 she had an interview with the producers of the Shell Theatre in London. There was the prospect of a part in *French Without Tears*, a new comedy of manners by Terence Rattigan. O'Connor had perfected an English accent that would suit this caper, set in a French boarding house. She spent the little money she had travelling to London and finding accommodation but nothing came of the meeting. (Shields T13/A/150(27)) When Shields finalised the deal for *Kindred*, he wired with the news. O'Connor rushed back to Dublin at the earliest opportunity. She was staying at her father's house in Ranelagh when she expressed her relief to Choate: 'We're both absolutely thrilled to bits. And I'm rescued from a ten weeks English tour of *French Without Tears!*' (Shields T13/A/150(28))

Dublin was miserable. The weather was wet and gloomy and 'There is a very worried look on everyone's face in the streets. [...] There is talk of nothing else but WAR'. (Shields T13/A/150(20)) *French Without Tears* was a huge success in London; O'Connor watched from afar as Kay Hammond and Rex Harrison went on from the Rattigan play to bigger and bigger success. Carroll's play *Shadow and Substance* was staged again in May. Management at the Abbey Theatre were hoping to capitalise on its earlier popularity even though Hunt (the original director) had left the country. To replicate as much as possible the original cast, O'Connor was asked to reprise her role as Thomasina. She appeared with the rising star, Cyril Cusack. At the Dublin theatre, the ignominy of her affair and her behaviour still lingered. Carroll joked with her about a play he was writing about 'a nice little teaser ... with a nose like yours.' (Shields T13/A/150(44))

If not rehearsing, O'Connor spent time typing letters in the office or reading in the Green Room. Eager to get back to the US, to be with Boss and to escape her strained family situation in Ranelagh, she enquired in letters to Eddie Choate about a role in *Kindred* for herself. At the same time, she promoted Mulhern's talents:

She has a very conservative and religious family and they refuse to believe she wants to go to America again. [...] Poor old Frolie—she's longing to go! (Shields T13/A/150(41))

O'Connor hated the thought of leaving her best friend behind, and continued to coax Mulhern to leave with her. Mulhern didn't have the strength to consider such a huge move; she was increasingly delicate. Despite bad health, Mulhern managed to retain her sense of humour and love of performing. O'Connor may have put her friend's weakness down to overwork or heartbreak after the end of her relationship with Wickes. Shields also discussed with Choate the possibility of Mulhern playing the character of Primrose in their first venture, although he revealed, 'The only thing that worries me about her is that she is not very strong.' (Shields T13/A/150(30)) O'Connor wanted Mulhern with her because she knew that without a confirmed role or money, travelling to the US was going to be a challenge. Requests for a role are repeated breezily, but there's real fear Shields would leave her behind in O'Connor's letter to Choate in May 1939:

Boss and I have no money whatsoever! ... Don't worry about me as I can wait a few weeks longer until Boss earns some money in Hollywood and then sends for me. (Shields T13/A/150(28))

O'Connor was now consumed with possible career moves. Hunt was considering staging *Kindred* in the UK and there was a production of Carroll's *White Steed* opening in Glasgow. Both plays were familiar to the actress and she had Carroll's approval. Hunt suggested there might be a part for her in a UK production, or O'Connor heard of the production and made the suggestion. She was ready to grasp at any part to leave Dublin, but wouldn't return to England without the blessing of Shields and Choate. One night, desperate for a plan, she sent a telegram:

Hunt definitely offers part Steed August. Sorry to rush you. Please cable decision re my last letter. Love Aideen.  
(Shields T13/A/150(43))

She may have been hoping to push them into action with news of the UK production; the action rebounded. Choate sent a polite note:

Their production definite. Mine Not. You make decision. Best Eddie.  
(Shields T13/A/150(43))

Despite her diligence and talent, apparent confidence and headstrong manner, such decisions left her floundering. After impassioned and lengthy discussions about the future, Shields arrived in New York without his lover. (Shields T13/A/150(41)) On midsummer's day, she took a train to Cork, bringing with her everything she needed for emigrating. The Abbey Theatre was, as usual, closed for the month of July. In Cork, she could stay rent-free with her mother's family at 4 Graham's Terrace in the port village of Cobh, from which boats left regularly for America. She had run out of friends to rely on in Dublin.

### **Preparing for New York**

Graham's Terrace has an iron gate, closing it off from the road. The terrace is carved into the hillside; the row of houses hangs precipitously over the steep incline down to the sea. It was a mature, respectable address, halfway between the village with its port and the cathedral, perched at the top of the hill. O'Connor could look down on the harbour from her window. It reminded her now of the wharfs of San Francisco, filling her with nostalgia in the same way that in San Francisco she was once nostalgic for Cobh. (Shields T13/A/442)

Number 4 Graham's Terrace was a place O'Connor associated with the long, lazy summer days of childhood, learning to sail during the day and running up from the village in the evenings. Now she was twenty-five, and her mother's family knew of the dispute with her father and the unsavoury love life of the actress. She often found herself trapped in the grim light of the house. After months of travelling independently, being toasted and

feted, O'Connor was reduced to unpaid housework and child minding. Occasionally, she managed to find a quiet corner and a few minutes to herself to write letters. She sent a note to Choate:

I had to cable Boss on Sunday about coming earlier. I've struck a bad patch at the moment! I'm here with my mother's people and Uncle Dick arrived home unexpectedly [from military service] and is very ill ... It's frightful. I have to look after the child (who is a fiend) and do all the meals – sit with him for hours on end. He just stares at me without uttering a word. Yesterday I thought I was really going mad. (Shields T13/A/150(46))

Shields had learnt to fill his days with calming activities when he wasn't working: he loved his vegetable garden, collecting stamps and reading about trains or talking about them with his son, Adam. O'Connor never had such serenity off stage and the tedium of housework only exacerbated her temper. She said:

Nothing ever happens in Cobh. Even Atlantic fliers going astray land at Galway—but perhaps the German fleet will anchor in the harbour and that would be news. (Shields T13/A/150(44))

Away from the career opportunities of Dublin and London, her anxiety intensified and she pleaded with Choate, 'You won't stop writing to me, will you, just because Boss will be in New York?' (Shields T13/A/150(44))

Often, when she wrote to Choate, O'Connor had a headache and was feeling physically ill. She thought the monotony of the house and her daily tasks would kill her, and was desperately lonely for her theatre colleagues. Her only valid excuses to leave the house were to attend mass or confession in the Cathedral, or to visit her old friend Sister Mary Monica in the Convent of the Sisters of Mercy.

Despite O'Connor's prickly nature, her dark moods, airs of grandeur and obstinate opinions, Sister Mary Monica remained loyal to Aideen. She was one of the few who knew her since she'd been a motherless four-year-old girl, and thought of her always as a girl with a strong Catholic faith and a kind heart. O'Connor had fans in America and friends in the Abbey, but

there's a searing honesty in Mary Monica's letter to the infant Christine Shields in which she says, 'I loved her very much.' (Shields T13/A/518(1))

When she found herself stuck in Cobh, O'Connor had much to tell her cloistered friend and also much she may have found impossible to reveal. There's no way of knowing if the nun knew about O'Connor's love for a married man, and if she supported or advised the actress. As the leader of a sodality group of one hundred and seventy young women, the nun did know the possible future that lay in store for women who fell pregnant out of wedlock. (Cosgrave) Kay Swift counseled love and passion; Sister Mary Monica stood for Catholic faith and prayer. In the serene grounds of the Sisters of Mercy convent and the hushed atmosphere of the cathedral, the nun continued to pray for O'Connor's peace and happiness after the actress left for New York.

Choate had left her to make the decision about the UK production, but she would not give up an opportunity to be with Shields. Hunt's offer of a part in the UK production of *Kindred* was politely declined and money somehow found to buy a ticket to New York. In O'Connor's suitcase the morning she embarked, like a talisman, was the final draft of Paul Vincent Carroll's play *Kindred*. On the dark green cover of the manuscript, the playwright had written, 'To Aideen, Bon Voyage, Paul.' (Shields T13/A/124)

Shields was filming in Hollywood when O'Connor arrived in New York, and he thought it better she stay where she had 'more companionship'. (Shields T13/A/151(27)) She was familiar with the Whitby apartments on West 45<sup>th</sup> Street, where they'd be living. Only a few blocks from the Edison Hotel, the Whitby lacked the glamour and modern appliances of the hotel. It was a community of people working on Broadway, quietest before noon and humming with parties until late. It had been built as a residential hotel, complete with bellhops and barbershop, maid service, a shoe repair stand and even Christmas parties in the lobby. During the depression that began in 1929, it was converted into small studios units. (Neuffer) There, Choate and his actress wife Iris Whitney kept an apartment full of fresh flowers where they entertained

O'Connor. Despite their close friendship, from the start of her stay, she and Shields constantly felt that they were a burden to Choate and his wife. (Shields T13/A/45(1)-(2))

When Choate arranged a reading of the new play *Kindred* in New York for potential investors, in the audience of invited guests was the then composer for Radio City Music Hall and the Director of Light Music for the World Fair, Kay Swift. O'Connor had high hopes she might invest, declaring her a 'grand person' and insisting, 'I know she will [help] if she can.' (Shields T13/A/150(21)) Swift was impressed and excited by the play, eager to give her ideas to Choate although she had no available 'monya'. (Shields T13/A/150(4)) Despite her elegant wardrobe and busy social life, Swift was struggling to support herself financially. There was little chance she could invest in *Kindred*, although her jovial mood may have given the producers a different impression.

Swift was still 'the old carhouse. Always feeling so well it's hardly decent.' (Lasker Folder 544) Her positivity and worldly wisdom could always provide O'Connor with a chuckle and a distraction from the pressing concerns of life. The Beekman Place apartment where Swift lived and entertained was decorated in zebra-print rugs; her bedroom and dressing room were painted (walls and ceiling) in shrimp pink. (Lasker Folder 259) Framed studio portraits of Gershwin, some signed in an ebony ink that echoed his own dark handsome profile, hung on the walls of her lounge. Along with various other ornaments and treasures she had taken from the Warburg townhouse, there was a baby grand piano. (Weber 133) Here, Swift composed and played with the same regularity as other women powdered their noses. She kept jottings of compositions wherever paper fell and coffee cups marked with lipstick surrounded her. Each time she sat there, Swift removed her gold bangles (a gift from Gershwin) and set them on the piano top. They sparkled and trembled as she played. (Weber 133)

On the first Sunday morning of September 1939, O'Connor was listening to the wireless in the Choates' apartment when William Chamberlain's speech was broadcast on BBC radio. The sentence 'His

Majesty's government has declared war on Germany' chilled her, casting a lifelong memory. (Shields T13/A/155(15)) Going back to her life in Ireland now was not only difficult but potentially dangerous.

There was a reunion with Shields in time to celebrate her twenty-sixth birthday, but soon both couples (Choate and wife Iris Whitney; O'Connor and Shields) were working on *Kindred*, 'going over the script word for word, indicating possible cuts and adjustments which we will later go over with Dick [Madden] for his approval.' (Shields T13/A/151(32)) Up until August, O'Connor was cast in the main role of Agnes. Then a decision was made, putting her out of the part.

It's unclear whether the original casting was just an arrangement by Choate and Shields to secure her visa, or if it was a dreadful surprise when she was replaced by well-known Broadway face Haila Stoddard. In any event, her sense of indebtedness to Choate overrode any anger about her re-casting in a minor role, Alice. Around the same time, Swift left O'Connor's life as dramatically as she'd entered, eloping with a cowboy to a farm in Oregon. To fill her days until rehearsals began, and to combat her sense of uselessness, O'Connor began volunteering with the Red Cross. She worked from nine am to four pm every day.

After months of idle days for O'Connor, trying to contribute to the war effort or reading and window-shopping, the long-awaited rehearsals for *Kindred* began at the end of November. Shields had a starring role and Barry Fitzgerald was also in the cast. Reunited with her Irish companions and hard at work, even if her part was minor, the actress saw the days fly by; her theatrical life was coming back on track. A week into rehearsals, distressing news from home reached her. Frolie Mulhern was dead and had been buried in Enniskillen. Stunned by grief, O'Connor wrote in her journal that she simply couldn't believe it was true. (Christine Shields Email)

There was an air of incredulity about Mulhern's death even in Ireland. According to her niece Mary McCullough, she died suddenly and quietly, with one gasp for air, her heart stopping as she sat at the fire with her mother. Deprived of the opportunity to say goodbye and pay her



respects to the Mulhern family at the funeral, yet again O'Connor buried pain and upset to carry on with dignity among a group of people who had never met her friend.

Less than a month later, the company left together for Princeton, a town eighty kilometres outside of New York. *Kindred* opened in the McCarter theatre, at the edge of the Princeton University campus, on 23 December 1939. They immediately travelled back by train to the New York opening. It was a tense Christmas day, for the next morning Arthur Shields had to pay an urgent visit to a doctor. *Kindred* would premiere that evening at the Maxine Elliott Theatre, but he was suffering from chest pain.

A pencilled note in Shields' diary for the following day, a Wednesday, records: 'Kindred a failure'. (Shields T13/A/372(3)) Sixteen performances after opening night, it closed. The spectacular flop left Shields with a twenty percent share in bankruptcy. Rehearsals of the old reliable, O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, began even before *Kindred* closed, on 4<sup>th</sup> of January. Under the stress, Shields was admitted to Lennox Hill hospital and diagnosed with tuberculosis. O'Connor continued to perform in *Juno and the Paycock*, playing a part now so familiar to the actress it was like reciting a prayer. O'Casey's description for Mary Boyle reads:

Two forces are working in her mind—one, through the circumstances of her life, pulling her back; the other, through the influence of books she has read, pushing her forward. The opposing forces are in her speech and her manners. (*Juno* 5)

Similar forces were working on O'Connor, but it was no longer the simple 'backwards or forward' decision she had contemplated as a younger Mary.

It's a long, hard trek from the Whitby Building up to Lennox Hill hospital, particularly if the weather is bad and there is no money for taxis. The walk leads away from the dazzling white lights of Broadway, past the large department stores up the length of Park Avenue and right up to the east side of Central Park. O'Connor had to make this trek, while ensuring that she was back in the theatre each evening in time to perform. On her way, she passed the Warburg townhouse where Kay Swift's ex-husband

still lived with her three daughters. It was a stark reminder of the luxury that Swift had given up for love and her career.

The year of 1939 had been bookended with the deaths of W. B. Yeats and of Frolie Mulhern, and had contained little but worry and relentless struggle for O'Connor and Shields. At least they had been a support to each other; now Shields' serious illness left the actress feeling even more isolated. As she trudged up and down to the hospital, sometimes with Iris Whitney or Barry Fitzgerald, the weight of worry about the future became heavier. Only in her private journals did she admit that she now longed for one thing only: to go home. (Journals) War, or love, or shame, or a combination of all three, kept her where she was.

Equity contracts reveal that O'Connor earned \$150 a week to appear in *Kindred* in 1939. After it closed, her salary decreased to \$100 a week for her part of Mary in *Juno and The Paycock* (1940) and then to \$50 a week for appearing with actor Hale Norcross in *Tanyard Street* (1941). (Shields T13/A/454) It was increasingly difficult for her to manage on her own; her reliance on Shields was not just emotional but financial.

Shields was still seriously ill, but his condition was improving. After *Juno and the Paycock*, he took the doctors' advice to travel to California to recuperate in sunshine and dry air. Barry Fitzgerald travelled with him. Both men had hopes of finding film work to improve their financial situation. Once again, Shields left O'Connor behind. She had been cast in a small part in a Terence Rattigan play, and was hoping it would improve her situation with Equity.

A few weeks into rehearsal for the production at the Hudson Theatre, O'Connor arrived back to the Whitby apartment bereft and Shields received a distressed call. The connection was bad; O'Connor was crying. (Shields T13/A/151(27)) Shields had to wait for an explanation. Choate wrote:

By the time your receive this letter Aideen will be arriving and will give you all the details of how Cooper railroaded her out of his show. Unfortunately, she couldn't reach me at the time all the damage was done. [ ... ] The new director wanted a different type

in the part and when Cooper refused to pay Aideen off, the new director and Homolka simply decided that they would make it so uncomfortable for her that she would leave of her own accord. (Shields T13/A/153(57))

O'Connor was the third actress to leave the production; the *New York Times* announced that English actress Maria Temple would assume the role. ('News of the Stage' 32) O'Connor's experiences in Dublin had made her tough; yet given the traumatic events of the previous few months, a hasty and emotional flight to the West Coast is easy to understand. Cooper was insisting that the actress had broken her contract and owed him two hundred dollars – a sum of money she didn't have. (Shields T13/A/153(57))

O'Connor said farewell to Choate and Iris Whitney, before heading for Grand Central Station. Swift had left for Bend, Oregon (with her new love) six months earlier. According to *Los Angeles in the 1930s: The WPA Guide to the City of Angels*, a round trip ticket from New York to Hollywood that year would have cost ninety US dollars, the equivalent of just over a thousand dollars in today's money. (Kipen xxxiii) It was a huge investment for an actress that had been deprived of two week's salary for walking out of a show. O'Connor walked under the widespread wings of the American eagle, through the wooden swing door and into the Vanderbilt Hall waiting room. The green marble Tiffanys' clock high on the wall counted down the minutes before she could board. Returning to Dublin wasn't possible; onwards to Hollywood was O'Connor's only option.

### **Life in Hollywood**

A few years after their parting in New York, Kay Swift found herself tiptoeing across the landing to the bathroom from the guest room of the Shields' Hollywood apartment. She was intimidated by the hush and found the quiet the couple lived in utterly discomfiting. (Lasker Folder 544) Having avoided using the bathroom as much as possible, Swift was 'near death' close to midnight and braved the expedition in bare feet. To her

horror, when she pulled the plug, she broke the mechanism and the plumbing 'roared like a wolf for three days'. (Lasker Folder 544) Despite the spacious surroundings, it was not a pleasant place to stay. Shields was still weak and O'Connor's unhappiness was rumbling under the floorboards.

1843 North Cherokee Avenue was a good address, on a steep hill one block away from Hollywood Boulevard with its bookshops, cinemas and restaurants. It was a four-storey apartment block built in 1926, with the entrance discreetly hidden by a fountain and shaded by palm trees. The white marble lobby was cool and the darkness dispelled by a chandelier; the mahogany front doors of the apartments ran down narrow corridors that all led to sash windows with cast-iron fire escapes. Climbing the stairs to the third-floor, the low hum of people in their homes was audible. The couple got a cat and named it Lucky after it survived a leap from the apartment window, but O'Connor was weary and melancholy. She abhorred the heat and boredom of her empty days in Hollywood:

I read about two books a day - nothing else to do in this god awful town. We have moved into another apt in this building. It is lovely. Big airy rooms and nice furniture and decorations. [...] My cooking has become most proficient! (Shields T13/A/154(6))

Six months after her arrival, O'Connor was feeling unwell. Shields wasn't strong enough to nurse her, and the stomach pains became so intense that she visited the doctor and was admitted to hospital with acute appendicitis. (Shields T13/A/471) During the early tours with the Abbey, O'Connor had used heavy painkillers provided by Bazie Magee to help with menstrual pains. Later, doctors had prescribed liver extract. (Shields T13/A/441) These pains were different. The casual, social drinking of the theatre crowd had intensified during her sojourn in New York and her journals shortly after she arrived in Hollywood show that it was becoming out of control. (Journals) This time, she stayed in hospital for ten days.

Symptoms of appendicitis include a lack of appetite, a painful bloated abdomen and general fatigue. These symptoms could also indicate cirrhosis of the liver brought on by excessive alcohol intake. If the patient

refused to acknowledge the extent of her problem or to be truthful about her consumption of alcohol, there was little a doctor could do to help. The doctors removed her appendix and O'Connor went home to recuperate. Now both she and her partner were weak and struggling to find work. But Shields had a plan: he was in discussions with producer Jack Kirkland to direct *Tanyard Street*, on Broadway. (Shields T13/A/153)

This play about an Irish soldier in the Spanish Civil War seeking a miracle, written by Irish playwright Louis D'Alton, had been produced on the Abbey stage in January 1940 as *The Spanish Soldier*. There, the rich comedy and social satire had delighted audiences and critics. Kirkland agreed to sponsor the production on condition Barry Fitzgerald was included in the cast, and so in December (later than planned) all three Irish actors went back briefly to New York. After the premiere had been postponed twice, the play opened in February 1941.

D'Alton had written *The Spanish Soldier* to stake a claim as a serious dramatist, but Broadway audiences came only to laugh at the famous comedian Barry Fitzgerald in the role of Mossy Furlong. (O'Farrell 111) Shields directed and played the soldier Kevin McMorna. In the final act, Kevin tells his lover Hussy that he has decided to join the priesthood. Hussy was played by the singularly titled 'Margo'. According to the *New York Sun*, Margo was Mexican, born as Maria Margarita Guadalupe Bolado Castilla. (Morehouse 6) O'Connor, as the only Irish woman in the cast, played the minor role of Nanno Deasy. (In Dublin, this part was played by Phyllis Ryan.) The play ran for only twenty-two performances. Critics hated it; Atkinson of the *New York Times* was amazed Fitzgerald had agreed to appear in it. ('The Play') Soon, all three actors were back in Hollywood. O'Connor's performance in *Tanyard Street* would be her last appearance on the stage.

Staying in Hollywood, Kay Swift 'loved being with' Shields and O'Connor. She declared they were 'kindness itself.' (Lasker Folder 544) Yet, her discomfort in a home devoid of life or energy is clear from her letters. Swift tried to get a hotel room; none were to be found in the vicinity.

Shields was 'delicate', recuperating slowly from his TB and O'Connor, Swift observed, was 'wearied from the extra work entailed by my visit'. (Lasker Folder 544) Barry Fitzgerald came most evenings for the dinner O'Connor prepared, providing light relief for Swift. The move to a bigger apartment on another floor of North Cherokee in June filled O'Connor's days and created enough chaos for her to hide her private drinking, from Shields and from Swift.

The sexy, hard-drinking and rarely-eating Kay Swift, with her leopard-skin coat, silk gowns and red lipstick had been replaced in Oregon by a calmer, plain-living woman who would not contemplate a dalliance with an unsuitable man. Swift had embodied the frank sexuality and liberated femininity of 1920's New York, a femininity that both thrilled and intimidated the Abbey actresses. Now, Swift had written a wholesome tale of the devoted wife and housekeeper, *Who Could Ask for Anything More?*, which fitted with the ideals of 1940s California. O'Connor tried to take on these ideas of womanhood, but it was not a role she relished. Inwardly, she raged and suffered. While Shields was at the studio, she was the diligent housewife. In the evenings, she entertained their guests with her 'proficient' cooking and cocktails. (Shields T13/A/154(6))

Doing her best to cater for her friend, O'Connor once put a hot water bottle in Swift's guest bed while she was out, only for the composer to discover on her return that it was leaking. A horrified O'Connor roused Shields from his bed to take some of his bedding to refresh the guest bed. A very awkward Swift had to sit 'in state' while her hostess remade the bed for her; the accident was another shameful episode for a struggling O'Connor. (Lasker Folder 544) Shields and Kay Swift were in bed by nine each evening. During the cool nights, O'Connor had time to read, write letters, to imagine how different her life might be if the war ended or she found acting work of her own, and to drink.

There was a temporary reprieve when O'Connor paid a visit to Selznick's studio and after reading for them, began rehearsing a part in a film with the Irish actress Geraldine Fitzgerald. They 'worked like fury - till

2am most mornings' until Equity questioned her status and there was a disagreement over money. (Shields T13/A/154(6)) Furthermore, Shields had misgivings. O'Connor told Choate that she'd reluctantly left it because, 'although I wanted to do it, Boss was terribly against it'. (Shields T13/A/154(6)) Despite his previous support for her career, Shields disliked the idea of O'Connor being exploited in the film industry. Shields was happy that she was 'housekeeping and reading and keeping as cheerful as the news of the war will permit any of us.' (Shields T13/A/154(3)) He felt: 'She misses New York but is good at settling down anywhere.' (Shields T13/A/154(3)) In her eagerness to please, to convince Shields that she could settle anywhere with good humour, caring for him and for his brother, O'Connor hid the extent of her loneliness and misery.

To celebrate her twenty-eighth birthday, Shields took O'Connor to Musso Franks restaurant on Hollywood Boulevard. (Journals) It was a rare social occasion for her, now that she often stayed at home if he was at a party at the studios. A waiter in a scarlet waistcoat escorted them to their table. The red leather booths were often full of movie stars eating the trademark steaks and drinking some of the best cocktails in Hollywood. It was one of her favourite spots, but it had been almost a year since she'd worked and there seemed little to celebrate. Nobody could help how old she felt, or how drab she believed she looked. (Journals) After dinner and drinks, the couple walked the short distance back to the apartment.

December came and the couple muddled through the holiday as best as they could without family and Irish tea. Swift was also far from her family. She called it the 'nostalgic old Nina Twaddle of a day' and lamented, 'all those choice regrets we have on Dec[ember] 25<sup>th</sup>.' (Lasker Folder 259) But, Swift found solace in the fact she was 'so damned necessary' to her new husband. Being needed by those around you, she decided, was the real 'payola'. (Lasker Folder 259) O'Connor felt nothing but a burden to Shields and Fitzgerald. Her choice regrets of December 25<sup>th</sup> were not so easily allayed.

That Christmas, there remained the prospect that O'Connor's career could be salvaged and her life turned around. On St Stephen's Day, as the Irish couple still called it, in 1941, Shields walked down the hill to the Post Office to send a wire to Choate. It read:

Aideen goes to Vancouver January 6<sup>th</sup>. A letter as you suggest would be very helpful writing. Boss. (Shields T13/A/154(44))

There was little Shields could do to support his lover, but he used his contacts to help her American visa application. O'Connor had to take a tram and then a train, carrying with her clothes for a few days as well as all the papers connected with her emigration status. Included in those carefully guarded papers was a letter from Kay Swift (now Mrs. Faye Hubbard) addressed to the American Counsel General in Vancouver. The letter certified that Swift 'enjoys an annual income from a trust fund in excess of \$10,000.' (Shields T13/A/467) Swift had not simply filled in some paperwork to help an old work contact. The trust fund she offered to support her friend was set up by her first husband's parents as a dowry that was to sustain her for life. She now had no financial security except the Warburg Trust Fund; Swift didn't hesitate to offer it to O'Connor to help her stay in the country.

Both Shields and O'Connor had previously visited the Canadian city with the Abbey Company. He particularly enjoyed how it contained 'interesting looking oriental people' and offered 'something queer around every corner.' (Frazier *Hollywood* 116) But this trip was different, and not simply because she was alone. The actress later said:

I had a real taste of a country at war in Vancouver. There the people were alert 24 hours a day. There were restrictions and partial blackouts and army life got the first place with civilians second. I guess that this will gradually happen here. (Shields T13/A/155(3))

O'Connor returned to North Cherokee with the right to residency for five years under the quota system, but also with 'rare fevers and miseries together with shaky legs, high temperature, dizzy head and a



swollen and festered leg.' (Shields T13/A/155(3)) The vaccinations she had before leaving for Canada left her feeling thoroughly unwell and she took to bed for a number of weeks, her hands wavering aimlessly over the keys each time she tried to compose a letter. (Shields T13/A/155(3)) Shields nursed her, but he was depressed about work and considering switching agents to improve his career chances. Eventually, her symptoms passed and Shields began a new round of the studios led by a new agent. Alone again during the day, she applied to the Red Cross for volunteer work and was disgusted when they declined her offer on the basis that she didn't know braille. She told Eddie Choate in January 1942:

Well, I ask you! Braille! They are the snuttiest [sic] crowd and seem to be trying to keep the Red Cross for the social and movie crowd when everyone in the country is needed.  
(Shields T13/A/155(3))

Frequently, O'Connor wrote about World War II. There is a sense of political naivety in her commentary though is she characteristically practical and frank. She wrote to Choate about it as early as 1939 from Dublin and in January 1942, she shared a real pride in the British forces: 'And boy, wasn't Churchill wonderful in his speeches here and in Canada. Whatta man!' (Shields T13/A/155(3))

Some months after O'Connor arrived in Hollywood, huge anti-war rallies were held in Los Angeles. Thirty-five thousand people crowded the Hollywood Bowl and surrounding hillsides to voice their resistance to the fighting. But the industrial and economic boom emanating from the European conflict generated huge wealth. In October 1939, the US had signed a Neutrality Act to say that they were not getting involved in World War 2, but on 4<sup>th</sup> November they passed an amendment to allow them to sell arms to European countries. By May 1940, Roosevelt was talking about the US as an 'Arsenal of Democracy'.

The ammunitions factories in California operated twenty-four hours a day, and new forms of entertainment began to spring up and to thrive, offering downtime and fun to the military services as well as the factory

workers. Many of the Hollywood movie stars and theatre people, including Kay Swift, became involved in the 'Hollywood Canteen'. This was a club offering food, dancing and entertainment for servicemen, usually on their way overseas. It was operated and staffed entirely by volunteers from the entertainment industry. O'Connor showed no interest in volunteering there; or she wasn't confident enough to try it.

Later that year, O'Connor grew concerned about Ireland's place in the conflict: 'Eire is now so insular, so cut off by her own will from contact from the rest of the world.' She was reading William Shirer's *Berlin Diary*. (Shields T13/A/155(9)) The actress swung between ferocious homesickness, dying to escape the cloying heat and lethargy of Hollywood, and delight to be free of Abbey politics, conservative Irish society and family conflicts. She often felt guilty about her distance from the war, telling Choate:

We feel so useless and SAFE over here - with plenty of food and clothes and amusement when we ought to be sharing the rationing and the anxiety and the work and the hardships that the people in Eire are having - or we should be doing something in England. (Shields T13/A/154(6))

The letters sent to Choate are neatly typed, dated and with corrections and necessary punctuation inserted by hand. They are the work of an organised and engaged young lady. It is in transcribing the letters she wrote during this time that one feels the erratic rhythm of her thoughts and repetitive tales. It's then one can sense the mood swings of someone inebriated. O'Connor's flurries of affection, fiery outbursts and frank analyses of events are the only clues to her private struggle; there are no other signs of her drinking habits or any evidence of possible attempts by herself, Barry or Arthur to address the issue.

'I STILL LOATHE HOLLYWOOD,' O'Connor wrote in 1942. (Shields T13/A/155(12)) Tellingly, this wasn't a letter home, but a confession she made to Choate. While Shields was often away on location, or shooting at the studios, she was at home. The local second-hand bookshops helped pass time, and her bedroom became a retreat for the slightest hurt or

injury, but two other places started to figure largely in her days. The rooftop of North Cherokee was open to residents, a quiet retreat where one could watch the neighbourhood unseen. Photographs of her here (from the private collection of Christine Shields) show a reflective woman, sitting among potted plants in the early evening light. The other refuge she found was entirely devoid of the sunlight that sapped her energy: the cinemas of Hollywood Boulevard. Alone in the darkness, O'Connor could immerse herself in another world, or simply drink unnoticed. Her journals show that she would attend two or three screenings on her own during the week, and then bring Shields with her to watch her favourites over again on his free days. (Journals)

War rationing was increasingly impinging on the Hollywood diet, but in December O'Connor and Shields arrived at Barry Fitzgerald's new house on Gardner Street to share an enormous turkey and British plum pudding. Outside, the sun was blazing but Fitzgerald managed to get some logs and created a proper fire inside to remind them of home. (Shields T13/A/155(15)) Despite the luxuries, O'Connor was not feeling well and was capable of doing little. On doctor's advice, Shields booked a week in the Biltmore Hotel in downtown Los Angeles and they left for a holiday.

The couple returned home to the wet season in Hollywood. The rain rarely abated, pushing houses into the sea at Malibu and keeping many awake at night. Temperatures were also below their normal level. Despite the damp, O'Connor was refreshed and full of good intentions. Reflecting that she was now three and a half years in America, she was cheered by the recent 'grand' war news and believed 'things are really looking up for the allies.' (Shields T13/A/155(15)) She hoped things were looking up for herself, telling Choate: 'I really am thoroughly ashamed of myself' for her lack of letters, and urging him to help her keep her promises. She signs off the letter 'God bless you', as if she was relying on faith to help fight her demons. (Shields T13/A/155(15))

News of the sudden death of Bazie Magee in October 1943 reached Hollywood faster than expected given the war. The couple wasted no time;

five days later Shields attended his doctor for pre-marital blood tests. (Shields T13/A/366) There was a quiet wedding ceremony on 10th November. If O'Connor did organize a Catholic ceremony in the church she attended where Fr. Coughlan was parish priest, I could find no record of it. After years of union, the marriage was a brief moment, no more than a passing reference in a letter to Choate: '[H]e and I were married last week. We are very happy about it.' (Shields T13/A/155(19)) The official arrangement was a precursor to other matters – Shields was preoccupied with the fate of his son Adam, who was moving around between family members in Dublin. His priority was to bring Adam to Hollywood.

Barry Fitzgerald had been a constant presence in her life since O'Connor's love affair with Shields had stabilized. If she felt put out by his constant presence at her dinner table in North Cherokee, there's no record of it. Fitzgerald's comic talent not only brought humour into her home, but his film success gave him an income that allowed him to support O'Connor and Shields when needed. Particularly when his brother was ill, Fitzgerald ensured that the couple never went without. Chance events in March 1944 would test O'Connor's loyalty to her brother-in-law.

One Wednesday evening, O'Connor cooked dinner and prepared drinks for Shields and his brother as usual, before they waved FitzGerald off in his car. Around midnight, she received a call to say that her brother-in-law had been in an accident and had been arrested. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Fitzgerald was driving along Hollywood Boulevard when he failed to stop at the junction of Sycamore Street. He didn't see two woman crossing the street; Mary Farrer was killed and her daughter Edna Torrance seriously injured. ('Barry Fitzgerald Faces Court' A3)

Shields and O'Connor went straight to the local jail after the call. Fitzgerald was now a rising star and the studio producers quickly stepped in to solve the problem. Jerry Geisler, an expensive and well-known lawyer to the stars, was hired to defend Fitzgerald and details on the case still prove difficult to find. There were suggestions that bad lighting was the issue; others believe he had been drinking but this was reported as

unproven. ('Barry Fitzgerald Faces Court' A3) For weeks after the accident, the couple lived with the much-shaken Fitzgerald at his home. O'Connor reveals little about what she said or how she felt about the incident although it is mentioned in later letters. (Shields T13/A/155(23))

The accident shook all three members of the Shields family to their core. If anything could force O'Connor to reconsider her drinking and the life she had created for herself, it was the events of that night. Her health problems were now an endless cycle of urgent illness; good intentions and fresh starts; followed by a gradual return to drinking in secret. After the war ended, she had a new house, a prospective step-son and hopes for a baby of her own. Her drinking continued.

Two years after the war ended, O'Connor was seven months pregnant when her eighteen-year-old stepson Adam arrived from Ireland. He was enrolled at Hollywood High School, to finish his education. Swift, who had relocated to Beverly Hills, thought Adam 'very nice, & his reactions to America are anything but dull.' (Lasker Folder 544) Swift had visited their home on Sierra Bonita Avenue, and heard of Shields' career developments. It caused her to reflect, as cheerful as always: 'Peoples' ships do come in, sometimes late. Everything's clicking for Boss, after so much hell.' (Lasker Folder 544) If everything was clicking for Shields, Swift had little idea how desperately O'Connor was struggling. Swift was herself a drinker, and was often taken to task by Mary Lasker for her outlandish behaviour and inability to curb her intake. (Weber Email) But Swift was an upbeat, riotous drunk, given to dance and sing when under the influence. The drinking of her Irish friend was private and her moods darker.

Five weeks after Swift's letter, O'Connor gave birth prematurely to a daughter, Christine Frances. She was named for Shields' most important role, as Christy Mahon in *The Playboy of the Western World*, and for Frolic (Frances) Mulhern. The dark-haired, blue-eyed baby arrived in a 'great rush'. (Shields T13/A/155(28)) Christine was brought home by Arthur Shields and Mae Clarke, a nanny; O'Connor was kept in hospital for ten days for further treatment. The house was now full. As well as Adam and

Mae Clarke, Bid Shields Mortishead (Arthur's sister) and her daughter Una arrived from Ireland in November to visit and help the new mother. On the day of her christening, Irish actress Sara Allgood stood as her godmother. (Shields T13/A/155(28)) Later photographs from Christine Shield's private collection show Allgood watching from a distance, smiling, as Christine toddles away from O'Connor's arms in their new back garden.

The house on Sierra Bonita Avenue was a split-level clapboard house, not far from their first home on North Cherokee. It had a bright, open-plan kitchen, a room where Shields could keep his stamp collection and two bedrooms upstairs under the eaves. Downstairs, there was a cool, dark room in the centre of the house, which the couple set up as a 'green room'. The walls were lined with books and there was a desk for a typewriter and an easy chair for reading. On the shelves, first editions of Yeats' poetry and Synge's plays sat alongside new fiction.

Shields was working away more and more, as his film career progressed. Despite the company of his family and a new baby, O'Connor was generally melancholy and pining for him. It isn't clear how well O'Connor hid her drinking at home, but she was attending a physician who had diagnosed the cause of her stomach pains as cirrhosis of the liver, denegration of liver tissue generally caused by long-term alcoholism. (Shields T13/A/472) In a moving letter written in January 1947, O'Connor wrote to her husband in New York to tell him, 'All I want is to be with you, even if it's in Timbuctoo'. (Shields T13/A/241) The letter takes her through day and night, keeping him up to date on life at home. Monday afternoon's entry reads:

I wanted to fly to NY last night to be with you – I kept very busy – made formula like mad and did a wash so that I wouldn't cry into the bathroom towels. (Shields T13/A/241)

By 6am on Tuesday:

Not much sleep as Christine talked most of the night! A cold dreary dawn. Longing for my cup of tea. I have the kettle on. Wish you were here. I always feel terribly alone and lonely in the cold early mornings. (Shields T13/A/241)

There was frustration that Shields was working and travelling so much:

'Boss – look if you would prefer me not to join you at all please tell me.' (Shields T13/A/241)

The truth of a marriage may be impossible to know for anyone outside the union. Even in O'Connor's most frustrated, angry and emotional moments, she loved her husband deeply. She respected his opinion on everything from the latest film to her own career development, and she supported and encouraged his endless round of meetings and auditions in Dublin, New York and Hollywood. Shields' early notes show his growing affection for O'Connor, but later on there are hints of his practical commitment. Throughout their marriage, Shields ensured that while he was not around, others were looking out for her. Choate assisted her in New York and various members of the Shields family came to Hollywood to help with baby Christine while he was away working.

Shooting for the Renoir film *The River* took place in India in 1950. While Shields was in Calcutta, his agent Vernon Jacobson had instructions to supervise O'Connor's finances. Vernon (known as Jake) accompanied the actress to the bank and ensured she had sufficient cash before arranging his own commission, and sending money on to his client. Once, he overlooked his own debts rather than leave O'Connor short. In his letter to Calcutta he said, 'Arthur, I didn't take any of the \$2,869.33 ... I'll wait until I get the other money.' (Shields T13/A/211(7)) He reported that, 'The family are fine and Christine is really growing and seems in great form.' (Shields T13/A/211(7))

A pencilled note in Arthur's diary for a Sunday in May 1950 reads, 'Learned of Aideen's illness'. (Shields T13/A/372(10)) He had returned to Hollywood after shooting finished in late April, to learn his wife's illness was now fatal. He knew of her alcoholism, but perhaps hoped all her visitors would help moderate her drinking. Choate served as his confidante. Shields wrote to him: 'It is all hopeless, and the sooner God takes the poor thing, the easier it will be for her'. (Shields T13/A/156)

On the other side of the Atlantic, Vincent Paul O'Connor and his daughters were also dealing with this shocking news. As late as June 1949, their neighbour, Maire Judge, only daughter of Crowe and McCormick, had been exchanging letters with the actress. Judge sent gossip from the Gate Theatre (where she worked) and family news; O'Connor sent *Hollywood Reporter* magazine and shared tit-bits of her 'glamorous' life in Los Angeles. (Shields T13/A/450) Her sisters missed (or ignored) any clues that O'Connor was an alcoholic. Until the very end, she presented to certain people as a vivacious woman living an idyllic life in the city of dreams.

O'Connor had spent much time in the 'green room' at Sierra Bonita and now her bed was set up there. Christine has an early memory of being brought into the dark room, crying with fear and an instinct that something was deeply wrong. Her mother was admitted to hospital shortly after that painful moment. (Christine Shields) There was no possibility of O'Connor seeing her father or sisters again. For years, the actress had abhorred the fuss of American holidays. In 1950, as Independence Day dawned on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, she slipped away. She was thirty-six years old and on her death certificate, she was deemed a 'housewife'. (Shields T13/A/472)

There was 'general sorrow' in the Abbey Theatre when news of her passing reached Dublin. (Shields T13/A/252(1)) Eileen Crowe was asked to speak to the press, and mass was offered at the Pro-Cathedral. In their home at Sierra Bonita Avenue, Shields was bereft. His sister Bid wrote of her sadness and advised he 'must just battle it out and think of Christine'. (Shields T13/A/252(1))

In September 2011, Christine Shields and I together paced the hills of Holy Cross Cemetery in Culver City in the noonday sun to find her mother's grave. The two hundred acres of parched grass are dotted here and there by low, gnarly trees and criss-crossed by lines of small, neat plaques. Christine Shields didn't visit much growing up and the O'Connor family never saw Aideen's grave. Arthur Shields chose to be buried with his brother in Deans Grange Cemetery in Dublin; Aideen O'Connor rests in Culver City alone. When we found it, we used tissue and water to scrub



from the surface moss that blurred the stencilled letters. The standard plaque barely fits a name and date, but here there are two names. She is buried as 'Una Mary Shields (1913 – 1950)' and then, in brackets, is the name 'Aideen O'Connor'. The two names symbolise the facets of her life she never managed to merge successfully: the desire to perform professionally as Aideen and to find personal fulfilment as Una.

### **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that O'Connor's life story comes with a tragic ending; it is a story of loss. And yet, this chapter serves as an example of how fragmentary archives can be re-constituted, to allow a narrative to be drawn or created. The question becomes: does this re-constituted archive achieve something? As previously referenced, Kathleen Gough sets out the challenge of reading the objective reality of Irish women separately from their allegorical images and metaphoric constructions. (7) It may be impossible to locate a real body in an archive, but it is possible to expose the process of construction and to put the reality of women's lives in direct confrontation with the metaphoric constructions of the dramatic characters they played, as I've attempted here. This allows biography to be a particular form of historiography.

I argue that the process of constructing a narrative such as this allows for a celebration of O'Connor's human features: her determination, focus and devotion to her craft. In tandem with similar studies of the lives of the other women in the company, it also allows for the exposure of fundamental truths about Irish theatre, society and attitudes to women in the 1930s. O'Connor was repeatedly punished for behaviour deemed outside of standards at the National Theatre. She was a real woman: complex and flawed, challenged and challenging. This is not a hagiography, but the presentation of a vital Irish woman and actress in all her facets and of how the parts she played impacted her off-stage reality.

As quoted in Chapter 1, Yeats feared it was 'almost impossible for us to find a passionate woman actress in Catholic Ireland.' (Frazier *Behind* 188) Other women, Yeats insisted,

have far more sensitive instruments are far more teachable in all that belongs to expression but they lack simplicity of feeling, their minds are too full of trivial ideas, and they seldom seem capable of really noble feelings. (Frazier *Behind* 188)

O'Connor was a Catholic who repeatedly displayed her passionate nature. Throughout her working life, she engaged with scripts, writers and directors in a way that proved her intelligence and her capacity to absorb and debate ideas. In her training at the Abbey School, and later in her work on the UK and American stage, her physicality developed and she mastered the use of her sexuality to expand her acting range. Yet, it was this passion and her exposure of a more liberated sexuality that led to her exclusion from the Abbey Company and to her emigration. She was punished in her career, her ambitions thwarted, for her behaviour off the stage. For all of Yeats' despair, his theatre could not escape the repressive atmosphere in Irish society. By the middle of the 1930s, it refused to countenance such expressions of femininity and promptly ostracized such women or made it clear there was no future for them in Ireland.

O'Connor could not, and would not, countenance a career or a life for herself that did not include performing in the theatre. She was part of the first wave of Irish women to risk a professional career as a performer by demanding her personal life be kept separate from her work. She sought to be accepted in America as an actress, not just an 'Abbey player' with a familiar repertoire of national stereotypes. She set a path that has often been travelled since by Irish actresses seeking success and fame in Hollywood. In this light, that Aideen O'Connor ultimately failed to have a long-lasting or what is conceived as a 'successful' performance career becomes less important than the fact she resolved and followed through on her decision to 'stick to the stage for good or evil now.' (Shields T13/A/437)

**Chapter 4: Frolic Mulhern (1907 – 1939)****Introduction**

As set out in my introduction, this dissertation seeks to explore various female lives in the Abbey Theatre Company of the 1930s. Frolic Mulhern was a girl from an upper-class family with a gift for comedy and mimicry that brought her huge popularity in Ireland and America. Her close friendship with Aideen O’Connor has been detailed in Chapter 3, but this chapter focuses on Mulhern. Their training, performing and personal lives consistently intertwined and overlapped, but Mulhern’s life story, while brief, warrants inclusion as a separate section. The brevity of this section in relation to the other chapters reflects that Mulhern’s life and career were short; but her contribution to the history of Irish theatre is nonetheless rich and vital to considering a spectrum of female theatrical lives.

Many of the Abbey Theatre actresses of the 1930s kept scrapbooks as they toured, piecing together newspaper cuttings, gluing photos and programmes into place.<sup>10</sup> They worked on their scrapbooks in hotel bedrooms between shows or clenching them on their knees in rocking train carriages. Coming home, they brought heaps of paper folded into the back of the books to be sorted and smoothed. It was a task as well as a memento, a shaping as well as a sharing of their memories and stories. The books served, professionally and personally, as evidential proof of their hard work and success. On the inside cover of one such scrapbook now in the National Library of Ireland, the name ‘Frolic Rutledge-Mulhern’ is inscribed in a loping, youthful hand. Mulhern’s curation of her scrapbook is intrinsic to understanding the archive it holds.

The first page of that scrapbook contains a black and white headshot. (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,511 – 23) The newspaper photo captures the star of this scrapbook: a dark-haired, sallow woman with a

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<sup>10</sup> May Craig’s scrapbook is in the UCD Archives with her papers; O’Connor’s is in the Shields Family Papers at NUI, Galway. It is my understanding that Mulhern’s

round face and molten brown eyes that revealed much even when she was silent. (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,511 – 23) She’s in her twenties, but there’s an innocence and openness in her expression, as if the photographer’s attention has startled her. On the next page is a newspaper photo of Captain Frederick Aherne, a Free State Officer in uniform. Aherne is sitting astride his horse and grinning, celebrating his win at an international military jumping competition on the second day of the RDS Horse Show in Ballsbridge, Dublin. That photograph helps date the scrapbook to the autumn of 1934. A strange insertion in this miscellany of theatre news, it nonetheless assists in filling out Mulhern’s background and understanding her personality.

### **Family and Background**

Frances Mulhern was born in Enniskillen, County Monaghan in 1907. (*Census 1911*) The baby of the Mulhern family quickly became known as Frolic to her five older sisters and one older brother; the name stuck. She began her scrapbook when the Abbey Company took her on tour to the US for the first time in 1934. Mulhern and Aideen O’Connor were dubbed the ‘babies of the company.’ (Shields T13/A/437) O’Connor was twenty-one; Mulhern twenty-seven years old. There was a naivety to both women, who still lived at home. Both had only one surviving parent in Dublin.

Although close to thirty years of age, Mulhern had never lived away from home. Leaving on tour, she packed her bags in ‘Belvedere’, a luxurious home on the upmarket Ailesbury Road, under the watchful eye of her mother, Bridget. Bridget Mulhern had been widowed before her youngest daughter turned four. (*Census 1911*) She buried her husband James in Enniskillen, and transplanted to Dublin to manage his business affairs and ensure a proper education for her seven children. A formidable

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family donated her scrapbook to the Abbey Theatre after her death and it subsequently transferred to the National Library of Ireland.

businesswoman as well as a strong maternal presence, she carried on the management of her husband's substantial bottling company.

Mulhern's elder sisters went to boarding school, but Frolic—the youngest and weakest—was kept close to home. She was educated at a Sacred Heart convent, near to the city centre, but came home in the evenings to share her funny stories and try out her mimicry. Mulhern didn't need to earn a living, but it was expected that she learn to be a respectable Catholic lady, to mix in the right social circles, and to marry well. While many of her sisters went on to university, she joined the Abbey School of Acting in 1929. If she were to devote her life to acting, her mother ensured it would be in a respectable cultural institution.

It didn't take Mulhern long to graduate from William Fay's evening lessons in the Abbey School to a full-time position in the Company. In April 1930, she appeared in the premiere of George Shiels' comedy *The New Gossoon*. Directed by Arthur Shields, she played Mag Kehoe. In Shiels' script of *The New Gossoon*, this servant girl is described as 'A coarse girl, with dirty bobbed hair, about thirty-five years old.' (133) The comedy opens with Mag entering the stage and 'flinging aside her old sun-bonnet'. (Shiels 133) She says:

Curses on them and their hay! I wish there wasn't a hay-field in broad Ireland. (*She wipes her face and neck with a cloth.*) I'll be as red as a crab, and peeled like an onion...  
(Shiels 133)

She goes on, complaining about her lot:

They've kept me working in the hayfield to within an ace of six o'clock, and now I've a days work to do before bedtime. Cows to milk and calves to feed and pigs to feed, and potatoes to wash and boil for to-morrow morning. The man that freed the blacks in America should be President of Ireland...  
(Shiels 133)

*The New Gossoon* was a huge hit for the Abbey Company, accumulating one hundred and eighty-eight performances between 1930 and 1951 as well as being a staple part of the repertoire on American tours.

Throughout her career, Mulhern would continue to play the customary servant girl, or 'homely colleen' role. A review of *Nineteen Twenty* by F X O'Leary in 1933 declared that, 'the honours must to Frolic Mulhern for a very amusing rendering of Liz Ann, the servant girl'. (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,511-23) She also played Baby in Lennox Robinson's play *The White-Headed Boy*, the character being described as 'a great lump of a girl' in the script. (69)

Mulhern did not only play wholesome servants; she did handle more tendentious matter. The role of prostitute Rosie Redmond in *The Plough and the Stars*, described by the playwright as 'a sturdy, well-shaped girl of twenty; pretty and pert in manner,' (O'Casey 161) still came with an air of controversy when she took it on in 1934. It had lost the aura of licentious danger Ria Mooney confronted in the 1920s, but Mulhern's religious family knew the history of the character and the play. It was a significant development in her career when she was cast in the role.

To return to my study of Mulhern's scrapbook and its photographs: There is no evidence that Captain Frederick Aherne, the Free State Officer with pride of place in her scrapbook, was a relative of the Mulherns, or that his military career connected him in any way to the actress. This supposition was confirmed by Mary McCullough, niece of Mulhern. Horse Show Week was an important event in the Dublin social calendar, with the Abbey staging a carefully-selected repertoire in the evenings and arranging social outings to the show for the company during the week. The military equitation team were the social celebrities of the moment. On top of their athletic prowess, the team boasted military discipline. As representatives of the new Irish Free State, they were the protectors of the Irish republic. These were men looking to the future, while maintaining their social status and respectable family backgrounds. At the annual outing, Abbey actresses had seats in the best stands, the perfect view to admire the horses and their riders.

**The American Tour of 1934/1935**

As detailed in Chapter 3, the Abbey Tour of America that began in the autumn of 1934 was to be 'one of the largest theatrical tours on record'. (Shields T13/A/108(1)) O'Connor had negotiated a salary of £3 10 shillings a week with Abbey management but Mulhern remained on the sum of £2 a week. She may have relied on her family for assistance when she needed funds. After Boston, the company spent a month in Canadian and eastern cities including Montreal, Toronto, Ohio and Detroit before appearing on Broadway. It was here that the paths of Frederick Aherne and Mulhern would cross again. When the Abbey Company arrived in New York, the Irish Military Team were also in the city, representing the Irish Free State in an equestrian competition.

Max Stein of the *Cincinnati Post* declared the Abbey productions of 1934 to be 'Romantic, Weird', but the performances were a resounding success. (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,511 – 23) Cocktail parties and dinners were held in honour of the Irish players and O'Connor and Mulhern were regularly in social columns. (Shields T13/A/437) It may have been that the New York cocktail parties celebrated the Irish sporting and dramatic prowess together, or that the Irish came together when they had a reprieve from performing to socialise and compare home with the buzz of New York City. If, as I propose, there was a romantic entanglement between Mulhern and Frederick Aherne, the couple didn't have long together in the same city before the Abbey Company moved on.

When the *Chicago Herald* announced a supper dance would be held after a performance at the Harris Theatre with 'Aideen O'Connor to be toast of the evening', Mulhern might have been irritated by the attention heaped on O'Connor, as the blonde ingénue. (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,511 – 23) Given her spirited personality and sense of humour, it's likely she was amused. The girls shared a bedroom on that tour. As spring arrived, the actresses were in San Francisco and O'Connor wrote to her sisters:

I am typing this at an open window of my bedroom, Frolic has just left the room like a young hurricane to have her hair done, and

when she comes back we are going to do a bit of shopping, a movie and dinner somewhere before the show.  
(Shields T13/A/437)

The hurricane-like Mulhern was easily roused by the stubborn O’Connor, but the arguments blew over as quickly as they ignited. They had a close but tempestuous relationship, sharing confidences and covering one another’s parts when illness struck, joking and giggling, rowing and making up again. During their stay in Los Angeles, the two women went shopping with film star Maureen O’Sullivan, ‘in Bullocks Wiltshire, the rendezvous of all the stars.’ (Shields T13/A/437) Despite O’Sullivan’s shyness, they all ‘became great friends.’ (Shields T13/A/437) Photographs often show Mulhern with a cigarette in one hand and a drink in the other. She enjoyed socialising as much as performing.

The *Chicago Herald* deemed Mulhern and O’Connor ‘pert and capable’. (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,511-23) They vied for press attention, yet given their physical attributes and acting styles they did not compete for character roles. In a strange twist, their usual roles were subverted in 1934, when O’Connor was cast as the servant girl Helena in *Drama at Inish* by Lennox Robinson. The play, which was re-titled *Is Life Worth Living?* for American audiences, pokes fun at provincial towns ‘blue-mouldy for a bit of innocent scandal’, at theatre companies and at acting itself. (Robinson 211) Mulhern played Christine Lambert, ‘a capable-looking, handsome’ accountant, who is spurning the advances of a young man to concentrate on the books of a local factory. (Robinson 203) The plot teaches Christine that there is more to life than work. As the curtain fell, she was in a joyful dance with her new husband. Such a happy ending would be denied Mulhern in her other roles and in her personal life.

#### **The American Tour of 1937/38**

O’Connor, Mooney and Mulhern are walking the decks like Russian peasants with kerchiefs over their heads.  
(Higgins NLI Mss 27,883(7))



Mulhern and O’Connor attended the luncheon to launch the new US tour in the Hibernian Hotel on Dawson Street in the autumn of 1937, as seasoned travellers and performers. (Shields T13/A/561(17)) Hugh Hunt presented each of the ladies with a bunch of flowers at Westland Row train station, where they departed on the train for Belfast. (Saddlemeyer 491-492) Travelling on the Samaria, Higgins was irritated by the snobbery of much of the company, but Mulhern was one of the four actors he chose as allies. (Higgins NLI Mss 27,883(7)) She had a sense of humour but in Higgins’ eyes she also had proper breeding and substantial family wealth. The other actors he respected were Paddy Carolan, Dossie (Udolphus) Wright and Maureen Delany.

Maureen Delany was a large-framed comedienne originally from Kilkenny; in size alone her presence on the stage was immense.<sup>11</sup> Dorothy Dayton described her in the *New York Sun* in December 1934 as a ‘witty and altogether delightful spinster’, who, off stage, lived alone and had a deeply superstitious streak. (‘Maureen’) Higgins wasn’t the only one to pair her with the young Mulhern. On tour in the US, newspapers speculated that should Delany stay in Hollywood to pursue a movie career, Mulhern would move into her substantial roles. (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,511-23) The women shared a talent for comedy, but, if others expected it, there’s no evidence Mulhern wanted a future similar to that proffered by Delany.

Mulhern and O’Connor were delighted to be on tour again. There had been increasing conflict backstage at the Abbey by the Christmas of 1936, but while O’Connor couldn’t seem to avoid getting involved, Mulhern was tactful, diplomatic and used her humour to dispel tensions. Mulhern doesn’t appear on the cast list for the premiere of *Shadow and Substance* written by Paul Vincent Carroll in March 1937, but the star of that play Phyllis Ryan remembered Mulhern as a ‘quirky young comedienne’ who whispered and conspired with O’Connor in the dressing room. (Ryan 74)

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<sup>11</sup> Her physical attributes are in evidence in photographs of Delany in the Abbey Theatre Digital Archive and Shields Papers, both at Hardiman Library, NUI Galway.

Despite their new maturity, O’Connor and Mulhern still found a huge amount of excitement and delight in their travels. O’Connor told her sister, ‘Frolic and I are still getting along together,’ but added, ‘We have a few rows now and again but we always make it up in no time’. (Shields T13/A/441) When they reprised their roles in Robinson’s *The Far-Off Hills*, one reviewer commented that Mulhern was ‘not quite so little now’, and was displaying ‘her indisputable development as a comic actress’. Her figure had expanded with new curves; she wore slacks and sunglasses off stage and was becoming known for her comic lampooning of famous figures. O’Connor was noted to be ‘still little’ and a ‘juvenile joy’. (*Scrapbooks NLI Mss 25,511-23*)

Robinson’s domestic comedy *The Far-Off Hills* had been in the repertoire of the Abbey Company since it premiered in October 1928, with Shelah Richards and Kitty Curling playing the sisters. Mulhern, cast by Robinson while she was still studying at the Abbey School, took on Richards’ role of Pet later that year. Mulhern initially appeared with the actress Susan Hunt, who left the Company after two years. Aideen O’Connor took over the role of Ducky in 1934 and it remained one of her favourite plays for the next five years. The success of their on-stage partnership in *The Far-Off Hills* owed something to the close, if tempestuous, friendship of Mulhern and O’Connor. Many of the newspapers commented on their talents, with C. J. Bulliett declaring a lengthy scene between them in *The Far-Off Hills* to be ‘one of the major delights of the whole repertory’. (*Scrapbooks NLI Mss 25,511-23*)

The scene, in the second act of *The Far-Off Hills*, that takes place in the girls’ bedroom, ‘a simple pretty room’, where the two beds are side by side with ‘their ends towards the audience’ has been discussed in full in Chapter 3. (Robinson 33) Ducky, played by Aideen, was the seventeen-year-old elder sister who is reading in bed while sixteen-year-old Pet (Frolic) brushes her hair by candlelight. When they performed the comedy in Toronto a journalist reported:

The fun-loving younger sisters, Pet and Ducky, played by Frolic Mulhern and Aideen O’Connor respectively, were both bewitching and perfect foils for one another.

(*Scrapbooks NLI Mss 25,511-23*)

If Mulhern was feeling frustration at playing a girl almost half her age, there was no sign of it on stage. The same high-spirits and youthful exuberance that they share in their real hotel rooms enchanted audiences.

Frederick Aherne, respectable military man, disappeared into the wings after the first tour to be replaced by a suitor far less ‘suitable’ to her family. Elbert Wickes, the American producer for the second tour, is a regular character in O’Connor’s letters, having an early breakfast on the train or huddling with stagehands. In a photo of the girls on the railway platform, a smart gentleman sits between Mulhern and O’Connor; his face is hidden. (Shields T13/B/327) Another photo, taken from the ‘sidewalk’, shows a smiling Mulhern, in a short-sleeved dress, hanging out the window of a hotel room, possibly the Hotel Clark in Los Angeles. To her right, further back, is Wickes himself. (Wickes Box 4) Such hints could be meaningless, but in 1939 O’Connor revealed to producer Eddie Choate that Mulhern and Wickes were ‘very much in love’. (Shields T13/A/150(41))

Wickes managed all of the Abbey tours. He was a well-known theatrical impresario by 1937, and he remained a manager of lecture tours for world-class celebrities up until 1949. But while Mulhern and Wickes shared much in terms of theatre, their backgrounds could not have been more different. Mulhern’s traditional Catholic upbringing was worlds away from Wickes – a Mormon who already had a wife and two children. There’s no evidence to suggest Wickes took his Mormonism seriously, but to Mulhern’s family it was an exotic religion with rumours of many wives.

In San Francisco in the spring of 1938, Mulhern accompanied Ria Mooney to a Chinese Temple. When they arrived, led by a sweet Chinese girl called Rose, and saw the High Priest with his ‘shabby coat and shabbier cap’, they realised this was a performance of its own kind, but handed over their dollars anyway. (Mooney *Part 1* 116) Joss sticks were lit before

strange images and gods invoked in a strange tongue while the women kept their heads down, resisting the urge to laugh or cough in the air thick with incense. The High Priest rose from kneeling and opened scrolls, at random, to read passages aloud. He exchanged words in a grave tone with Rose before the ritual concluded. (Mooney *Part 1* 116)

Outside, Mooney pressed Rose for an explanation of the message. In curiously-accented English, the girl reluctantly revealed that the High Priest had foretold of Mooney’s death within a year. The girl was sad; she held out her hand. Mooney laughed; Mulhern joined in. Both believed the High Priest was nothing but a ‘money-making racket’. (Mooney *Part 1* 116)

#### **After the Abbey Tour of 1937/8**

Despite the fact she had left Wickes behind, Mulhern appears to have settled back into the Abbey Theatre when the tour ended more easily than her best friend. On O’Connor’s return, her dispute with her father continued to rage and she had to seek somewhere else to live. Mulhern was welcomed back to Ailesbury Road, where (according to her niece Mary McCullough), teasing comments were made about her slacks and she unpacked presents of candies and toys for her brood of nieces and nephews. She also visited family in Enniskillen, stayed there for some time ‘renewing old friendships and adding, if that were possible, to her widespread popularity.’ (‘Popular Abbey Actress’)

In Dublin, Mulhern again played Rosie Redmond in *The Plough and the Stars* in its revival at the Abbey in October 1938. She continued to get comic roles in new productions. O’Connor told Choate of seeing Mulhern appear in a new play by J. K. Montgomery called *Heritage*, declaring her friend’s portrayal as a movie-struck servant to be ‘grand’. (Shields T13/A/150(41)) Mulhern continued to smoke, drink and entertain endlessly with her uncanny impressions, but others in the company had come to know that she was weak and attending a doctor. (Shields T13/A/150(30))

In early October 1938, Mulhern was cast in *Pilgrims*, a play by the first-time playwright Mary Rynne. Educated in London but now living in

Clare, Rynne was a prolific fiction writer. Mulhern played Kitty Brady, who enters in the first act of *Pilgrims* 'amidst applause from outside. She is a pretty, giggling small-town Miss; even in her uniform she looks "dressy".' (Rynne Mss Act 1) Kitty is a society girl, who joins a pilgrimage to Italy hoping for a miracle: to pass the matriculation exam she has failed three times and so be able to enter university. Her petition is not granted; they learn that only the first visitor will be successful and they allow this to be the young Nano. Brady doesn't gain exam success, but is pleased by the male attention she receives during her travels. In the final scene of *Pilgrims*, Kitty and the Captain that led the pilgrimage have an exchange:

KITTY. I do very well on my own.  
CAPTAIN. You don't. You couldn't. You need protection,  
assistance, gentle correction –  
(Rynne Mss Act 3)

Kitty is married off to the fifty-something Captain.

Mulhern was more used to comedic roles, but here there was a definite suggestion that she would not, as others suggested, follow in Maureen Delany's footsteps. Instead, she was showing an ability to play the romantic heroine or give a fresh interpretation to the depiction of young Irish women. Her range was broadening and technique developing. The *Irish Independent* critic singled her out saying, 'I have never enjoyed Frolic Mulhern more than I did in her study of Kitty.' ('Ennis Woman's Play')

O'Connor was not in *Pilgrims* and the same month, Hunt recast *The Far-Off Hills*, replacing O'Connor with the newcomer Phyllis Ryan. Mulhern retained her role. At eighteen, Phyllis Ryan was more suitable for the part than either of the other two women, yet it was a slight to O'Connor to be pushed out. Mulhern was in an awkward situation, but her career was too important to her to refuse the part. She giggled and conspired with Ryan by candlelight in the bedroom setting.

The following spring, Mulhern was approached by Arthur Shields about taking a role in a New York production of Paul Vincent Carroll's play *Kindred*. He noted: 'She is very keen to work in the States again.' He was certain that if Mulhern got a firm offer of work that she would go back.

(Shields T13/A/150(27)) Yet, as time passed, he worried about her strength and noted her family were intent on keeping her at home.

One newspaper cutting in her scrapbook gives a unique glimpse of Mulhern as an, 'accomplished diseuse,' in her family hometown of Enniskillen in August 1939. (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,511-23 37) There, she performed in an evening of vaudeville entertainment, of 'mystery, music and mirth' where her dramatic talents 'charmed and pleased' the local audience. (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,511-23 37) At the packed event, in aid of the parochial bazaar, Mulhern was obliged to recite 'no fewer than six pieces,' with her 'imitation of the dialect and mannerisms of the people of home and foreign countries being exceptionally clever.' (*Scrapbooks* NLI Mss 25,511-23) Her touring of the US left a lasting impression; in her own way, she introduced Wickes and her other American friends to her family.

Close to Christmas in 1939, O'Connor was in New York when she received news from Dublin. Frolic Mulhern had died on 17 November, at her home on Ailesbury Road. The news was delayed reaching across the Atlantic: World War I had broken out in September of that year. According to Christine Shields, an entry in O'Connor's diary shows that she was devastated to have lost such a close friend, and to have missed the opportunity to pay her respects at the funeral. (Christine Shields Email)

Mulhern's niece Mary McCullough said in an interview that family stories report that Frolic died suddenly and quietly on a Friday evening, her heart giving out as she sat at the fire with her mother. However, others suggest that there were underlying health problems, most probably TB. In the death notice published the next day, there was a long list of mourners. The large collection of clerics in the grieving extended family confirms Aideen's comments about the Mulherns' religious background. ('Late Miss Mulhern') She was buried with her father in Enniskillen. In the obituary, *The Irish Independent* said of her career:

Her high ideals, courage and good humour adorned all she undertook, and the Company will be the poorer for her death.  
(*'Death of Abbey Actress'*)

The *Fermanagh Herald* chose to emphasise her religious faith:

She was a splendid type of sterling Catholic young lady, exemplifying in high degree the highest qualities of a member of the Catholic Church. (‘Popular Abbey Actress’)

For this newspaper, her embodiment of a religious lady, adhering to the teachings of the Catholic Church, was more important than her career.

Mulhern and O’Connor parted when O’Connor took the train to Cobh in the summer of 1939. Mulhern was then considering joining her friend in New York. She may have held onto dreams of reuniting with Wickes, and appearing on Broadway again. News of war in Europe was imminent; America was notionally a safer place to be than Dublin. Yet Mulhern’s health was fragile. She needed the care and attention of a doctor and her protective family were against her departure.

Hunt’s official history of the theatre, *The Abbey: Ireland’s National Theatre 1904 – 78*, omits any reference to Mulhern’s death, or indeed to her acting. Holloway remarked on her passing in his diary—three days after her death. He described her as: ‘full of the joy of life and she carried that joy into her parts on stage’ and said, ‘Both the company and the audience loved her.’ (Hogan and O’Neill *Volume 3* 38) Holloway’s assessment of Mulhern after her death included the following comment:

I liked both herself and her playing very much indeed and often thought on her fame in the days to come, for she had it in her to excel as an actress of rare gifts. (Hogan and O’Neill *Volume 3* 38)

There is faint damnation in Holloway’s assessment that she ‘had it in her’ to prove a gifted actress. For others, she was *already* a gifted actress. But it is true that since her return from the Abbey Company’s American tour in 1938, Mulhern was growing in stature and range. She was poised on the edge of a very successful career, rich with possibilities. Whether she could have confronted her family’s conservatism and embraced her professional status is open to debate. Her loss would be felt by O’Connor and other close friends, but the impact she might have made was a loss to Irish theatre audiences that cannot be measured.

**Chapter 5: Ria Mooney (1903 – 1973)****Introduction**

The members of the Abbey Company returning to the theatre from the summer break in 1937 were waiting for details of the upcoming tour to America, when they received unexpected news. W. B. Yeats, musing upon casting in his office over the theatre, decided to make changes in the repertoire and casting. After consultation with Higgins and Robinson, Yeats put thirty-four-year-old actress Ria Mooney into the leading role of Pegeen Mike in J. M. Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*. It was a delightful surprise for Mooney and a shock to others.

The casting as Pegeen brought much careful deliberation for Mooney. With characteristic diligence, she prepared for the role outside of rehearsals at the theatre, reflecting on it at home and over the weekends she spent in Glencree, Wicklow with her lover, Higgins. The original Pegeen (Margaret Flaherty) had been the actress Maire O’Neill, and O’Neill had played the sheebreen owner with a glamour and sophistication that Mooney didn’t find fitting. ‘I knew I was no glamour girl,’ Mooney admits in her memoirs, but she didn’t believe this to be a deterrent. (*Part 2 66*)

Eileen Crowe had brought to the part a sentimental quality, negating any ferocity in the character. Rather than ape the performances of her predecessors, Mooney decided to make the character her own. She found in her reading of Synge’s work ‘a hard and aggressive Pegeen’ and she based her interpretation on this. (Mooney *Part 2 66*) Drawing on women she’d met on the Aran Islands as inspiration, she devoted herself to presenting a tough peasant woman. The director, Arthur Shields, was also playing her leading man, Christopher Mahon. His tall thin frame and pale face contrasted strongly with Mooney’s dark fury when the play opened on Monday 16th August, running for six nights. At the same time, the harsh vigour of her language contrasted with the fluid, balletic rhythm she maintained with her feet under her long skirt. (Mooney *Part 2 66*)



The second volume of Mooney’s autobiography *Players and the Painted Stage* opens with the admission, without a note of self-pity, that ‘No one, however, liked my performance in the Synge play except Yeats – and Sinclair Lewis.’ (65) Yeats called for her after a performance at the Abbey Theatre early in that August run. She had withstood the comparisons to Maire O’Neill from Irish critics and the public, while the rest of the cast were either bemused or curious about her interpretation. (Mooney *Part 2* 65) It was the summons from Yeats that left her shaking with anxiety in the dressing room. She made her way towards the office, only to find him sitting on the steps leading upstairs with a blanket over his knees. His daughter Anne stood over him as she approached. While Mooney held her breath and feared the worst, he wanted only to praise her. (Mooney *Part 2* 65) The disapproval of the public meant considerably less when those she respected recognised and appreciated her work. With Yeats’ approval, Mooney held fast to the interpretation of Pegeen she had developed through her own well-honed technique.

Mooney had bravery, a strength of mind that some would call stubbornness or, later on, view as eccentricity. This courage stemmed from a devotion to the plays, to the characters as written, and to the playwrights that engendered them. It grew through dedication to her acting technique and it led her to make artistic and personal choices and decisions that other Abbey actresses of that time would not or did not consider. The sections that follow are not strictly chronological, although they trace the growth and expansion of Mooney’s craft and work. They work to show the patterns and motifs in Mooney’s life, and examine the unanticipated lurches back and forward in her career. Like many life stories, there is rarely an uncomplicated sequence of cause-and-effect; yet there is a beautiful and brilliant unity of artistic philosophy in Mooney’s work that has not been explored by Irish theatre scholars to date.

**Players and the Painted Stage: Autobiography**

Ria Mooney is the only actress in this study to have compiled and

written her own memoirs. She worked with editor and writer Val Mulhern in the late 1960s to produce *Players and the Painted Stage*. This was eventually published in journal format in two volumes of *George Spelvin's Theatre Books* in 1978, five years after Mooney's death. Such evidence provides a valuable source of biographical information but a strategy for reading and interpreting this evidence must be carefully considered. Such evidence must be tempered by the reading of other sources and by an understanding of her personality and art, as well as the context in which the memoir was prepared.

As theatre historian Viv Gardner has explored in her essay 'By Herself: the actress and autobiography, 1755 – 1939', by the twentieth century autobiographies of actresses were no longer scandalous memoirs full of gossip, but often were 'a narrative assertion of a professional self which mirrored the increased confidence, social and theatrical acceptability and education of the writers.' (178) The failure to find a publisher for her memoirs when Mooney completed the work in the late 1960s was a blow to her self-belief. Her autobiography, however, shows a reticence to proclaim her own accomplishments and to assert the importance and ingenuity of much of her work.

Scholars, including Gail Marshall, have written of how autobiographical writing by actresses allows 'new possibilities of self-constitution' and permits these women to 'reconstitute the body as a literary artifact'. (178) For Gardner, 'Autobiography has often offered the actress an opportunity to articulate and negotiate problems of identity and identification.' ('By Herself' 175) In *Players and the Painted Stage*, Mooney's writing suggests a reversion to the self-effacing Irish woman idealized by the Free State. The title is both a tribute to W.B. Yeats and a signal of her understanding that she was a minor part of a greater Irish literary tradition. The voice and tone represents a naïve and even superstitious girl. Early on Mooney says, 'This vocation seemed to be thrust on me.' (*Part 1* 29) While she lays claim to being gifted with 'second sight', her own agency in life decisions is elided. (Mooney *Part 1* 57) Later,

Mooney suggests, ‘Perhaps it was the strength of my desire for change that brought it to me.’ (*Part 1* 104) Repeatedly, the gentle, sweet tone belies her life experience, her struggles, patience and hard work. It also conceals the exposure to life in New York, and to political machinations in theatres in Dublin and elsewhere, which made Mooney an astute, worldly woman.

Tracy Davis has noted the highly problematic nature of autobiographies ‘in part due to women’s reluctance to discuss the machinations of invisible professional forces ... and to mention delicate personal matters relating to romantic liaisons and the female life cycle.’ (*‘Feminist Methodology’* 64) The entry into self-writing ‘activates the actress’s public image,’ and in Mooney’s case, this meant the image of a girl sheltered from evils such as prostitution and suicide. (Corbett 15) By using her birth date, the 30<sup>th</sup> April, Mooney adopts the persona of ‘changeling’. It was only on reaching her thirties that Mooney learnt of the May Eve changelings: changelings swapped by the fairy folk for children born on the last day of April. It was a tale that she adopted, a familiar narrative to explain how she looked so much like her siblings but would lead a life entirely different from theirs. A ‘changeling’ suggests a mythical creature that touches on the ‘strangeness’ of her mentor Eva Le Gallienne, without being as subversive.

Theatre scholar Robert Schanke has written a biography of Le Gallienne, and said the following of her two autobiographies:

Certainly they were well-intentioned, but both are literary shrines to a woman that Eva always wanted to be, not to the woman she was. [...] She did an admirable job of camouflaging herself behind portraits that rob her achievements of their sinew and texture. (Schanke xvi)

The same comments could be made of Mooney’s autobiography. This thesis, however, aims to exercise such sinews and demonstrate the texture of her achievements.

Mooney’s depictions of events are fascinating in how the details work to obscure the people and material reality of events. Instead, she draws heavily on colour and light, creating painterly impressions of scenes.

Mooney swallowed any fury she may have felt at powerful figures and always remains discreet and dignified in her account of the history of the Irish National Theatre. Often, the structure of the slim volume works synchronically, focusing in on apparently inconsequential minutiae and moments of her life until they expand to reveal their impact on the overall narrative. Such intimate descriptions frequently allow her to conceal or evade other critical contexts, including her own emotions at major points.

The biography by James P. McGlone, *Ria Mooney: The Life and Times of the Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre 1948 – 63*, drew extensively on Mooney’s account of events, supplementing it with newspaper reviews and limited other third party sources. Its aim was to reassert the importance of Mooney’s contribution to Irish theatre, but in doing so it ascribed her a title that she never officially held: Artistic Director. Here, I refer to Mooney’s own account of events in her life in each section, but also work to read between the lines of her ‘literary performance’ for a deeper understanding of the turning points in her life and the factors that drove and energized her.

Writing on actresses and autobiography, Mary Jean Corbett asserted: ‘Whatever sorts of roles it may recount, an autobiography or memoir is less an ordinary act of self-expression than another formally constrained or determined mode of performance.’ (15) *Players and the Painted Stage* does not so much reveal Mooney, as expose that she performed in every way to the end of her life.

### **Member of the Abbey Theatre Company**

O’Connor, Mooney and Mulhern are walking the decks like Russian peasants with kerchiefs over their heads. Delaney is sitting reading with sunglasses. Craig and Crowe are in their cabins, not too well. (Higgins NLI Mss 27,883 (7))

Pacing the deck of the boat in her kerchief, Mooney was small and curvy, with large eyes set deep into a moon-shaped face. In those dark eyes one could still see the raven-haired, eight-year-old girl peering out a

doorway on Baggot Street. This girl watched three gentlemen passing by her father’s teashop on Upper Baggot Street and imagined they had stepped out of a fairy tale book. Her father, at work inside, laughed at her question: the men were from the Abbey Theatre. (Mooney *Part 1* 9)

Catherine Maria (Ria) Mooney was born on the last day of April in 1903. For this ‘changeling’ growing up on Baggot Street, the upheaval of the 1916 Easter Rising and the first rumblings of the Civil War were all swept up in the sudden death of her mother. Mooney was fourteen years old when her mother passed away. Rather than turn to practical matters like assisting with the family teashop business or raising her younger siblings, she chose to let herself loose upon the world. ‘From the day my mother died, I did exactly what pleased me,’ Mooney says in her memoirs. (*Part 1* 27) If there was no one to tell her when she was doing wrong, there was also no one to tell her when she was doing right. This liberation paved the way for many of future adventures.

The ‘crimson, gold and cream’ of Madam Rock’s theatre school performances entranced Mooney at an early age. (*Part 1* 12) Her mother was an amateur actress in her time, and was delighted to watch her daughter dance at the Gaiety theatre and the Theatre Royal. This sense of resplendent theatricality meant that the Abbey Theatre was something of a disappointment when Mooney made her first professional appearance there. Threadbare and dowdy, the theatre’s serious intentions did not yet extend to décor and costume. At the age of twenty-one, she appeared in a leopard-skin coat in George Shiels’ comedy *The Retrievers*. All of the actors were charged with providing their own costumes; a penurious Mooney borrowed, along with the coat, a dress and hat. She had to relinquish the training of her youth for something radically different.

Madame Rock’s dance training had taught Mooney poise and rhythm, before she had a basic introduction to acting with the amateur Rathmines & Rathgar Musical Dramatic Society. At the Abbey, she was exposed for the first time to the still, elegant quality of acting fostered by Frank and William Fay. In the early decades of the Company, the Fay

brothers trained all of the Company in 'restraint' and 'teamwork'. (Frazier *Hollywood Irish* 59) Derived from the French Conservatoire and André Antoine's company, the Théâtre Libre, this style kept the focus on the language of the text, the essence of a playwright's theatre.<sup>12</sup>

The animated business of the British melodrama was anathema to Frank Fay, while a light tempo of the voice was crucial. He believed there should be no physical action while an actor was speaking and the eyes of the entire cast rested always on the speaker, much like a spotlight moving from 'star' to 'star'. Despite her initial disappointment at the lack of colour, Mooney quickly became disciplined and devoted to achieving the elegance demanded. Her diction impressed William Fay; she herself describes her accent as 'affected', situated somewhere between her own Dublin brogue and the polite English of her elocution lessons. (Mooney *Part 1* 29)

### Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*

While Mooney was working away happily in minor productions for the Dublin Drama League and other 'Dramic' (her term for amateur drama) productions in aristocratic drawing rooms, Sean O'Casey was working on a play entitled *The Plough and the Stars*. He completed it in August 1925 and sent it to Lady Gregory who deemed it 'a fine play, terribly tragic.' (Krause 142) As was her custom, Gregory read the play aloud to the other directors. While she had no issue with the character of the prostitute Rosie Redmond, O'Casey was wincing. He wrote to Gabriel Fallon:

It was rather embarrassing to me to hear her reading the saucy song sung by Rosie and Fluther in the second act ... (Krause 142)

The reading over, he set to thinking about casting and he wondered aloud to his 'buttie' Gabriel Fallon:

[O]ught I to chance young [Shelah] Richards for the part of Nora?  
Or Ria Mooney? Which of the two would you suggest?  
(Krause 142)

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<sup>12</sup> By the early 1930s, the mode had deteriorated as more actors transferred from the populist drama at the Queen's Theatre to the Abbey. The audience knew what to expect from each performer and anticipated the 'turn' of their favourite, eager to see improvisation.

In stage time, Rosie is not a substantial role, but rehearsing and playing the first prostitute on the stage of the National Theatre would require significant strength of mind, firstly to withstand the Catholic prudery of the rest of the cast and secondly to endure the public reception of the play. Shelah Richards (from a well-off Protestant family) was already known for her outspoken nature, but O’Casey had been watching Mooney’s performances intently.

Two weeks before he finished *The Plough and the Stars*, the playwright had an altercation with M. J. Dolan. O’Casey criticized the production of Shaw’s *Man and Superman* on the Abbey’s main stage, declaring on 13th August that acting was the ‘first essential in drama’, and that the performances were ‘painfully imperfect’. (Krause 139) He went on to tell Dolan that the performers in *Man and Superman* ‘were all bad (except Ria Mooney).’ (Krause 139) When O’Casey approached her, he displayed utter conviction that she was the only actress fit to play the role. Shelah Richards was cast as Nora Clitheroe.

The building was a hum with the licentious energy of O’Casey’s play by January 1926. Upstairs in the offices, Yeats and Robinson were fielding the anxious entreaties of the directorate. Dr. George O’Brien, professor of economics at UCD, had been on the board for only two months when he was sent a copy of the play for his approval. He couched his grievances on 5 September 1925 by saying the appearance of a prostitute was ‘not in itself objectionable’ but that O’Casey’s portrayal ‘is objectionable’ because ‘The lady’s professional side is unduly emphasized in her actions and conversation’. (Krause 144) While O’Brien believed changes could be made, certain elements (in particular the song) ‘could not possibly be allowed to stand’. (Krause 144) Yeats and Robinson rushed to Rosie’s defence:

[S]he is certainly necessary to the general action and ideas ... It is no use putting her in if she does not express herself vividly and in character, if her ‘professional’ side is not emphasised.  
(Krause 146 – 147)

Dr O'Brien retained his objections and his fear that the character would incite a serious attack on the theatre proved prescient.

Downstairs in the rehearsal spaces, there was, as Adrian Frazier has described, an embattled 'stand-off between actors and author'. (*Hollywood Irish* 72) Crowe gave up her part rather than speak about children being begotten between the Ten Commandments, because of the indirect allusion to those that were not. Craig took the part after Crowe consulted her priest and voiced her decision. McCormick refused to use the term 'snotty' to his stage wife. In a sleight of hand, the director discovered that McCormick's stage wife, Richards, had no problem with it; she took the line and made it her own. (In fact, while on tour with the play in January 1928, Richards was signing off letters to her husband from 'your little red-nosed Norah' suggesting that she had her own way of softening the term if decorum required.) (Johnston TCD Mss 10066/287/2632) Yeats did insist that O'Casey remove many of the 'bitches', but allowed one in the final dramatic scene between Bessie Burgess and Nora Clitheroe to remain. O'Casey, noting that most of the banned words had appeared in other plays but not all in the same one, wrote to Robinson on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1926 to say, 'I draw the line at a Vigilance Committee of Actors.' (Krause 165)<sup>13</sup>

While Crowe consulted a priest for advice and compromises, Mooney did not have a 'Father Confessor'. (*Mooney Part 1* 43) Her mentor was O'Casey himself and he wanted her to play the part. Committed to the role, she took the potentially embarrassing step of frequenting the alley at the back of the theatre to ensure her appearance was authentic. Having studied the streetwalkers, Mooney imitated their 'clown-like make-up' of thick white powder and red circles on their cheeks. (*Part 1* 43) But while she could (and would) separate the personal from professional and take on the role, she did nothing that would, to her mind, besmirch her good name or that of her family. 'I need hardly say that it was some of the women who tried to put me off,' Mooney reveals in the autobiography. Unmoved by



either ‘their self-righteous faces or their arguments,’ she agreed to play the part. (*Part 1* 43) It is useful that she states this fact; social histories tend to focus on the patriarchal suppression of 1930s Catholic Ireland and patriarchal values are often transmitted by women. However, the collusion of women in Ireland’s ideology is rarely set out in such startling fashion.

In an interview with this author in July 2012, the editor of Mooney’s autobiography, Val Mulkerns, dispelled the famous anecdote around Mooney and Rosie Redmond’s profession. Neither Mulkerns, nor (according to Mulkerns) Gate Producer Michael MacLiammóir who introduced the volume, believed that when she was cast as the Dublin prostitute that a twenty-three-year-old Ria Mooney didn’t know how a prostitute earned her money. But it is true that Mooney always insisted that this was the case and says so in her memoirs. Setting the apparent truth (from Mulkerns) against the anecdote yields an insight: Mooney understood the nature of prostitution, but off-stage she played the role of a respectable Catholic girl who didn’t countenance such things.

Prior to the opening, O’Casey made one significant change to the part of Rosie. Moved either by his own embarrassment in the wake of Lady Gregory’s reading or O’Brien’s objections to the bawdy number about a tailor and a sailor, he wrote to Lady Gregory on 11<sup>th</sup> September to say that ‘My little song, I think, has to go’. (Krause 147) Thus, Mooney left the stage at the end of the second act without a song. In later years, when she herself came to direct the play, she restored the original tune.

Opposition to the play did not break out immediately. A few evenings into the run, actors were subjected to shouts and jeers mid-performance, with lumps of coal and coins being used as missiles during the second act. After an attempt to set the curtain on fire, a decision was made to leave the stage bare for the third act. Mooney watched from the wings as the trouble continued. A boxing match broke out and McCormick stepped out of his role as Jack Clitheroe to disassociate himself and his wife

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<sup>13</sup> In previous chapters, that ‘Vigilance Committee’ has been explored from the

(Crowe) from the play. Yeats made an appearance, declaring his fervent support for O'Casey. When the audience verbally attacked him, he admonished them while simultaneously affirming O'Casey's genius with words frequently quoted in the decades since:

You have disgraced yourselves again ... You have rocked the cradle of genius ... You have sent O'Casey's name around the world. (Mooney *Part 2* 46)

Many of the actors in the play were shocked to find that the attackers included personal friends. Denis Johnston recalls Richards' disgust at a woman in the audience that yelled at her every time she opened her mouth, and her later fury to find that the heckler was someone she had known from childhood. (Adams 80) The coalescence of personal and professional lives had become dangerous for the performers.

There were no further riots in the theatre, but off stage the opposition continued, with letters appearing in the newspapers and some feeble attempts to terrify the main actors, who were instructed not to approach or leave the theatre alone and on foot. Mooney believed they were in danger of being kidnapped, but that the would-be kidnappers did not go through with their plans. The second act was played with auditorium lights up and plain-clothes policemen on hand.

Rosie Redmond is not a crucial element of the plot of O'Casey's play. The prostitute presents an element of Dublin tenement life that others wanted to ignore and appears only in the pub scenes, disappearing after the second act. In his essay 'Staging the Body in Post-Independence Ireland' Lionel Pilkington discusses the subject of labour in relation to the first performance of O'Casey's play. He examines a photo of Mooney in costume and asserts that 'commodification is so fused to the woman's subjectivity that the spectator is encouraged to enjoy the figure of the prostitute without being ethically detained or troubled by it.' (Pilkington 'Staging the Body' 121) This is true for the spectator, yet Mooney had an

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individual perspective of other players in that cast.

empathy, an emotionally uncomplicated connection to the character which reduced her to tears when Covey reminds her of her position.

As a character, Rosie has little to offer beyond her profession or 'type'. She has no storyline, just an outburst when the Covey resents her voicing her opinions at the end of the second act. His announcement that he won't take any 'reprimandin' from a prostitute!' turns her 'wild with humiliation'. (O'Casey *The Plough* 175) She tells him:

You're no man ... I'm a woman, anyhow, an' if I'm a prostitute  
aself, I have me feelin's. (O'Casey 175)

On the stage of the National Theatre, Mooney asserted the right of all Irish women, including prostitutes, to express emotion and be treated with respect. O'Casey's intention may have been primarily a socialist one, but there's also a clear feminist intent in the line.

In taking on that role and sustaining her performance during the moral storm that accompanied *The Plough and the Stars*, the actress set her career on a new plane. Mooney herself said:

It was not until that night that I ceased to be an amateur and  
became a professional actress in the truest sense of the word.  
(*Part 1* 45)

The transformation happened before she hid in the wings, watching the riots; the shift began when she accepted and began to rehearse the role. Unlike many of the females in that company, Mooney had started to separate her personal life and her moral concerns from those she adopted on stage. Despite her beliefs, she divested herself of ego and treated the character as written with respect by going out of her way (and down that alley) to imbue Rosie with an authenticity that may have contributed to the riots. That she refused to publicly admit her understanding of prostitution suggests she hadn't completed the separation of her personal and professional reputations, but the split had begun.

After the opening night of *The Plough and the Stars*, O'Casey came to Mooney backstage and told her that she had saved the play. The solemn actress remained devoted to O'Casey, and his work, for the rest of her life.

He was a tall, avuncular presence and she responded to his passion for theatre and his generosity towards her. In the summer of 1926, she was missing Rosie and O’Casey. Once she had saved enough money to pay lodgings in advance and keep enough for a return ticket, she took the boat to London. Mooney never admitted that she followed O’Casey, but he was by then living happily in the city.

**The Civic Repertory Theatre Company**

Early in the spring of 1928, Shelah Richards wrote to her fiancé Denis Johnston from the Belvedere Hotel in New York telling him that Mooney had ‘by the by’ signed a contract with Eva Le Gallienne to appear in her Civic Repertory Theatre Company. (Johnston TCD MSS 10066/287/2638) Richards and Mooney were appearing together in a tour of O’Casey plays by an English company. They shared rooms close to the theatre and while Richards often pined for home, Mooney found that her ‘pulse responded to the city’s rhythm’. (*Part 1* 62)

Mooney had not stayed in London long. Money ran out quickly, as did her hopes of finding work, and she was close to going home when she was offered the job as an understudy to Richards in New York. But Mooney’s disappointment about not being on stage was assuaged by the sight of the skyscrapers rising from a mist on the Hudson river like ‘a fairy city resting on a cloud’. (*Part 1* 62) Yet again in her writing, the romance of the scene conceals any trepidation about the lifestyle change. Soon, she had been cast as Mary Boyle in a production of O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock*. At the same time, she lost weight and acquired some ‘well-cut American clothes’, which gave Mooney for the first time in her life ‘a presentable figure’. (*Part 1* 62) She began to present herself as a stylish woman, confident of a place on the New York theatre scene.

They weren’t performing during the last week of the tour, and the women set about experiencing what Richards described as: ‘Bored Broadway believing in Better Brighter Plays’. (Johnston TCD Mss 10066/287/2633) They endured the nine scenes of Eugene O’Neill’s

experimental play *The Strange Interlude*, which lasted from five pm until eleven thirty pm with a break for dinner, and declared it 'marvelous'. (Johnston TCD Mss 10066/287/2633) Two polite men called at their rooms to escort them to visit the Civic Repertory Theatre on Fourteenth Street, where *The Three Sisters* was being performed. Richards told Johnston:

'The Three Sisters' was actually good - very good - although I don't imagine it was like the London production; [ ... ] but the acting was extraordinarily good and the best I have seen here, and the most like *The Abbey*!  
(Johnston TCD Mss 10066/287/2633)

Richards was impressed; Mooney captivated. In Dublin and London, she believed in putting herself in the right place and waiting for something to happen. A newly-confident woman took matters into her own hands: she wrote to the director of *The Three Sisters* asking for an audition.

Richards' reporting of Mooney's contract with the Civic Repertory Theatre Company was matter-of-fact, but winning a place in the core group of this company was not a straightforward matter. The standards of dedication and discipline of director Eva Le Gallienne were extremely high. Le Gallienne personally monitored all aspects of productions, as well as taking starring roles. Rose Hobart, Le Gallienne's acquaintance for years before joining the Company, was sacked for visiting her husband during a week she wasn't performing, without telling the director. (Sheehy 152) Another actress said: 'It was as if we must always be fit, do our best, make the best of everything, because Eva was doing so much.' (Sheehy 152)

Given her own schedule, Le Gallienne relied on others to scout talent for her. It was the Civic's literary manager, Helen Lohman, who saw Mooney perform *Mary Boyle* and granted her an audition after her letter. That season, the permanent core of twenty actors was expanded to thirty. The following season, thirty apprentice positions were coveted by over two hundred applicants. In those auditions, Le Gallienne tried to 'sense their inner quality ... some trace of sensibility or imagination, humor, or aspiration'. (Sheehy 179)

Mooney completed the tour as understudy to Shelah Richards and returned to Dublin, where she played Rosie Redmond one last time. Then she packed up and said farewell again to her family and to her friends in the Abbey. She was returning to New York as an official member of the Civic Repertory Company but, nonetheless, alone.

The Civic Repertory Theatre is no longer visible in downtown New York. It was on the north side of Fourteenth Street (just off Sixth Avenue) and close to two subways. An overground train rumbled past at regular intervals. On the autumn morning of her first day, Mooney walked past a Salvation Army hostel, a second-hand clothes store and the Child’s restaurant where she would eat many of her meals for the next few years, to arrive at the neo-classical façade. The building was crumbling, but a few weeks before the new season, Le Gallienne used money she’d won with a *Pictorial Review* award to refurbish the interior.

As Mooney was introduced to the other actors, the cast sat around on the stage under a gold proscenium arch reading scripts. The auditorium was freshly painted in green, gold and black and there was a cyclorama of lights and modern footlights. After the first read-through, the actors walked up newly-carpeted aisles and explored the dressing rooms backstage. For all the glamour front of house, the floorboards in the dressing rooms were warped and the radiators wheezed. In the green room, photos of Le Gallienne’s estranged father, poet Richard Le Gallienne, hung on the walls. (Sheehy 144 – 158) Mooney was ready to start rehearsals.

**Background: Eva Le Gallienne**

Training and working with Eva Le Gallienne left a life-long impact on Mooney, personally and professionally. To understand that period of her life fully, it is necessary to re-visit the background of Le Gallienne, her inspiration, artistic ideals and the company she led.

Le Gallienne was born in London but raised by her mother, a journalist turned milliner, in Paris. Julie Norregaard separated from her

husband, Richard Le Gallienne, after years of emotional abuse. Much of the time, Norregaard was also the main carer to Hesper, Richard's half-Irish daughter from his first marriage. An early feminist, Norregaard raised her daughter with the aid of a nurse. This primary role as the sole focus of the energy of these two formidable women was central to the development of Le Gallienne's personality. As her biographer Helen Sheehy recognizes:

Her horizons were not circumscribed by traditional expectations and she simply did not recognize any boundaries in her development as a person. [...] Her soul was that of a searching artist; her vitality and her appetite for experience were enormous. And she had the good fortune to grow up in an atmosphere free of stifling bourgeois conventions. (57)

Set on a life on the stage from an early age, Le Gallienne spent many of her summers in Surrey with her half-sister, attending as much theatre she could. A generous patron paid the fees for Le Gallienne to attend Tree's Academy in Gower Street (the institution that is now the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art). By the age of sixteen, she was in New York with her mother. Le Gallienne was ambitious and precocious, although behind the precocity there was an educated intelligence and diligent work ethic. Her early influences were decidedly European: Eleonora Duse and Sara Bernhardt were idols she studied and emulated. On first watching Duse perform in London in 1923, she was stunned by her 'superhuman understanding and compassion' along with the 'metaphysical and impersonal creative genius.' (*At 33 164*) In 1966, Le Gallienne would publish a biography of Duse, and in it Le Gallienne showed that the awe of her youth gave way to a careful interrogation of her idol's life and work.

Given her maturity and arrogance, it was not long before taking roles for other production companies failed to fulfill Le Gallienne's ambitions. With a desire for additional training and experience, she planned (with a collaborator) to create a workshop where, in her own words, 'untroubled by outside opinion, we could improve and perfect our instruments'. (*At 33 147*) This would provide a space outside of the long-run system, which she found unbearably suffocating, to work on plays they

chose for the pleasure of the rehearsal process. In the event, professional commitments and health problems meant the plans came to naught, but years later Le Gallienne returned to her ‘idealistic dreams’ and transformed them into practical plans to introduce New York to a proper repertory theatre system. (*At 33 147*)

If Duse and Bernhardt formed the centre of her philosophy on acting, Le Gallienne’s craft was indelibly shaped by the work of the Russian theatre director Constantin Stanislavski. The Moscow Arts Theatre first visited New York in 1923, and Le Gallienne frequently saw them perform from her habitual seat in the front row. Sharon Marie Carnicke has asserted, ‘The lasting impact of the Moscow Art Theatre in the United States occurred within the theatre community, which had left the Russians actors themselves cold.’ (26) Le Gallienne introduced herself to Stanislavski, and her later process shows that she took note of his approach, including the ensemble work and concentration on the inner reality of characters.

Broadway had become, for Le Gallienne, a male-dominated business focused on stars and marred by long runs, high-ticket prices and typecasting. She sought to allow audiences exposure to art, regardless of their financial position. The idea that repertory theatre could thrive in New York was an idealistic one, but Le Gallienne determined to succeed where others had failed. She was convinced that the audience was there for the type of plays she wanted to produce, but such an audience were of modest means and so alternative modes of funding productions were essential. Although she later claimed there was ‘no commercial angle’ to the original plan, Le Gallienne was charming and sincere in her dealings with potential wealthy benefactors. (*At 33 198*)

There were seven actors in the core company Le Gallienne established, each with a contract guaranteeing twenty weeks of work. The salaries ranged between sixty and two hundred dollars. She had also chosen a repertoire of four plays (two by Ibsen, one by Chekov and one by Benavente) and hired five Russian musicians to provide an orchestra. With a promise from theatre producer Otto Kahn to meet the rent for the first



season, Le Gallienne began an intense five-week rehearsal period, involving all four plays.

In the first volume of her autobiography, *At 33*, Le Gallienne describes the rehearsals for their first major hit: the production of Chekov’s *The Three Sisters* that Mooney attended. This particular rehearsal period captures many of Le Gallienne’s ideals. The company took over a small inn in Westport, in Essex County, New York. There, the cast sought to identify themselves with the various characters in the play. They called each other by their character names and frequently started work by discussing in character things not actually in the play. Once somebody gave a proper ‘cue’, the conversation would continue as written in the text. This created a ‘tremendous sense of ease and reality’ before they began rehearsing on stage where Le Gallienne could give ‘actual shape’ to the performance. (*At 33* 201) Rarely again would the company have the financial means or the time to immerse themselves in a work in this way, but the essence of this approach was transported back to the crumbling Fourteenth Street theatre, where they would rehearse with a soundtrack of roaring trains and machinery drilling for subways.

### **Temperament: Mooney and Le Gallienne**

For Le Gallienne, acting was not a trade (as purported by the Equity union, whose strikes she refused to support) but a high art; she considered herself a conscious and endlessly developing artist. (Sheehy 76) This concept of the actor as a creative artist was also a central tenet of Stanislavskian teaching. In the sections that follow, it is necessary to distinguish between the original Stanislavski System (as expounded by Carnicke, Benedetti and others) and the tools that formed the basis of the American ‘Method’ of Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler.

The American Method drew on the translation of Stanislavski by Elizabeth Hapgood, and it used certain of the principles to commodify actors, create an industry and perpetuate gender stereotypes that were

harmful to women.<sup>14</sup> Stanislavski's teachings, conversely, had as their cornerstone the concept of the individual creative artist, who must be respected and supported in their work. The artist used empathy, rather than emotional substitution or 'recall', to explore character and the system balanced psychological work with physical exercise, including yoga.

Le Gallienne was also inspired by the philosophy of Eleonora Duse, and she was committed to Duse's idea that 'in playing, as in any other art, one should abolish the personal and try to place one's instrument at the service of a higher, disembodied force.' (*At 33 168*) Obliterating the ego and submitting to a higher power was not a religious act, except where the religion was acting. This idea was echoed by Mooney many years later when, in June 1962, she wrote a letter to a young actor Patrick Laffan, which he still keeps:

Don't let your brain come between your instinctive acting talent and your audience. Remember the great actor is, or should be, a MEDIUM. (Laffan Collection)

Throughout her career, Le Gallienne's mood was in large part determined by the character that she played at the time. Sheehy's biography reveals an ongoing cycle, from her earliest professional life to her elderly years, in which each new part demands a shift in lifestyle—a new facet to her personality, a new style of movement, often a new partner or living arrangement. (84) At various points throughout her career, Le Gallienne would work herself into state of nervous exhaustion by complete immersion in the work and intense periods of overwork. If as a director in rehearsals she employed the Stanislavskian ideals of ensemble playing and calm introspection, in her own work she eschewed his notion of 'dual-consciousness' and frequently allowed her immersion in character dictate her personal life.

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<sup>14</sup> The manner in which Hapgood's translation differs from Stanislavski's writing and its inconsistencies, deletions and erroneous substitutions is clearly set out in Carnicke's chapter 'The US Publication Maze' in *Stanislavsky in Focus*. (76 – 93) Carnicke also explains how 'dual consciousness' ensured the mental health of actors was protected, in a manner never observed by the American Method.

Although Le Gallienne invested the money earned by her success, ensuring the comfort of her mother and providing herself with a solid base, she remained wary of the 'insidious joys of prosperity'. (At 33 181) At the heart of her vocation was a constant struggle: to obliterate her own personality and become each character, at the same time as her adoring (and sometimes scathing) public sought to know the real Le Gallienne which she wanted to keep private. In her twenties, Eva wrote long, reflective letters to her mother in Europe. While appearing as Julie in a production of Molnar's *Liliom* she wrote:

It must be wonderful to be able to create away from crowds--out of sight of one's public--it is a source of endless wonder to me, why the medium that has been thrust upon on me should be the most terribly exposed--so glaringly illuminated to all eyes. With my nature it is a curious paradox--& somewhat of a burden.  
(Qtd in Sheehy 134)

This struggle echoes the paradox of the actress set out in my introduction: the 'occasional invisibility coupled with her all-pervasive significance'. (Gale and Stokes 2) Le Gallienne simultaneously abhorred and relished this challenge. Sheehy asserts: 'Eva Le Gallienne refused to be typecast in any part, in the theatre or in her private life.' (134) Despite her youth, she was already grappling with complex and conflicting desires for privacy and for public recognition. She also loved and wanted to live with women but refused to define herself as a lesbian. (Sheehy 198) She was beginning to realise the difficulty of realizing her artistic ambitions in a theatre world dominated by 'show business' and was coming to despise the money-driven values of Broadway.

Le Gallienne was elfin, and she generally kept her brown hair short and dressed in a boyish fashion. Looking at photographs of her in costume, it's difficult to penetrate the persona she has created for each one. Her Peter Pan is androgynous and child-like; her Varya in *The Cherry Orchard* feminine and quiet. Early photographs of her in *Liliom* show the oversized men's boots she used to explore and create the character of Julie. There is a *Time* Magazine cover from 25 November 1929 that aims to capture her

‘off-stage’ appearance. The ink portrait shows her in a royal-blue blouse, her wavy hair cropped and brushed back from the delicate features of her impassive face; her blue eyes are intense with focus. In fact, her biographer suggests that Le Gallienne chose this outfit and persona specifically to depict a ‘determined young feminist’. (Sheehy 194) She learnt early to construct and present the woman she wanted to be: a determined, intelligent artist, not restricted by gender or sexuality.

Midway through her biography, Sheehy facetiously observes:

it was clear to uptown Broadway folk, especially younger theatre people, that Eva Le Gallienne set herself apart—a pious prig who affected devotion to art and looked down on ordinary actors in commercial plays who just wanted to make money and have fun. (Sheehy 118)

Sheehy goes on to pose the question:

[Le Gallienne’s] industriousness, her very nature, seemed both a challenge and a rebuke. She appeared overly serious and humorless. What was she trying to prove? Why was she working so hard? What was wrong with her? (Sheehy 118)

The same questions hovered around Mooney’s life in Dublin. Her childhood and haphazard introduction to theatre, while she continued to dance or to flirt with the notion of becoming a visual artist, could not have been more different to Le Gallienne’s sheltered and spoilt upbringing. But they shared a solemnity few understood. Denis Johnston captured Mooney’s curious mix of innocence and maturity when she was included in his pen sketch of the Abbey green room. The playwright described, ‘the dark, square charm of Ria Mooney and her full mellow voice belying so quaintly the naivety of everything she says’. (Johnston TCD Mss 10066/165)

McGlone cites Mary Manning (an understudy to Mooney for extended periods), who remembered her close friend as getting on well with the various casts; although: ‘She wasn’t very humorous. She was very earnest and ambitious.’ (28) Similarly, Michael MacLiammoir of the Gate Theatre commented that, after her return from New York:

... her head was full of their theories; she would labour at some small technical point for hours together and be ready for endless discussions about the theatre; she was a serious person. (167)

MaLiammoir goes on to say, somewhat tetchily, that she lacked 'the national passion for malicious commentary'. (167) Like Le Gallienne among New York actresses, Mooney was set apart from her female contemporaries in the Abbey by her solemn demeanour and intellectual devotion to her craft. She was never the 'overbearingly ambitious' actor that Le Gallienne was, but Mooney was compelled by Le Gallienne's vision and confidence. (At 33 147) She was drawn by her style and persona, and found a challenge in the lofty nature of Le Gallienne's ambitions that only a period of work with the Civic Repertory Company would satisfy.

At the time that Mooney was living with Richards and seeking an audition with Le Gallienne, the theatre critic George Jean Nathan penned an acerbic article in the popular magazine *American Mercury*. He said that the Civic Repertory was 'praiseworthy only in intent' but that it was a total 'botch' and its 'incompetent' director should step aside to let 'other and more competent producers' fulfill New York's need for repertory theatre. (Nathan 377) He called on Le Gallienne to give up her belief that 'she is a reincarnated combination of Rachel, Joan of Arc, and Nat Goodwin, with faint but unmistakable overtones of Jesus'. (Nathan 377) It is a savage attack with little substance, smacking of homophobia or misogyny. Nathan and Le Gallienne had found themselves on opposite sides during earlier protests about *The Captive*, a production that had 'introduced lesbianism to Broadway' which Nathan thought corruptive and evil. (Schanke 72) Nevertheless, Nathan's opinion presents one end of the spectrum of the city-wide response to Le Gallienne's work on Fourteenth Street.

The contradiction in Le Gallienne was always that the egomaniacal, wildly ambitious business woman who sought funding for her theatre concealed an artist consumed by the need to embody dramatic characters and create spell-binding theatre. Nathan's objection appears to be to her political, business persona while he concedes her intent was 'praiseworthy'.

(377) He didn’t, or couldn’t, countenance a woman that occupied such a paradoxical position. As Sheehy notes:

[I]n describing Le Gallienne writers returned again and again to the word ‘strange.’ Her beauty was unconventional, her mind extraordinary, her sexuality ambiguous... (164)

Mooney was not deterred by this ‘strangeness’. She dismissed the gossip and rumours to work with the legend and with the woman. Mooney’s own sexuality is opaque, but she found in the women of the Civic Repertory Company, and those artistic circles in Greenwich village, a circle of emotional and creative as well as financial support, affection and empowerment. She also witnessed at first hand the power of artistic vision and creativity when coupled with discipline and ambition, regardless of the gender or sexuality of its bearer.

### **Technique at the Civic Repertory**

Le Gallienne describes her rehearsal process in her autobiography *At 33*, and in her biography Sheehy repeats the details as reported by the director; but a further account of the process supporting this evidence can be found elsewhere. Helen Dore Boylston was an English-born nurse who settled in Connecticut, becoming famous for a series of Young Adult books about a trainee nurse called Sue Barton. Boylston was a neighbour and close friend of Eva Le Gallienne. At some point in the 1930s, she spent a year backstage at the Civic researching for a new fictional heroine. (Sheehy 274) *Carol Goes Backstage* was published in 1941 and tells the story of a young girl who comes to New York as an apprentice to a Repertory Company established by a Miss Marlowe. The illustrations in the book (by Frederick E. Wallace) support the contention that Miss Marlowe is modelled on Eva Le Gallienne.

The novel *Carol Goes Backstage* expresses with unaffected clarity Le Gallienne’s beliefs about the Repertory system in America and many of the central tenets of her philosophy and teaching. The book’s depiction of acting and directing techniques tally with other accounts of the Civic

Repertory, such as May Sarton, while the details, meticulous if idealistic in places, link directly to the tenets of Stanislavski (as translated by Carnicke).

Early in Carol’s training at the Civic, the apprentices are invited to watch a rehearsal being led by Miss Marlowe. They gather midway down the house ‘to await spectacular events’. (Boylston 97) But to their disappointment, the rehearsals are calm and entirely respectful. The cast arrive in comfortable old clothes and simply move around the bare stage reading from scripts, pausing now and then for ‘amiable discussion’ with little or no physical gestures. (Boylston 98) Although there is the occasional joke at which everyone laughs politely, the performers are for the most part quiet and courteous. The cast Carol sees, ‘worked, in fact, as a single unit, willingly and hard, with every appearance of enjoying what they were doing.’ (Boylston 98) Despite a touch of fictional idealism, there remains a suggestion of the serene simplicity that Le Gallienne engendered in her cast and saw as vital to any successful interpretation of a play. This was not simply an extension of her personality, but derived from a considered directorial ideal and artistic technique.

In her 2012 study *An Actress Prepares: Women and ‘the Method’*, Rosemary Malague conducts an examination of the relationship between gender and ‘the American method,’ the theory derived from Elizabeth Hapgood’s translation of the work of Stanislavski. Malague considers the theory, practice and pedagogy in ways that are useful to interrogate the process demonstrated by Le Gallienne, and subsequently by the directors she influenced. However, to fully understand the work Le Gallienne did with the Civic Repertory, one must revert to the original teachings of Stanislavski, rather than relying on the gradual assimilation and manipulation of these tools into the American ‘Method’ of Strasberg and the later Actors’ Studio. The Moscow Arts Theatre Company that Le Gallienne watched perform during their visit to New York in 1923 was lauded in particular for ‘the actors’ seamless portrayal of character, their creation of an illusion of real life without obvious theatricality but with

clear artistry, and their ensemble work.’ (Carnicke 24) These factors can be noted in the work of the Civic Repertory Company.

In Boylston’s imaginative rendering of a rehearsal, Miss Marlowe watches from the centre aisle, just behind the orchestra pit, and moves back at times to watch from a distance. The writer describes her:

She offered only occasional suggestions. She didn’t shout or swear, as directors were supposed to do, and she never, for a single instant, lost her temper. (Boylston 98)

The traditional relationship of manipulation and control between a male director and female actor (a relationship which Malague examines) is here abandoned. Instead of the notion that a powerful man will use force to extract the performance ‘out of her’, Le Gallienne assisted actors to come to their own understanding of their characters and make decisions accordingly. Stanislavski, similarly, sought to ‘offer advice to actors of different temperaments who wished to speak through different aesthetic styles.’ (Carnicke 3) Le Gallienne resisted imposing her will on the individual creation and artistry of each actor. She was there to support, mentor and assist respectfully.

The future writer May Sarton was also an apprentice in the company. She recollects her own time watching rehearsals, sitting in the blackness of the house ‘before the huge empty stage where only a work-light threw shadows on the brick wall at the back’. (Sarton 152) She watched Le Gallienne go down the aisle and climb onto the stage to talk to individual actors intimately, without ever raising her voice. (Sarton 156) When the apprentices performed, the other professional actors always offered encouragement and guidance, while Le Gallienne’s criticism was ‘severe, inclusive and exceedingly helpful’. (Sarton 156) Sheehy asserts that actors’ time was never wasted: the director came to each rehearsal punctually and well prepared. As a sign of respect, during working hours Le Gallienne called each of her actors by their surnames (Miss Mooney, Miss Hutchinson). There was a professionalism and dignity in Le Gallienne’s



treatment of her actors; this echoed Stanislavski's insistence on respect for theatre as an art form and for actors as practicing artists. (Carnicke 29)

Her process of preparation, emotionally and intellectually, marked Le Gallienne as an 'implicit feminist actor', as the term has been defined by Elizabeth Stroppel. Stroppel concedes that, 'whether inadvertently or not, acting choices remain by and large aligned with the prevailing power structure.' (111) However, she argues that implicitly feminist actors use their intelligence and decision-making power to subtly shape and possibly reinterpret the role. (Stroppel 120) Le Gallienne frequently produced plays in a realistic mode, but throughout her career she refused to be bound by gender, playing parts such as Peter Pan, Romeo and Hamlet as well as traditional female roles. Such 'implicit feminism' extended to Le Gallienne's direction and teaching, where she listened and encouraged attention to details, to endless questions about personality and motivations. She mentored actors to create characters individually by meticulous preparation and intellect, as she herself prepared.

Malague asserts that in the Stanislavski method: "truthfulness" in the theatrical product is achieved through "truthfulness" in the acting process' (9) Carnicke clarifies that Stanislavski's belief was, 'the moment-to-moment performance of a role is the actor's present reality and truth.' Carnicke adds, 'This paradox, which equates "truth" with "theatricality" opens the door to non-realistic aesthetics.' (3) Thus, the stereotypical notion of actors 'losing themselves' in a role, inhabiting an entire 'reality' derives from the later Method. This was not a tenet of Stanislavski's system, nor was it a feature of Le Gallienne's directorial technique.

At one point in *Carol Goes Backstage*, the heroine observes a friend in a state of terror. Instinctively, she notes the movements and gestures expressing her friend's mental state. Disgusted by her heartlessness, she speaks to Miss Marlowe, and learns this is the way of all great actresses:

The real artist is driven to absorb and use anything which pertains to his art, and that this necessity is a thing apart, functioning by itself regardless of the personal sympathies of the artist. (Boylston 155)

The director is adamant that the vital importance of any off-stage experience is their capacity to be used in the portrayal of characters. Again, it is helpful to differentiate this tool from the American Method with its use of personal recall and emotional substitution. Rather, Le Gallienne held with Stanislavski's belief that empathy, as a controllable sensation, is a more powerful prompt to creativity than personal emotion. (Carnicke 214) Emotions are not used for 'recall' or 'substitution', but observations of emotional states and reflections impact on decisions made in the interpretation of stage roles.

During one apprentice rehearsal, the strident young director Mike drills his friends in the basics of grouping and movement on stage. He insists they appear in a triangle, allowing the stage picture to slide effortlessly into something else, without unnecessary or awkward shifts. He sets out rules for movement:

If you have to cross the stage, do it while you're speaking. But never do it when someone else is speaking. That's supposed to be very unfair – because it makes the audience notice *you* instead of the one who has the lines at the moment. And you must always go across the stage in a straight line. (Boylston 105)

It is useful to note that while it's the strident male establishing the rules for physical movement, the emotional understanding comes first to the female members of the apprentice company. Over time, however, male and female performers come to work together, drawing on each other's understanding of technique.

Mooney was taught by the Fay brothers, at the Abbey Theatre, never to move while speaking on the stage. That distinction aside, the refined physical gestures and graceful movements of the Abbey school were in keeping with the Civic Repertory style. Mooney quickly mastered the physical techniques. She then began to work at developing the mental focus and psychological interpretation engendered by Le Gallienne.

There was a lavish quality to Civic productions that enthralled Mooney, as she found herself drinking warmed Chianti on stage in *La Locandiera* and eating caviar during Russian plays. (*Part 1* 90) At the Abbey,

she had been presented with plates of paper ham and pork chops shaped from wood. From early rehearsals, Le Gallienne insisted that actors have appropriate costume elements and props to work on their interpretation of roles. This followed Stanislavski's notion that 'three-dimensional sets, realistic props and sound effects induce an actor's belief in the play.' (Carnicke 30) The Moscow Arts Theatre used make-up and costumes as early as two months before a play opened. Le Gallienne employed similar means to stimulate and engage actors' imagination and emotions.

The thrill of having luxuries on the stage later grated with Mooney's discipline and work ethic. The hearty foodstuffs, she claimed, distracted the poor and hungry actress from her playing on the Civic stage. Mooney also admitted that she had never been as drunk as when she'd sipped lemonade at the bar in the second act of *The Plough and The Stars*. (*Part 1* 91) That said, in all of the productions she later directed, Mooney displayed the directorial techniques of gentle intercession with individuals, discussion of minute detail and the nurturing of individual styles and temperaments.

The work of the Civic Repertory Company was incessant. Rehearsals, while calm, were long and painstaking. After they left the theatre, the actors often had dinner together to discuss progress, problems and ideas. Le Gallienne was relentless in her pursuit of perfection; she expected the same of her actors. Mooney became relentless in her own self-criticism and struggle for excellence. As a young actress, Mooney put her heart into parts in threadbare productions and then in New York, where money was no object to create scenic illusion, she lost the conviction to match her skills to the sumptuous presentation. Her sense of inadequacy was reinforced by the trials of working with the perfectionist, Le Gallienne. Mooney would always hold to the truth that she discovered in the Civic Repertory that, in acting: 'Technique, without feeling and concentration, is ... dead.' (*Part 1* 45)

In the 1950s and 1960s, Abbey actors would refer to Mooney's inept direction and actor Vincent Dowling recalled her approach as 'uptight, defensive'. (174) However, it may be that Mooney was not only the first

‘Director of Plays in English’ at the Abbey Theatre, but she was the first director to attempt to work within a particularly feminist model in the patriarchal institution. The implicitly feminist style of work she learnt from Le Gallienne, (using tools which Le Gallienne derived from Stanislavski but inflected with her own feminism), put the emphasis on disciplined, meticulous ensemble process with decisions gently considered and ideas calmly delivered. Feeling and concentration were balanced by well-honed technique. This met with resistance from many of the undisciplined male actors, given as they were to dramatic passion and ostentatious display.

Some of the problems she faced working within the Abbey at this time may correlate with those experienced by Maria Knebel of the Moscow Arts Theatre, who directed *The Cherry Orchard* at the Abbey in 1968. In an essay exploring the rehearsal process of the that production, Roz Dixon reports that Knebel’s experiences were largely positive, but that Knebel was ‘not impressed, however, by what she clearly perceived as the unprofessional practices of some of her actors.’ (158) Their ‘scornful’ behaviour and reactions to her discipline, methodical character work and ensemble playing suggest the conditions Mooney was faced with in trying to bring Stanislavski tools to bear on the Abbey Company. (Dixon 158)

### **The Influence of Alla Nazimova**

As Ria Mooney said her goodbyes to the Abbey in the summer of 1928 and internally questioned the decision to leave for New York permanently, she heard a rumour: renowned actress Alla Nazimova was also joining Le Gallienne’s company. Nazimova had trained with Stanislavski at the Moscow Arts Theatre and was, Mooney states, ‘the film star par excellence’. (*Part 1* 71) In an effort to look even more like her idol, Mooney altered her appearance:

I fluffed out my black hair, or parted it down the centre, and twitched my nostrils to make myself look more like her.  
(*Part 1* 71)

The star's presence would later prove a catalyst to changes in Mooney's position in the company and in her relationship with Le Gallienne.

Nazimova first came to New York early in the 1900s, where she presented a season of Ibsen on Broadway and met Le Gallienne, before going to Hollywood to make a number of films. While other prominent names had requested roles with the company, Nazimova was the first to commit to becoming a permanent member. After much negotiation with Le Gallienne over her return to New York, the two stubborn women finally struck a deal which meant that Nazimova had a private dressing room with her own bathroom (a luxury Le Gallienne did not have) and an apartment across the courtyard from the director and her partner, Josephine Hutchinson. However, she would not be 'starred'. (Sheehy 176) Such negotiations would be ongoing. However, Le Gallienne later wrote that while there was 'trepidation at having such a famous star among us', it transpired that, 'No one could have been simpler, more warm-hearted, enthusiastic and utterly charming.' (At 33 221)

During that season, Mooney had a small part in the production of *The Would-Be Gentleman*. Her first major role was in a symbolist play by the French playwright Jean Jacques Bernard entitled *L'Invitation Au Voyage*. Le Gallienne had brought the play, in a translation by Ernest Boyd, back from a trip to Paris and it would remain forever her favourite play in the repertoire. (Sheehy 179) Mooney won the part of Jacqueline, the twenty-year-old sister to the bored Marie-Louise, wife of an industrial magnate. Marie-Louise (played by Le Gallienne) is in love with a man that recently fled to the Argentine Republic without knowing anything of her affection. She sustains herself with the dream of their idealised love.

The play is set in 'the present day in the Vosges district.' (Bernard 195) When the curtains rose, the audience saw tall, arched French windows flooding the stage with September sunlight while, as Marie-Louise, Le Gallienne played a Chopin nocturne on the grand piano. Jacqueline appeared on the patio outside the window. Le Gallienne wore a bobbed, brunette wig, and Mooney had her own thick black locks cut to match.

Both women were made-up sophisticatedly and wore 'some of the prettiest dresses ever worn in 14th street.' (Sheehy 179) Leaning in the window, Mooney uttered the opening line: 'Are you alone, Marie Louise?' (Bernard 195)

This play was conceived in the symbolist tradition. Much of the script is slow and suggestive: sighs, pauses and hidden tears. As John Leslie Firth points out in his introduction to a later translation of the play, Bernard's work has 'a quietness, a simplicity, an entire absence of "drama" in the crude sense.' (10) Although it might appear such work was a departure from Le Gallienne's earlier productions, it must be remembered that for Stanislavski, 'symbolism specifically explores the realm of "imaginary truth"'. (Carnicke 35) Le Gallienne's growing sensibility was for plays that dismissed the traditional notion of 'realism' but worked towards a more esoteric notion of 'truth' or 'art'. In this, her taste differed from the majority of the audiences that came to Thirteenth Street. Such a sensibility would inform Mooney's later interest in play texts of a more abstract nature, including those of Jack Yeats.

There is an intimacy between the two sisters in Bernard's play that can only have been performed by two confidantes. The second act is set in December, with snow heaped on the fir trees outside. Jacqueline (Mooney) tells Marie-Louise: 'I understand much better than you think, believe me. I've eyes in my head. And I know that the Argentine set you dreaming.' (Bernard 232) With tears in her eyes, Marie Louise confesses: 'I should be so glad if we could talk together gently, you and I. We're very far apart, perhaps. But I've really no one but you, Jacqueline.' (Bernard 232)

McGlone asserts that Mooney's 'work went unnoticed in the failure' of the play. (32) In fact, Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* asserts that the play 'lacks substance and dramatic moment', but goes on to say that 'Miss Le Gallienne and her comrades adorn it with an exquisite performance'. Mooney, he says, 'plays the part of the sister with as much graphic precision as charm'. Clearly taken with their 'supple charm', Atkinson declares the piece 'discovers the Civic Repertory troupe in one of

its most accomplished aspects.' ('The Play' 17) May Sarton never forgot watching 'that extraordinary play of silences' and called the experience 'pure luxury.' (158) Sarton was in a minority; the audiences deplored it. As was usual, Le Gallienne had been rehearsing three plays at the one time. Thus, as quickly as *L'Invitation Au Voyage* closed, *The Cherry Orchard* opened. Le Gallienne starred as Varya and Nazimova played Madame Ranevsky and it proved a popular hit. Mooney was not cast in the play.

The final production of the season was *Katerina*, a play by Andreyev that had been included in the repertoire on Nazimova's demand. For years, she had been trying to get a Broadway production of the piece, which was the perfect vehicle to showcase her own talent, although it was not ideally suited to an ensemble company. The play is a 'light hearted frolic, with marital infidelity, voyeurism, and attempted murder.' (McGlone 35) When the cast list was hung backstage, Mooney's name was again not on it.

The Civic Repertory Company was now playing to ninety-four percent capacity, but relations between Le Gallienne and Nazimova were strained. While they attempted to maintain professional politeness, Le Gallienne was disgusted that Nazimova was advertising *Lucky Strike* cigarettes. In rehearsals, differences in their dramatic approaches were surfacing. Josephine Hutchinson described the Russian as 'a cat', recalling that she was 'very theatrical' while the Company were 'much more modern'. (Sheehy 181) In a further affront to Le Gallienne, who thought *Katerina* melodramatic and ridiculous, Nazimova intervened in casting. The star insisted that, given the physical resemblance, the actress cast as Liza (Katerina's sister) should be replaced with Ria Mooney.

*Katerina* opened in February 1929 and despite the problems, Le Gallienne recorded in her diary that Nazimova gave a 'magnificent performance'. (Sheehy 189) Broadway critics agreed, but when the Company toured to Philadelphia and Boston the power struggles between Le Gallienne and Nazimova continued. Mooney was torn between her allegiance to Nazimova and her respect for Le Gallienne; but experience had taught her to avoid conflicts. She didn't gossip or slander and she

would resist any part in a feud. In any case, a refusal to get involved would have been taken by the egomaniacal Le Gallienne as a sign of dissension.

Although she was on the programme for the next theatrical season, Nazimova finished the tour in Boston and did not return to Fourteenth Street. Mooney’s place in the Company changed substantially the next season, when Le Gallienne charged her with directing the new apprentices. Le Gallienne arranged people around her as she desired, and it may be that after the split with Nazimova she wanted ‘Miss Mooney’ in a less conspicuous role. It’s also possible that she identified in Mooney a gift for mentoring young talent that could be used for mutual benefit.

### ***Romeo & Juliet* at the Civic Repertory**

In Boylston’s novel *Carol Goes Backstage*, the fictional apprentices are under the tutelage of a lady with the most Irish of surnames: Miss Byrne. Miss Byrne is already in place and working assiduously with her young charges when Carol joins the company. In factual records, it is established that the real apprentice group auditioned by Le Gallienne and put under Ria Mooney’s care as the 1929/1930 theatre season opened included such future luminaries as May Sarton, Burgess Meredith, Howard da Silva and John Garfield. Both real and fictional apprentices were permitted to watch the main company at work, whilst also having their own schedule of classes and scenes to prepare.

In Mooney’s record, she was directing a rehearsal when she noticed that Le Gallienne had come to observe her methods from the balcony. (*Part 1 91*) Steeling herself against the prospect of criticism, she carried on, leading them through *The Playboy of the Western World* in the traditional style of the Abbey Theatre. Le Gallienne was impressed; she invited Mooney to become Assistant Director in the forthcoming production of *Romeo & Juliet*. While Le Gallienne never gave her official credit for her work, Mooney distinctly remembers how the chorus were instructed to obey Miss Mooney as if she was the director herself. (*Part 1 92*)



Le Gallienne's overarching principle for *Romeo & Juliet* was to convey a sense of Italy during that period: 'Colourful, violent, and above all SWIFT.' (At 33 225) Pauses between scenes were eliminated; there was full concentration on flow with a steady increase in tempo and suspense throughout. The prologue was eliminated and the play opened with the pounding of drums and a street brawl. Many apprentices appeared as dancers and a number of the Company were in silent chorus roles.

Working to Le Gallienne's vision, Mooney turned to visual art for inspiration. Le Gallienne herself used a similar method; for her production of *The Good Hope* she used Dutch paintings for formations for group scenes. (Sheehy 168) It was the work of the Florentine painters, with their unique sense of light and colour, which influenced Mooney's direction of the chorus scenes for the Shakespeare play. Using the costume colours, she started to group crowds to circle and highlight the main players. She let the actors move freely and instinctively, with the imperative that they were on the required spot when the cue came. Her technique grew from years of careful watching: at the Abbey Theatre and in the Civic Repertory, as well as her love of visual art.<sup>15</sup> Intent on capturing the fluid, mercurial sense the director demanded, Mooney began to develop her own directorial technique.

In *Carol Goes Backstage*, while the apprentices studied fencing and voice with other Company instructors, 'Miss Byrne' works diligently with them on movement, progressing from physical stance to styles of walking, running and abrupt stops that capture distinct characters. (Boylston 144) In one acting exercise, she calls each actor to cross the stage and deliver a letter, without any dialogue. As they step out to begin, she calls out their character's work or social position: prince, servant, young girl... The objective (delivering the letter) was identical; the distinctions were in the small physical choices the actor had to make quickly and decisively. Such

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<sup>15</sup> This strain in her work will be considered in detail at a later point in this chapter.

simple exercises consistently reinforced the delicate craft of creating character from within, in the mode of Stanislavski.

Boylston’s heroine and her friends also appear as silent chorus in *Romeo and Juliet*. After Miss Byrne has spent weeks ‘drilling them in entrances and exits’, they make their first public appearance, gaining confidence even while they’re acutely aware that they’re under ‘very close observation’. (Boylston 116-117) The pressure of working for Le Gallienne was intense, but Mooney responded warmly to the energy of her charges. Dismissing traditional boundaries between the Company and apprentices, she arranged social evenings in her home to introduce the budding actors to established artists. This nurturing of her charges off-stage, which began in New York, set a pattern for her career. In Wicklow in the 1940s and later, she would often hold social evenings in her Glencree cottage. She continued to draw energy from young talent around her, while supporting and encouraging the development of their technique.

Enmeshed as they became in the life of the Company, the work of the apprentices differed from that of the main troupe in one specific point. For the apprentice rehearsals and productions described in *Carol Goes Backstage*, there are no props or scenery. The essence of the lesson, Carol understands, is to ‘act without self-consciousness in the midst of purely imaginary furniture’. (Boylston 119) Mooney engendered in her charges the vivifying dramatic imagination that was central to her work in Dublin.

### **Outside of Rehearsals**

The strict discipline of the Civic Repertory Theatre structured her days and if she wasn’t performing, Mooney arranged social evenings for her apprentices. There was little time for her own social life; in fact, she made sure of that. Unrequited love had hastened her departure from Ireland. To artist friend Patrick Tuohy, Mooney confided that she had decided to leave Ireland to get away from a man and heartbreak. (McGlone 32) While there is no evidence or clues to suggest the identity of this man, there are pointers to suggest that her leaving for London was linked to

O’Casey’s settling there. He was unmarried, and had showed genuine affection for Mooney and a regard for her talent. His continued support to her was demonstrated by his lending her money when she failed to secure work, but it may have been that when she was in London, she discovered that O’Casey’s interest in her was not romantic. In any case, New York brought encounters that would salve her broken heart and reanimate her.

For the initial visits to New York with Shelah Richards, the two women shared an apartment on Broadway, as close to the theatre as they could afford. A circle of Irish theatre acquaintances, including Maire O’Neill and Sara Allgood, invited them to parties where they made friends with a bohemian group that included sculptor Jacob Epstein and writer/photographer Carl Van Vechten. To reciprocate, they held soirées of their own. The housemates had different temperaments and tastes, but both were smitten with ‘the best-looking man’ and the ‘one with the most charm’ – professional singer Paul Robeson. (Johnston TCD MSS 10066/287/2632) At their party, Robeson sang Negro spirituals and talked of his daughter. Richards joked they lived ‘on chocolates, gin and oranges, trying to get with New York society.’ (Johnston TCD Mss 10066/287/2633) She was missing Johnston, who was in Ireland, and wrote to him:

You’ve ruined my life—I can’t even get interested about anybody here. You keep cropping up—as if you ever meant anything to anybody—it’s ridiculous. (Johnston TCD Mss 10066/287/2633)

As the lovesick Richards counted the days to go home and begin her married life, Mooney continued to socialise and made a close friend. Rita Romelli was a frequent host of social evenings and was also a dancer, an actress, teacher and later a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance. A New Yorker born and bred, she trained at the American Academy of Dramatic Art under its founder, Charles Jehliger. (‘Rita Romilly Benson’) She took a minor role in *The Living Corpse* by Tolstoy staged at the Civic Repertory in 1929; thereafter, all archival traces of Rita Romilly relate to teaching.

The editor of Mooney’s memoirs, Val Mulkerns, would later refer to Rita (by then Mrs Milton (Kick) Erlanger) as a ‘close friend and patron’.

(Part 1 62) Mooney herself referred to her simply as 'a beautiful girl named Rita Romelli', to whom she dedicated her autobiography. (Part 1) Romelli and Mooney had a loving and intimate relationship that lasted their whole lives. There is no evidence it developed from friendship to a sexual relationship, or indeed is there anything to suggest that it was only platonic. Their relationship was intimate, loving and vital to Mooney's happiness.

Without Richards's company, Mooney threw herself into life at the Civic, spending any free time drinking coffee or eating cheap meals in the Childs' restaurant next door to the theatre. As well as her friendship with literary manager Helen Lohman, Mooney was close to scenic designer Aline Bernstein and her assistant Irene Schariff. Bernstein was 'plump, mature and well-corseted' with 'straight grey hair which she wore parted down the front.' (Part 1 98) In 1926, she would become the first woman to join the scenic artists' union of the United States. As well as discussions about theatre design, Mooney jested with Bernstein about searching for a wealthy male suitor. Yet, she was surrounded by same-sex arrangements.

According to McGlone's cursory survey of Mooney's life, the troupe was rumoured to be a 'den of lesbianism'; *American Mercury* critic George Jean Nathan called the group the 'Le Gallienne sorority'. (McGlone 32) Le Gallienne had been living in an apartment on Eleventh Street with leading actress Jo Hutchinson (recently separated from her husband) for over a year when Mooney arrived. The other actors called the couple 'The Botticelli Twins' and not even their own mothers objected to the arrangement. (Sheehy 164) Leona Roberts (Hutchinson's mother) was a member of the core company and Julie, Le Gallienne's open-minded mother, shared their flat for months each time she came to visit.

After her first season, Mooney returned to Ireland for the summer break; but in 1930, she decided to forgo the trip home. As well as working with the Arden theatre group in Philadelphia, she spent one dissolute weekend with friends in Greenwich, Connecticut. McGlone asserts the details of this scene have been left 'purposely vague' in the memoirs. (43) The episode, though not recounted in detail, is tinged with nostalgia and

magic; yet its inclusion in the memoir – otherwise so impersonal – lends it a gravity that cannot be ignored.

With little memory of events during daylight hours, Mooney focuses on the night-time adventures and one particular bacchanalian scene. Walking through the woods around the home of Richard Chanler, close to midnight, 'they' came upon a clearing. By a river, a picnic meal illuminated by a log fire was coming to a close:

They sat in twos, making love between sips, or in groups, having loud and fierce arguments while they drank and nibbled food—and each other. From a large flat rock overhanging the river, naked figures were seen for a moment as they shot through the light in dives that engulfed them in the black waters. Everywhere were the sounds of laughter, arguments, corks popping, bodies splashing into the water, mingling with nature's medley of night sounds. (*Part 1 97*)

Exactly who were the 'we' that took that moonlit walk? Was this 'scene of revelry' a party exclusively for women? Was Mooney only an observer of events? McGlone asks these rhetorical questions, and decides that the scene 'might have been extracted from popular novels of the period' but was 'out of character' for Mooney. (44) Yet, it may be that it is out of character only for the 'character' or persona created in her memoir.

As referred to above in relation to her friendship with Romelli, Mooney's sexuality has always been opaque. McGlone never addresses the issue directly, but it appears vital to draw attention to the social forces acting on Mooney at this point in her life, encouraging her to break with Irish models and follow any desires to share a passionate relationship with a person of her own gender. Her autobiography is reticent in relation to her relationships with men, including Higgins, but there are the accounts of others to support the veracity of rumours. If Mooney did chose later in life to disavow the forces she had experienced in New York with this circle of lesbian women, they still had a profound impact on her life.

That same summer season, Josephine Hutchinson was divorcing her husband, Robert Bell, and the New York theatre scene was agog with rumours about Le Gallienne's involvement in the closed divorce

proceedings. The divorce was held in open court in Reno, with no other parties named and the estranged couple remained always on good terms. (Sheehy 198) But damage was done by malicious speculation: *The Daily News* published a photograph of Le Gallienne with the headline ‘Bell Divorces Actress, Eva Le Gallienne’s Shadow’. (‘Shadow’ being an insinuation of lesbianism.) (Sheehy 198) More pertinently, the future of the Civic Repertory was in serious doubt, with financial strain heaped on Le Gallienne’s already-struggling shoulders. Mooney could have been worrying about her future, seeking parts outside the Civic Repertory Company or looking for other work; instead she focused on the magic of her new social life.

Spending one night in a guest room belonging to Madame Rubinstein, Mooney slept in a comfortable bed in a room scented with sandalwood, under a roof that rolled back to expose the night sky. Looking up at the stars, she discovered that soft glitter was falling slowly from them and melting into the darkness. (Mooney *Part 1* 96) Despite the struggles behind and the unknown future ahead, a twenty-seven-year-old Mooney reached out in blissful joy and wonder, trying to catch the fireflies.

### **Art & Life**

While on tour with *The Plough and the Stars* in Chicago in the 1920’s, Abbey actor Michael Scott chose to visit an exhibition of French paintings in the Wrigley Building and Mooney joined him. As she wandered along beside her friend, Mooney’s attention was captured by a ‘glimmering object’ in the distance. (*Part 1* 69-70) Transfixed, she abandoned her companions and moved towards the torpedo-shaped piece of metal. The sculpture, by Brancusi, was titled *The Golden Bird*, although there was only the suggestion of a beak and tail in the refined silhouette. It sat on a rough-hewn geometric base. Mooney studied this one piece for the rest of the afternoon, in awe of ‘the artistry that made this piece of shining metal a thing of movement, exhilaration and truly great beauty.’ (*Part 1* 69-70)

She wasn’t new to the art world; at the age of nineteen, Mooney had joined the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art on a whim and spent two years studying drawing and painting. Mooney also realised ‘the meaning of hard work and the satisfaction to be derived from it.’ (*Part 1* 30) While she continued to act in amateur dramatic groups in the evenings, she gave up her office job to create a studio in Anne Street with five other students. Mooney specialised in embroidery, the others in leatherwork, design and figure work. Only on Lennox Robinson’s request to appear at the Abbey in 1924 did she subsequently abandon the artists’ collective. Mooney’s introduction to the modern art movement in that Chicago museum was a world away from those days embroidering in the chilly Anne Street studio, but both ignited her sensitivity to shape, light and colour.

In New York, when moving into her apartment on Thirteenth Street, Mooney and her flatmate took advice from Irene Schariff (the Civic’s assistant scenic designer) on decorating their humble walk-up. They stained the floor black and used rugs of cheap felt, covering the couch with royal blue sateen behind cushions of red, yellow, green and black. (Mooney *Part 1* 74) In their design, they mimicked the dark blue walls and oiled timbers of Le Gallienne’s exceedingly more luxurious home. All were following the fashions in Greenwich village at that time, but Mooney’s insistence on a vivid colour scheme is central to her dramatic vision.

Helen Lohman, of the Civic Repertory Company, would subsequently take Mooney to see and hold two more pieces of Brancusi’s work. The same Madame Helena Rubinstein who offered fireflies in Connecticut introduced Mooney to the work of Picasso, engendering a life-long passion for his Cubist work. Back in Dublin in the 1940s and 1950s, Mooney would frequently visit Waddington’s small gallery on South Anne Street to buy art in meagre weekly instalments that she could afford. (Mulkerns) This acutely colourist sensibility was developed in her work as the Assistant Director with the Civic and would come to fruition in her work with the Abbey Experimental Theatre in Dublin in the 1940s.

Given this sensibility, it is no surprise that in her own writing Mooney often reverts to memories of colour to illustrate scenes. A lengthy expedition to the Aran Islands in 1930, during a holiday at home, creates an interlude in the story of her career. On the island, Mooney spent time with documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty and Tom Casement, brother of Irish patriot Roger. As they sailed between the islands on a still June evening, the sun ‘began to tip to the west’. She sketches the scene:

Silver and black were the colours on our right, pink and blue above our heads, crimson and gold on our left. (*Part 1* 88)

Wherever she went, Mooney drew strength and life from the colour and artistry in the world around her.

### **End of Days in New York**

Mooney returned from a summer of stock theatre and heady socializing in 1930 to one more challenging season at the Fourteenth Street Theatre. The Civic Repertory Theatre Company began the theatre calendar with a reprised production of *Romeo & Juliet*, an established success; but both Le Gallienne and Hutchinson were ill – tonsillitis and appendicitis. Aline Bernstein was struggling with personal difficulties. A leading actor left after an ‘uptown’ offer. New productions were quickly cancelled and in an uncharacteristically downbeat mode, Le Gallienne wrote in her diary of ‘Bad days—tiring *wearing days*.’ (Sheehy 201) She was no stranger to long periods of depression and had been known to find solace in alcohol, but during the day she continued to rehearse and make business plans. Others in the company noted how her figure grew ever slighter and her eyes more enormous. (Sheehy 201) When she gave her usual performance of *Peter Pan* at Christmas, soaring across the auditorium on a wire, her breathing was laboured and her body feverish.

The apprentices in Dore Boylston’s fictional Stuyvesant Company gradually become part of company life, and come to understand the backstage atmosphere. Budding actress Carol observes:



[I]n light plays, requiring little emotional acting, the backstage mood of the company was gay and relaxed [...] sometimes an actor going on stage was unable to stop laughing and had difficulty with his lines. In other plays the mood was tense and serious; there was no joking or conversation in the wings [...] (Boylston 127)

As 1930 came to an end, the real Civic Repertory Company were caught between an atmosphere of festive celebration and intense stress over Le Gallienne's physical state and emotional fragility. Any hope that the rest over the holidays would restore their director's strength faded in January when she was confined to bed with bronchitis. Le Gallienne handed over rehearsals to her old teacher, Constance Collier. Collier began directing *Camille*, while Le Gallienne learnt her lines and prepared her starring role in bed. It is characteristic of Mooney that she reminisces about the gems of wisdom she learnt watching Collier direct rehearsals, without ever recording any tension around the arrangements. (*Part 1* 93)

Despite Le Gallienne's frailty, *Camille* transpired to be the Civic Repertory Company's biggest hit. Brooks Atkinson announced in the *New York Times*: '[I]t is a major hit that turns 'em away at the box office.' ('Plays and Players' 105) Atkinson described the atmosphere inside the theatre as electrifying: 'The excitement leaps from row to row like an electric spark.' ('Plays and Players' 105) The critics may have thought Le Gallienne and her company were back on form; the actors knew better. At some point, Le Gallienne gathered her cast and crew backstage to share a major decision. She was taking advantage of the current success to close the theatre on a positive note, planning to take a year off to recuperate and plan for the future. The financial problems had not gone away and the depression was worsening all over America, but Eva Le Gallienne would not step away from Fourteenth Street under a cloud. She was determined to retain the impression that her talent and vision were undimmed.

Mooney never says that she was shocked at the closure of the Civic Repertory Company. She was there for the final gala week of performances, celebrating with the Company and the group of apprentices. Nazimova

returned briefly to appear in two performances of *The Cherry Orchard* and they also staged *Peter Pan* and *Romeo and Juliet* before closing with *Camille*. While some of the Company would find work with a tour of *Alison's House* by Susan Glaspell, others were offered a fifty-dollar-a-week retaining fee to return in 1932. Mooney was not in the first group, and letters to friends in Dublin don't mention any retainer. News may have filtered back from Paris, where Le Gallienne was staying, that May Sarton had been offered the job of salaried director of the Civic Repertory apprentices when the theatre reopened. (Sheehy 214) Mooney was working on other plans, holding fast to the belief her future was in New York. She set to work with an actor friend on a dramatic adaptation of Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. Shelah Richards received a letter from her friend and told Johnston of her news:

Ria Mooney has written saying she and Grupke are starting theatre life on Broadway (!) and she is to be managing this that and the other including reading of plays and would you send "Moon"? (Johnston TCD Mss 10066/287/2651)

Johnston had written a play entitled *The Moon in the Yellow River*, which Mooney was seeking to produce. The identity of 'Grupke' is unknown, mainly because the plans came to naught. When word came in the New Year that the touring Abbey Company needed a player, Mooney packed up her Thirteenth Street home, planning to join them in Georgia. It was then that Cheryl Crawford, casting director of the New York Theatre Guild, contacted her, offering her a role. (McGlone 47) A future in New York was a distinct possibility, but Mooney elected to hold the promise of secure work and return home. She was weary of struggling for work, or was eager to share her skills in Ireland.

Other members of the Abbey Company would also see Le Gallienne perform, albeit without Ria Mooney, during a tour of the United States in the spring of 1935. While Mooney was performing in Dublin with the second company, the first company attended *L'Aiglon* in Chicago, in which Le Gallienne was starring as a prince. The twenty-two-year-old Aideen

O’Connor, on her first tour abroad, was mesmerised by the performance.

She told her sister some weeks later:

I’m still crazy about Eva Le Gallienne. I bought her life story, its [sic] grand. I wrote to her from Chicago after seeing her play and she wrote me a lovely letter, and said she’d like to meet me in New York next time we go there. If the Abbey sack me I’ll write to her for a job. To my mind she is the one great woman on the stage today. (Shields T13/A/437)

O’Connor’s anxiety about losing her job reveals the actresses’ awareness of their precarious position in the Irish Company. Her belief in Le Gallienne suggests they saw working with the Civic Repertory as a liberating, empowering experience, in comparison. O’Connor makes no reference to Mooney’s involvement in the Civic Repertory. *At 33* contains only one passing reference to a ‘Miss Mooney’ during a stage anecdote, so it’s quite possible she missed it entirely. To many of her colleagues and theatre friends in Dublin, it was as if Ria Mooney had never worked or directed at the Civic Repertory Theatre at all.

### **After The Civic Repertory Theatre**

To follow in full the chronology of Ria Mooney’s career following her return to Dublin from the Civic Repertory Company in 1932 is not only difficult and confusing but entangles distinct threads of her work. For over three decades, Mooney was a central figure in Dublin theatre life: acting, directing and teaching. She was a working professional, immersed in the day-to-day grind of the theatre. Yet, to consider all of her acting roles during those decades would not prove particularly illuminating. Instead, I’d like to follow two specific trajectories in her artistic work that she kept distinct but in careful counterbalance.

On the one hand, Mooney continued to appear on the main stages of the capital’s theatres in traditional conservative drama, such as plays by George Shiels and Lennox Robinson. Initially, the Gate Theatre fulfilled her desire for leading roles. She subsequently returned to the Abbey Theatre, taking roles in plays by new female playwrights Elizabeth Connor and

Teresa Deevy. At the same time, she pursued her interest in mentoring young actors and in working with drama of a more experimental form than ever before seen in Ireland. In her memoirs, Mooney refers in a self-deprecating way to 'my little Experimental Theatre.' (*Part 2* 88) In fact, the project, which she began with senior student at the School of Acting Cecil Ford in June 1939, was an innovation in Irish theatre. Setting these two tracks of Mooney's career side-by-side, studying them separately while allowing them to reflect back on each other, brings us closer to an understanding of the theatre that drove and sustained her.

There is a photograph of Mooney, dressed as Rosie Redmond, on stage with Seán O'Casey during the dress rehearsal of *The Plough and the Stars*. Her skirt reaches below her knee; she wears thick tights and flat shoes, with a tartan shawl around her shoulders. For the modern spectator, there is nothing sexual about this prostitute; except for the coy smile the actress is giving the playwright, who has autographed the memento for her. He says: 'Be clever, M'girl, & let who will be good.' (Berg Mss 70B5715) In September 1969, Mooney returned this photo to the O'Casey Estate, and it was placed in the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library.

Holding the original photo in my hands, I can see that there is a well-worn thumbtack hole in every corner. This photo was not framed or stored in a dust-free album, but was tacked to the bedroom wall, to the mirror in a dressing room, or to any available surface. Always visible, always close, it was a talisman to remind Mooney of her experiences as Rosie Redmond, and the journey it had set her on.

That photograph (her personal archive) was packed up in the bohemian walk-up in Greenwich and brought on tour with the Abbey Company, and then back to the bedroom she shared with her sister in her father's house on Dublin's south side. Retracing that path to the Abbey's backstage door was not a joyous reunion or comforting transition for Mooney. But beneath her warm, open nature and child-like idealism, she had a resilience earned during *The Plough and the Stars* and compounded as she walked the streets of New York after the Civic Repertory closed,

looking for work. At points in her career, Mooney's insecurities about her acting talent would re-surface and threaten to overwhelm her, but an enduring belief in her craft, coupled with economic necessity, drove her on.

The memoir *Players and Painted Stage* contains only two references to intersections between Mooney's family and her work. The first is her father's anxiety during *The Plough and the Stars* riots. The second is her sister's weeping after she saw Mooney perform at the Abbey after her return from New York in 1932. Almost thirty, with a figure that had always been womanly in its curves and a face that was always mature if elegant, Mooney was cast as the sixteen-year-old schoolgirl Ducky in Robinson's drawing-room comedy *The Far-Off Hills*. After the curtain came down, Mooney returned home to her father's house to find her sister crying with shame and disappointment. (*Part 1* 101)

The Abbey directors often put adult women into the roles of children and teenagers. Such casting was judged to be a necessary practice to maintain the ensemble nature of the Company, and also connects to the amateur beginnings of the theatre. The preposterous practice was not confined to Ria Mooney: in 1935 the *San Francisco News* reviewed Brinsley Mac Namara's *Look at the Heffernans* and spoke of the 'lamentable casting of Maureen Delaney as a bold, young girl.' (Craig UCD Mss LA28/116) While there is no evidence actresses objected, the reaction of Mooney's sister shows that the ridiculous nature of the casting did not go unnoticed by the audience. Mooney's telling of the event in her autobiography cleverly displaces any personal shame onto her sister, allowing her to make the point without appearing to judge. She didn't give up the part, that wasn't an option, nor was objecting or making a complaint. In Mooney's account: her sister cried; she resolved to find other opportunities.

After that reprise of Ducky and other similar roles, Mooney was weary of playing parts for which she was unsuited and also perhaps of being infantilized by the Abbey directorate. In September 1933 a chance came to work with Hilton Edwards and Michael MacLiammóir at the Gate

Theatre and she grasped it. In their rehearsal room at the top of O'Connell Street Mooney found the magic that had exhilarated her in New York:

There was the 'poetry' of theatre [...] the same escape from dull reality; the same magic windows on to different places, people and periods. (*Part 2* 104)

The Gate offered international plays and elegant roles like Lady Precious Stream in Hsiung's work of the same name and Gwendoline in Wilde's *The Importance of being Earnest*. As McGlone observes, for the first time ever, Mooney had 'an entire season playing romantic parts.' (60) MacLiammóir saw something in her that the Abbey directors didn't; in fact, he saw something she had trouble seeing in the mirror. The woman MacLiammóir remembers is unlike the dumpy persona she repeatedly presents of herself:

Small, with night-black hair and long, slow-glancing green eyes, she had [ ... ] a curious intensity like a steadily burning inner fire, and her acting was poised, shapely and full of intelligence. (MacLiammóir 167)

This intense woman was not only focused on acting; at some point she presented the adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* that she had worked on in New York with fellow actor Donald Stauffer. MacLiammóir read it, and was stunned, declaring it 'by far the best I had ever read' and noting how it 'preserved the essence of Emily Bronte's mind into the few feet of the Gate theatre.' (MacLiammóir 167) He cast Mooney as Catherine Earnshaw, taking the role of Heathcliff himself.

Huge success was close, but fragile self-esteem again threatened to mar her performance. Mooney believed that she was far from 'an ideal Catherine' on the basis that she was simply 'too small' and also struggled with the fact that she knew every line and comma in the script. (*Part 1* 105) As she had with Le Gallienne, Mooney drove herself on relentlessly, a perfectionist intent on securing the right interpretation of each line and each gesture. Her discipline was a gift but it was also a noose, strangling her instincts. It was MacLiammóir who nurtured and supported her. He

coaxed her to focus on one line, one objective, one scene at a time and eased her back into an assured performance.

The production was revived in February 1935, when the *Irish Independent* critic 'D.S.' noted on 13<sup>th</sup> February that, 'Miss Ria Mooney has by a series of slight alterations considerably improved the original adaptation of the famous novel.' He also gave the acting honours to Ria Mooney, and believed 'her Catherine Earnshaw is greater than Emily Brontë's.' ('Wuthering Heights' 6) The *Irish Times* reviewer that saw the revival echoed D.S.'s view that Catherine overshadowed Heathcliff in every scene, saying Mooney gave 'a performance of quite remarkable force, and in the course of it she never seems to strike a wrong note.' ('The Gate' 8)

Nurtured in the rehearsal room, praised by the critics, exploring her full potential, little could tempt Mooney away from the Gate. Except, perhaps, for one thing: an influential male suitor. During an 'At Home' social soirée in 1934, Abbey Theatre Managing Director and poet F.R. Higgins approached her with the news that they were recasting the repertoire and would like to include her. The offer to entice her included leading roles and top salary, although initially she would perform with the second company, as the first company was on tour. Mooney later claimed that this opportunity came at a time when she was 'temporarily annoyed' with the Gate directors, but there is no evidence this is anything but a retrospective rationalisation of her decision. (*Part 1* 106) Something about the intervention of Higgins, in charming mode, caused a transformative shift. She was also about to embark on a long affair with the married poet.

### **The Second Company**

Buoyed by the regard of Higgins for her talent and her success at the Gate, Mooney now felt she could confidently contribute her experience to the National Theatre. She came back to the Abbey with the expectation of being a romantic lead, albeit in the No. 2 Company, but it was not long before she was reminded that some of the Abbey Directorate would forever consider her 'the Abbey whore'. Ethel Mannin later noted this jibe,

which she saw as simply 'good-natured. (Arrington NLI Acc 6548) However, the identification of Mooney with the playing of prostitutes and other unrespectable women would continue to shape her career at the Abbey.

One of Mooney's first castings was in the role of Mrs Katharine O'Shea in W. R. Fearon's play *Parnell of Avondale*. In this, she was asked to perform one of the most notorious women in Irish history: an English-born divorcée who had a public affair with Home Rule champion Charles Stewart Parnell. The affair led to the downfall of the nationalist political leader in the 1890s, and many continued to believe that O'Shea was a spy for the British government. Parnell's enemies gave his lover the name 'Kitty O'Shea', because 'Kitty' suggested a shortening of Katharine, but was also English slang for prostitute. Dismissing once again the scandal and hearsay, Mooney immersed herself in the text and her role. Research included visiting Avondale House, Parnell's ancestral home, with Fearon. She sensitively observed the house and its inhabitants:

We waited for 'the girls' in an over-furnished drawing-room ... There were dance programmes with pencils attached, paper fans, paper chains, antimacassars on all the many chairs and sofas, and photos in frames all over the room. Several of these photos were of the great Irish Leader, but there was none of Mrs. O'Shea. (Mooney *Part 1* 108)

The 'girls' were the two Miss Parnells, who still lived in the Victorian stone house in undulating Wicklow hills. This once grand home now, for Mooney, 'seemed to reflect the fortunes of its owners.' (*Part 1* 108) The grounds were uncared for, the staff ageing and the inhabitants refusing to live in the present. Both of the 'girls' were disgusted at the sympathetic presentation of Mrs O'Shea in the play and looked on Mooney as a person with 'rather bad taste'. (Mooney *Part 1* 108) They made it clear that they could not understand how a respectable Irish woman would take it on. Mooney notes with a touch of humour: 'at least they presumed I was respectable.' (*Part 1* 108) For her, notions of respectability had come to mean little. It was always about interpreting the part the author had created, giving the character dignity and emotional truth. Lennox Robinson,



as director, cast an actress he knew would relish the part rather than worrying about the historical reputation.

The opening scene of Fearon’s play focuses on the first meeting of Parnell and Kate O’Shea. Mooney wore a nineteenth-century dress in black velvet and chiffon that she had designed and Denis Carey played Parnell. From that first meeting, the action shifts to William O’Shea’s discovery of his wife’s affair and the play concludes with Parnell’s downfall. As Mooney observed, the affair takes precedence over the politics in Fearon’s plot.

The *Irish Times* reviewer on 2<sup>nd</sup> October thought the play a ‘gallant failure’. He said that Carey’s ‘physique was rather against him’ in the role but he was ‘competent’ while Mooney was ‘excellent’. (‘New Play’ 6) All of the critics seemed incapable of seeing past the portrayal of Parnell as something other, or something more, than a patriotic political leader. A young actress in the Abbey Experimental Theatre attended and was mesmerised by Mooney’s performance. She remembered:

The play itself was little more than documentary, but their portrayals carried it to a revelation of passion seldom seen now. (Finlay 177)

In Fearon’s second version, Mrs O’Shea’s part was reduced and Parnell made the central feature.<sup>16</sup> Mooney was disgusted that the part became nothing more than ‘a dressed dummy’. (*Part 1* 109) She believed Fearon destroyed good drama for a political argument and points out, ‘This production was quite unsuccessful.’ (Mooney *Part 1* 109)

### Relationship with F. R. Higgins

On boarding the *Scythia* liner to travel from Belfast to America with the Abbey Company in the autumn of 1937, Ria Mooney hung over the railing on deck with producer F. R. (Fred) Higgins. Three convoluted paragraphs follow this scene in the memoir, as Mooney tries to convince the reader that their relationship was a familial one—through mutual relations in Trim, County Meath. (*Part 1* 113) It’s an attempt to persuade

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<sup>16</sup> This second production was directed by Hugh Hunt in October 1935

the reader, and possibly herself, that her connection with this married man was innocuous and above reproach. In an appendix to the volume, Higgins' place in her heart is fully revealed: he presented her with a silver ring sometime in the late 1930s. According to her own admission, Mooney wore the ring like a wedding troth until the metal wore away. (*Part 1* 120)

In the collection of books bequeathed to the National Library after her death is a book of Higgins' poetry entitled *Arable Holdings*. It is inscribed: 'To Ria, in a Californian twilight, as a memory of our American tour.' (Mooney NLI Acc 6548) The poem he wrote during that tour, 'A Wish for Ria', hung on the wall of her hideaway cottage in Glenree, Wicklow for decades. Knowing that their conversation on that exposed and windy deck was not about mutual relations, one wants to ask: what did they speak about? What drew them together? And how did this relationship shape Ria's career and life?

Higgins had little but disdain for most of the actors, telling his wife:

They are really laughable in their snobbery, style and behaviour—  
all except Paddy, Delaney and Mulhern and Dossie—I talk to  
these most of all—the others only annoy me.  
(Higgins NLI Mss 27,883(7))

He doesn't put Mooney in either group, but she is mentioned elsewhere. That sea crossing to the United States was a particularly choppy one, rendering the actors bedbound with nausea. In one letter, Higgins described to his wife how he visited the actors in their sick beds and then:

Dr Higgins and Nurse Mooney (she was the only woman who  
survived) went upstairs and [...] played House, the boat still  
heaving. (Higgins NLI Mss 27,883(7))

Mooney impressed him with her strength of mind, her focus and poise. Higgins was delicate and paranoid; he feared being away from home and doubted his ability to cope. She, on the other hand, was at ease with travel and used to making the best of strange surroundings. The Atlantic crossing wasn't new to her; she came to believe that fresh air and exercise on board enabled a passenger to avoid nausea. Regrettably, her reaction came later. In a cottage on the Aran Islands after a similarly choppy

crossing, she woke at 4am to find the whole building heaving and became violently ill. (Mooney *Part 1* 85) Outwardly strong and worldly, Mooney's turbulent moments were private.

Mooney's relationship with Higgins may have begun earlier, but it was strengthened during that long period travelling together from September 1937 to May 1938. To the rest of the company, it was an open secret. While Higgins was dour, rude and often spiteful, Mooney had a child-like frankness. She had an easy manner with strangers and the ability to make friendships and to foster them. At the same time, she was erudite, educated in European theatre and versed in American literature, through her exposure to the Harlem Renaissance. It may never be possible to fully explain the romantic connection between two historical figures, but there's no doubt that Mooney was useful to Higgins. Quite apart from his personal demeanour, Higgins was a poet with little practical theatre experience.

Since her appearance as Rosie Redmond, Mooney was detached from the other devout Catholic actresses and actors. Now she had been brought on tour with the first company, having been on stage with the second company for over three years, and she was outside of the actors' tight-knit circle. Although close enough to be privy to what was going on with the individual actors, she did not have particular allegiances to any of them. Such knowledge of personal details and Company gossip was the kind of information prized by the paranoid Higgins. At the same time, her intimacy with the man the other actresses openly despised cut her off from close friendship. Mooney was comfortable forever situated somewhere on the outside of the group, and it suited Higgins to have his lover there.

McGlone describes how, following the death of Yeats, Mooney and 'her poet stood together now at the head of the Abbey.' (71) While the image is attractive, it has no basis. Mooney moved around behind Higgins, perhaps whispering in his ear while they spent the day in Glencree or gently leading him in different directions with a prepared argument and presentation of a particular script, but she was never fully visible to those watching Higgins' strategic manoeuvres.

**New York: For the Second Time**

On arrival at the Edison Hotel in New York in the autumn of 1937, Ria Mooney took to her hotel bed. The Abbey Company were staying in the Art Deco hotel on West 47<sup>th</sup> Street, mere footsteps from Times Square, and the others had recovered from their seasickness. Higgins, already under strain from the business of the tour, wrote:

For the past two weeks, Ria Mooney is very sick. Doctors attending here. (Lucky for me she is not in *The Far-Off Hills*, which is now in its third week.) She has gone completely limp and the Doctors cannot make out what is the matter. (Higgins 27, 883(7))

Medics failed to diagnose anything; the illness may not have been physical. The city had a difficult history for the actress and now she struggled to cope with it. When she managed to get on stage, she was nothing but miserable about her performances. Decades later, on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1953, she recalled the time and confessed to friend Theresa Helburn:

[A]ll the complexes I developed at the Civic Rep Theatre came crowding down upon me. (YCAL Mss 436)

MaLiammóir had nurtured her; the actors of the Abbey Company were too wrapped up in their own affairs. Arthur Shields took Higgins onto the roof garden of the hotel, twenty-two floors up with a view over the lights of Broadway, and at times dosed him with bromide to calm his nerves. (Higgins 27,883(7)) Higgins couldn’t support Mooney, nor could the other actresses, who had no understanding of the fear that seized her on arrival back to the place where Le Gallienne had affected her confidence so badly. Mooney’s illness in the Edison Hotel coincided with the opening of the Abbey Company’s first play on Broadway: Teresa Deevy’s *Katie Roche*.

**Teresa Deevy and playing *Katie Roche***

In the spring of 1935, a thin, severe-looking woman arrived off the train from Waterford and headed for the Abbey Theatre. She reached the theatre just in time to take her seat before the orchestra finished and the curtain rose. Any excitement she’d felt on the journey dissipated rapidly in

the half-empty audience. Teresa (Tessa) Deevy was there to see the first performance of her one-act play *The King of Spain's Daughter* and was accompanied by her sister, Nell. Yet, the programme notes didn't match the script she'd submitted and the characters that appeared differed fundamentally from those she'd created. (Deevy TCD Mss 10722/8) Tessa continued to watch. She watched facial expressions, physical gestures and movements, both of those on the stage and in the audience around her. Where possible, she read the lips of the performers. The words were her own, but the intonation indecipherable. Despite how intently she watched, her deafness meant that Teresa (Tessa) Deevy could never understand all that was going on around her.

Although she'd been submitting plays to the Abbey for over a decade and had shared first prize in the Abbey Theatre new play competition in 1932, the Waterford native had thought carefully about attending that performance of *The King of Spain's Daughter*. She wrote to her friend, fellow writer Florence Hackett:

I'm afraid now I shan't be up to see it in Dublin. Fares are so high, and the play is so tiny a thing - Then it would mean staying a night or so in Dublin - all runs to so much money. (Deevy TCD Mss 10722/6)

When she changed her mind and did travel, it was a distressing experience:

The house was wretched! You could count the people. I think the production was good, but the producer's interpretation of the play was very different from my conception of it. (Deevy TCD Mss 10722/8)

Producer Fred Johnson had eradicated the 'gay air' that had been central to her composition. The 'light-hearted youth' she'd called Jim Harris was now a cruel, careworn man and Mrs Marks 'a weary apathetic woman, beaten by the world' while she had envisioned 'the big genial mother sort.' (Deevy TCD Mss 10722/8) For Deevy, the only source of solace was that when the central figure, Annie Kinsella, appeared on the grassy roadside: 'She was good, very good.' (Deevy TCD Mss 10722/8) The romantic dreamer, Annie, was aged 'about twenty' and wore under her dark shawl a red dress.

(Deevy *The King* 23) The actress didn’t have the golden hair Deevy described in the script: she was played by Ria Mooney.

Frank O’Connor, writer and board member, had been interested in Deevy’s work since her early submissions. After she wrote *Temporal Powers* in 1932, he sought Deevy out in the lobby of the Abbey to tell her:

I was enchanted by the technique of your play, its delicious invention and steady, perfectly controlled progression, its masterly climax without a hint of theatre. (Deevy TCD MSS 10722/81)

Deevy relied on her sister Nell to interpret. She had been deaf since the age of twenty and although her lip-reading was proficient, her work is marked by an abiding fascination with how people consistently try and fail to fully comprehend each other. In the early 1930s, she wrote to a friend to commend a play she’d read. It gives an insight into her sense of drama:

first of all delight in the atmosphere - the delicious turn of their talk - the absurdity and reality of them all.  
(Deevy TCD MSS 10722/1)

The real conflict, as she sees it, is in the ‘action of the soul.’ (Deevy TCD MSS 10722/1) In writing *The King of Spain’s Daughter*, Deevy focused on the ‘April day atmosphere’ and on holding the absurdity and reality of Anne Kinsella in careful balance. (Deevy TCD MSS 10722/8) Johnson eradicated the first, by changing the setting to the summer. Annie’s spirit was left to Mooney to portray. Joseph Holloway, who attended the opening night, was uncertain about the play, saying it had ‘an unusual theme’. (Holloway NLI Mss 1971) But Holloway was convinced that it was Mooney’s acting which ‘made it seem almost a masterpiece’ as she ‘revealed all the depth of feeling.’ (Holloway NLI Mss 1971)

As always, Mooney committed herself to interpreting the character as conceived by the author. The difficulty with playing Annie Kinsella, a woman forced to choose between indentured labour in the local factory and marriage, is that she is consistently nothing except inconsistent. In fact, the entire script of *The King of Spain’s Daughter* tends so much towards

hyperbole that it's difficult to read it as a serious situation. Annie is incapable of remembering accurately the bride she has just seen:

ANNIE. It was in pale gold I saw her.  
 JIM. (*Furious*) An' in shimmerin' green, an' in flamin' red, an' in milk-white when it will suit you!  
 (Deevy *The King* 28)

Annie's whimsy often slips into ignorance, and her fanciful imagination into deceit. So much so that, on reading, one can empathize with Jim's impatience and her father's anger. However, all indications suggest that it was Mooney's subtle talents that gave the character such presence. Her work on Bernard's *L'Invitation Au Voyage* meant that she understood how to work with an apparent absence of drama. Schooled by Le Gallienne in observing the slightest shifts of humour, in tracing emotional shifts in gear so that they flowed effortlessly, Mooney was one of the few actresses that could bring a sense of coherence to the role.

Given this success with Deevy's material, it may have been expected that Mooney would be cast as the leading lady in Deevy's next play *Katie Roche*. However, in 1936 she was cast as the 'odd little' unmarried woman Amelia Gregg, who is 'something over fifty' and lives in fear that the marriage of her brother will leave her homeless. (Deevy *Katie* 25) The title role was given to Eileen Crowe and the part of Stanislaus Gregg, her new husband, to F.J. McCormick. The casting is noteworthy because it gave the role of a young single Irish female seeking independence to a married woman: Eileen Crowe was married to devout Catholic F. J. McCormick. On stage, the Abbey directorate could be seen to explore ideas of female independence. But it was always in the context of male decision-making power and sheltered by the off-stage reality of the Catholic institution of marriage. The play has been discussed in detail in chapter two, but some details may be usefully repeated here.

*Katie Roche* explores the same subjects as *The King of Spain's Daughter* in a more protracted form. As the play opens, in the home of Amelia Gregg, the servant Katie is contemplating entering the convent. At

the same time, she wavers on the idea of marriage to a number of different men. Katie's social position is more complicated than Annie Kinsella's because of her parentage: her mother was unmarried and the identity of her father remains a mystery to her for most of the play. Stan's proposal of marriage comes with the confession that he loved her mother. As in *The King of Spain's Daughter*, there is futile and endless vacillation between choices, none of which offer Katie any kind of meaningful future.

KATIE.       *(goes to him)*. Is it me to be the woman behind you?  
A help at your work? Is that what you want? *(Eager.)*  
STAN.       You might indeed: you very well might *(so*  
*condescending that she is repulsed)*.  
*(Deevy Katie 40)*

Amelia Gregg functions only to point up the other option to Irish women: unmarried, she manages her brother and the house like his mother. The spinster sister both welcomes the new wife as an ally and fears her as a competitor with the power to put her out of the house. Often, Amelia and Stan speak of Katie as if she is a recalcitrant child:

AMELIA.     No, -- but I mean, she does her best. She's a brave  
little soul. *(Deevy Katie 108)*

In the play's final moments, when Stan has ordered Katie to accompany him to Dublin and she is 'bitter' and 'full of self pity', it is Amelia who urges her on. She encourages her to be brave, insisting:

AMELIA.     [...] If you're brave, you can make it grand. My  
dear, you must! *(Deevy Katie 113)*

Katie leaves 'exultant' and 'almost gaily', while Amelia is left to watch her from the doorway, as if contemplating the misery of her own predicament in comparison. *(Deevy Katie 113)*

Katie's triumphant departure with her violent husband has always drawn the focus of readers and critics. It can be overlooked that in performance, the final image left by Deevy is: 'AMELIA stands at the door, looking after her.' *(Deevy Katie 114)* With Crowe and McCormick in the wings, Ria Mooney held the stage. As the unmarried, solitary Amelia, she



was left to contemplate the position of Irish women, their lives, their options and their capacity to 'make it grand'. (Deevy *Katie* 113)

Deevy travelled to Dublin in March 1936 to spend a few days in rehearsal with the Abbey Company before *Katie Roche* premiered. She thought the new English producer, Hugh Hunt, to be young but full of enthusiasm and was struck with the industry and friendliness of the cast. Once the play was 'safely over' she could reflect on the whole experience and told Florence Hackett on 5<sup>th</sup> April: 'all this looks as if you are right in saying that "Katie" is my best.' (Deevy TCD Mss 10722/15)

Deevy had always hoped that one of her plays would be brought to America by the Abbey Company. (Deevy TCD Mss 10722/12) In 1937, the success of *Katie Roche* in Dublin led the board to choose the play to open the repertoire and the US tour in New York. But the subtle exploration of female independence was not popular with American audiences. The New York newspaper *Daily Mirror* was quick to pick up the error of that decision, reporting on the Abbey's 'half-hearted struggle with Teresa Deevy's shadow of a play *Katie Roche*, which they unwisely, we think, chose to open their current repertory engagement here.' (Craig UCD Mss LA28/231)

In New York, the Abbey was associated with the gentle humour of comedies such as Robinson's *The Far-Off Hills* or the traditional charm of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*. Calling it a 'shadow' of a play suggests not that they were disturbed by the patriarchal violence of Irish society, but that they failed to grasp the issues at stake and the subtlety of Deevy's writing. As mentioned above, Mooney was struggling to leave her hotel bedroom and *Katie Roche* was disappointing the American fans of the Company. Higgins decided to replace the play with more crowd-friendly fare, and full details of the failure on Broadway never reached Deevy.

Mooney had inhabited the romantic idealism of Deevy's heroines and also knew the harsh reality of the treatment of Irish women. She was ordered by Ernest Blythe to direct the play in 1949, and in a neat reversal of history she cast Eileen Crowe (the original Katie) as Amelia Gregg. In that instance, the nine-week run was a success, making Deevy 'feel like a

millionaire for the time being.’ (Deevy TCD MSS 10722/49) Mooney, then the theatre’s Director of Plays in English, described it as a ‘beautiful play,’ which she always thought of with ‘tears in my heart.’ (*Part 2* 90)

**The Women of J. M. Synge: Pegeen & Widow Quin**

Many Irish actresses aspire to play all the female parts in O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars* in the course of a lifetime: progressing from the prostitute Rosie to new bride Nora, to Mrs Gogan and finally the elderly Mrs Burgess covers a life span of performing. For Mooney, her career progression brought her through all the parts in Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*. With different casts, Mooney played the minor parts: Honor Blake (1926), Susan Brady (1928/1932) and Nelly Reilly (1936) before her casting as Pegeen Mike (Margaret Flaherty) in 1937. She took on the role for the US tour that opened that autumn, but the interpretation that impressed Yeats was largely ignored by US critics. During the Abbey Theatre Festival of Irish Drama in August 1938, she again played Pegeen, this time opposite Arthur Shields as Christopher Mahon. (Abbey Theatre Database) An important celebration of the Abbey, the festival was also, in retrospect, a final tribute to Yeats. To be chosen to play Synge’s Pegeen at the event was an honour and privilege. It was the last time she performed for Yeats before his death in France in January 1939.

There is one portrait of Ria Mooney hanging in the Abbey Theatre, but it is visible only to performers and stage hands. The portrait currently hangs on the wall between dressing rooms two and three (the Ladies’ dressing rooms). The portrait was painted by Gaetano de Gennaro and shows, in shocking bright colours, a rounded, beautiful Mooney as the Widow Quin in 1943. That production was designed by Seán Keating, an established artist Mooney persuaded Blythe to employ. (McGlone 78)

In her memoirs, the actress writes of wearing a Spanish-style tortoise shell comb in her hair and an embroidered shawl to reference the Spanish descent of Galway women. (*Part 2* 71) Keating was charged with erroneous costuming, but Mooney was convinced of its authenticity. The

portrait shows no comb and around her shoulders, there is a traditional plaid shawl. When the production opened on St Stephen's Day 1942, both Yeats and Higgins were dead. (Mooney's lover passed suddenly in January 1941.) She was facing into a new year and launching into a new phase of her career. People, de Gennaro included, would continue to overlook the life, imagination and colour she brought to the Irish stage.

### **Elizabeth Connor, Una Troy and *Mount Prospect***

In May 1940, Mooney spent a morning trying to write a letter to playwright Una Troy to thank her for the gift of an evening bag. *Mount Prospect: A Tragedy in Three Acts* had been staged at the Abbey Theatre weeks earlier and Mooney played the central role of Mrs Kennefick. After throwing away two drafts, she wrote the following:

You really are much too generous because I feel, honestly and truly in debt to you for having written it and to Frank Dermody for fighting for the part for me. It's meant a very great deal to me, I haven't had such compliments since I was in the Gate, in fact, numbers of people had forgotten I could act until they saw me as 'Mrs K' -- so it's I who should send presents.  
(Troy NLI Mss 35,687 (9))

Despite the usual mannerly gratitude of an actress to a playwright, there is pain in her admission that others had forgotten her skills. Some quality of this playwright's work captured Mooney's latent talent and re-inspired her; the play, and its provenance, offered her something vital.

The adjudicators of the Abbey Play Competition that year were George Shiels and P.S. O'Hegarty, assisted by Brinsley MacNamara. According to *The Irish Independent*, the first prize was shared between a W. D. Hepenstall (from Greystones) whose play *Today and Yesterday* was a comedy of modern Irish life and Connor's *Mount Prospect*, a tragedy of middle-class life in an Irish provincial town. (Troy NLI Mss 35,687 (9)) Connor travelled from Clonmel to accept the prize and she had lunch with Lennox Robinson in the Unicorn restaurant the following day. Although the

prize of fifty pounds was shared equally, some weeks later, on 12 February 1940, Robinson corresponded privately with Connor to say:

[I]t should of course have the whole prize, but we Directors preferred to leave the judgment to other people and so could only accept their opinions. [...] I think you have written a tremendous play. Your woman in it is as great, and greater, than Strindberg’s *The Father*. (Troy NLI Mss 35,687 (9))

Robinson was already concerned about casting the eldest son and Dermody had to fight for Mooney to have the role. (There were actresses closer in age to the character, such as Craig and Delaney.) But with parts assigned, the play was staged for the first time in April 1940. It drew good houses and played for a second week. *London Tatler* attended the premiere and deftly summarised how the play ‘deals with a kind of female Tartuffe in the Irish bogs’ and had ‘set Dublin talking.’ (Troy NLI Mss 35,687 (9)) In attendance that night were Lord Longford (of the Gate Theatre) and wife; Brinsley MacNamara; the painter Charles Lamb (a relative of Connor); the Lennox Robinsons, ‘an interesting pair’; Higgins and Mrs George Yeats, ‘Dublin’s most inveterate first-nighter’. (Troy NLI Mss 35,687 (9))

Much of the talk about the play centred on the fact that the play was based on a novel that had been banned in Ireland by the Censor, before being published in England. All of the action takes place in the drawing room of a grand house – ‘Mount Prospect’ – in an Irish provincial town. Robinson believed the playwright captures ‘all the quality of snobbish, country, county Cork.’ (Troy NLI Mss 35,687 (9))

The first scene stages the reading of Mr Kennefick’s will, when they learn the house is to be shared by his second wife and stepson Rex with his children from his first marriage, Peter and Mary. Early on, Mrs Kennefick reveals her attachment to her home:

Mrs Kennefick: I was so proud when I came here first as Edward’s wife -- as you know, Kate, I was past thirty and not handsome at my best and it seemed as if God had forgotten me. And then, after all, he made me Mrs Kennefick of Mount Prospect. This house has been my home for so long - I’ve worked and cared for it for twenty-three years - I feel it’s alive with me...  
(Troy *Mount Prospect* 8 NLI Mss 35,687 (9))

Gradually, the strange tendencies of Peter and Mary become apparent and the audience is left guessing to the motives of all involved. Sharing the house, as Mr Kennefick wished, seems an impossible resolution. Mooney's character is a pious member of the Legion of Mary and the Vincent de Paul society, who rules her children with medicine, egg flip and a domineering presence. In the novel on which the play is based she openly declares: 'I could never live out of Ireland, Rex. My kind would never get on away from here.' (Troy *Prospect Novel* 544 NLI Mss 36,685 (2))

While Peter struggles to run the solicitors' office inherited from his father, Rex is carousing. Peter insists Rex is lazy and useless; Mrs Kennefick argues Peter works too hard and needs to find help. She embodies practical sense and maternal devotion. Mrs Kennefick always knows what is best for her step-children, as she alone holds the secret of their inherited madness. Tensions rise when word reaches Mount Prospect that a girl in the village is pregnant with Rex's child, although she had been dating other men in a bid to conceal her state. Yet, contrary to the conventional ending in which true motives may be revealed and evil forces ousted, things take a different turn. The pregnancy subplot is neatly sidestepped with a timely motorcar accident, so that all focus remains on the family unit. Hugh Hunt called Deevy's Ireland a 'twilight world' of romantic female dreamers, but Connor's countryside is a place as black as night. (157)

Connor understood the social pressures on Irish women during this time. To some, she was Mrs Walsh, wife to the GP in Clonmel in Tipperary. To others, she was the banned novelist Elizabeth Connor, with avid readers across the UK and Europe. To her family of artist relations, she was Una Troy: the name she was given at birth. Reading the plot of her banned novel *Mount Prospect* alongside the play reveals the highly accomplished nature of the adaptation, dramatizing material that could be staged without scandal while still holding an audience's attention. Her subtle touch shapes each of her female characters into fascinating individuals: strong, dynamic women. In each case, there is a marked gap, a dramatic

space, between who they are and who they purport to be. Early in the play, Mrs Kennefick confesses to a female friend the strain of motherhood: ‘Sometimes I get so tired, thinking of others... But I shouldn’t say that.’ (Troy *Mount Prospect* 10 NLI Mss 35,687 (9))

In the novel, Mary is a married woman who has left Mount Prospect with her husband. Her marriage is unhappy, however, and she realizes that the feminine ideal she has worked to achieve bores her husband. She has an epiphany:

At least, she knew now that she could make no change in her husband; she could change only herself. (Troy *Prospect Novel* 468 NLI Mss 36,685 (2))

After much thought, Mary decides there is only one remedy for her ‘agonizingly dull’ union: ‘She must, of course, commit adultery.’ (Troy *Prospect Novel* 469 NLI Mss 36,685 (2))

Marital infidelity and female emancipation of any kind are excised from the play. In the stage adaptation, Mary is a fragile girl, almost a prisoner at home. She wants to become a doctor and tells Mrs Kennefick:

Mary. I could you know, Mother. I got my Matric at school and it would be quite easy – ... I want to go away. I want a life of my own.  
(Troy *Mount Prospect* Act 1 Scene 2 NLI Mss 35,687(9))

Despite opposition, Mary does talk back to her stepmother. Unlike the idealistic and hopelessly imaginative heroines penned by Deevy, Connor writes wise and cunning women, who see boundaries that can be gently poked without full transgression. At one point, she shares this exchange:

Mrs Kennefick. You're not fitted for this world, child.  
Mary. Who unfitted me?  
(Troy *Mount Prospect* Act 1 Scene 2 NLI Mss 35,687(9))

At the same time, the violence of the novel is tempered for the stage. In the book, Peter kills Rex in a clear display of the ‘strength of insanity’. (Troy *Prospect Novel* 558 NLI Mss 36,685 (2)) When they gather at his bedside in the final scene, Mrs Kennefick is convulsed with grief and ‘Mary reeled, swayed and leant heavily on the bed.’ The final order is then

a maternal plea driven by love, grief and desperation, and delivered in 'a croaking whisper': 'Mary ... take your ... hands off the ... white quilt.' (Troy *Prospect Novel* 563 NLI Mss 36,685 (2))

In the play, Peter taking out his rage on the drawing room furniture is the most violent section of the action. Mrs Kennefick watches from aside, calm and stately. In the final line of dialogue before the curtain falls, she requests the drawing room door be closed lest the servants overhear. From page to stage, there is a clear shift in emphasis from female desire to social propriety. Connor couldn't stage female emancipation, but she presented female power in a form palatable to the Abbey directorate.

The theatre critic from the *Irish Times* was stunned by 'the grip and compulsion of the moving and very human story' on 23 April 1940 and hoped the production signalled 'the rebirth of the serious play in the Abbey Theatre.' ('Abbey' 4) Gabriel Fallon thought Mooney's performance 'one of her best' but dismissed the character of Mrs Kennefick as 'almost fully drawn and nearly credible.' (Troy NLI Mss 35,687(9)) Robinson's reading of the character (quoted above) is more astute: she is a complex, unflinching portrait of an Irish woman in full control of her home, her family and her future. The audience's sympathy for the widow is manipulated by the playwright at every step of the action.

*Mount Prospect* is a dark and eerie thriller, a morbid analysis of Irish small-town society and a callous dissection of the Irish mother figure. While Elizabeth Connor would go on to future success with her novels, it is a huge loss to the National Theatre that she shifted her attention from the stage. She understood that the stage of the Abbey Theatre was not a space for the things she wrote about in her fiction: female emancipation, infidelity and power. Mary Kennefick can meddle with such issues because she will be declared 'mad' at the end of the play.

The part of Mrs Kennefick presented Mooney with a challenge worthy of her talents, and she rose to it. For a role of similar stature, she had to wait for Mrs Tyrone in Eugene O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey Into*

*Night*. That production opened in 1959, but there would be challenges in a different form before she returned to the stage as a performer.

### **The Abbey School of Acting**

In the autumn of 1935, Ria Mooney was appointed the Director of the Abbey School of Acting. Robinson’s alcoholism had become intolerable, but those who expected M. J. Dolan to replace him were surprised by Mooney’s designation. Given her history with the school and her experience in New York, it was a position to which she knew she was ideally suited. It also brought in an additional salary, while she continued to perform with the Company on the main stage.

After rehearsing during the day, Mooney tramped down the stairs to the Peacock Theatre, the smaller studio on the same site as the Abbey, to lead classes. She began the term with high ideals, some of which were lost in the daily toil necessary to keep the school operating. In February 1936, she presented to the board her new scheme for the school, which included classes in the theory of acting, the practice of acting and a separate class for the juvenile leads. (Minute Books NLI Acc 3961) The scheme was unanimously accepted, as was her proposal that Sara Payne (with a musical accompanist) give a class once a week in rhythmical movement. (Minute Books NLI Acc 3961)

Frank O’Connor would repeatedly interfere in her work, but Mooney dismissed her irritation with the intrusion to focus on recapturing the respectful observation and gentle mentoring that she had experienced at the Civic Repertory in New York. Students, she insisted, should be allowed to feel their way into parts. They should be allowed to experiment with every kind of role, even those that may not ostensibly suit them.

In a step outside of O’Connor’s comprehension, Mooney directed her charges with what she termed ‘poor movements’, or inadequate staging and gestures. This was based on the theory that their conception of the character could not then rely on outward gestures or movements. The student had to focus on fully inhabiting the mind of the character. Once



completely secure and confident in the interior life of the character, Mooney would assist the young actors with natural and minimal movements. (*Part 2* 69) In her memoirs, Mooney reiterates her belief that while only the ‘original creator’ could give somebody talent: ‘If you couldn’t teach to act, you could teach someone HOW to act.’ (*Part 2* 68)

It is the highest tribute to her work during those long evenings that not only did many future stars of the Abbey stage emerge from her tutelage, but the enthusiasm and professionalism of her charges engendered a company. Adopting a logo that merged the traditional Irish wolfhounds with a modern, geometric form, in 1937 Mooney’s students formed AET: the Abbey Experimental Theatre.

### **Experimenting with Form**

The concept of an experimental theatre group at the Abbey had been in the air for some time, but it was only in the spring of 1937 that the idea took formal shape. Mooney learnt that a senior student at the School of Acting, Cecil Ford, was organizing rehearsals at night with the intention of a public production. At first, Mooney believed the endeavour was premature but she was won over by Ford’s enthusiasm and industriousness. Together, director and student came to agree on a scheme for staging plays by foreign authors that were not welcome at the Abbey. W. B. Yeats thought of the AET as ‘a theatre which would “try out” plays rejected by the Abbey’. (Saddlemeyer 467) Robinson later dismissed the plays staged by the AET as ‘not impressive’ but said that at least ‘the Theatre has never been guilty of quenching young talent.’ (*Ireland’s Theatre* 154-5)

The students of the Abbey School financed this experiment themselves. Each student was a shareholder in the Society, with small weekly contributions constituting a share. They produced the plays, designed their own sets, made and painted the scenery and, when necessary, created their own costumes. Front of house, they ran the box office, the pit café, and they ushered people to their seats. The Directors of the Abbey chose the plays and provided the Peacock Theatre free of

charge. Hugh Hunt and Mooney also had a right to veto productions that didn't meet a certain standard. (There is no evidence Hunt was involved.)

A photograph of the AET Group during the production of *Harlequin's Positions* shows a total of fifty-eight students with a vast range in age: thirty seven men and twenty one women. (Fitzgerald) There was a small managing committee, comprising six students and Ria Mooney. One of those serving on the committee was a married woman with a young family at home (Josephine Fitzgerald); another a young lady with an ordinary day job (Shela Ward). George Yeats spoke of them all affectionately, urging her husband to send a telegram to wish them luck:

The 'Experimentalists' have been working with the enthusiasm of fanatics and the sense which fanatics do not usually possess. (Saddlemyer 467)

The students directed the first productions (in April 1937), but in 1939 Mooney took on the direction of Jack Yeats' *Harlequin's Positions*. Ian R. Walsh proposes that this production of the first play of the well-known artist was approved by Higgins after the death of W. B. Yeats. (41) In fact, weeks before the death of his brother, the playwright was in contact with Mooney about the production, or a possible one. Jack Yeats sent her notes of scenes while working on it, with the disclaimer: 'They are probably much too elaborate, though they may be of use as suggestions.' (Berg Mss 170B6454) He continued to send letters of inquiry, but rehearsals did not begin until April 1939. The following month, he added some lines to the script. Four times he attended rehearsals, 'each time with more respect for the way the company carried the days along'. (Pyle 154)

*Harlequin's Positions* ostensibly presents a conventional 'stranger in the house' plot, but it works in a radically different mode. It's a dramatic piece wholly dependent on images rather than words, very much in the modernist style, and thus it appealed directly to Mooney's sense of colour and shape. From the first reading, Mooney felt Jack Yeats 'could have contributed as much to the Irish theatre as he did to Irish painting.' (*Part 2* 111) The students were encouraged to restrict their movement as much as

possible and to speak the words with 'intelligence and conviction.' (Mooney *Part 2* 111) The playwright himself believed that 'acting' in the traditional sense would be fatal to the script. Instead, 'dialogue must flow from one actor to another each becoming nothing but an agent and putting all of Yeats into his words.' (Pyle 154) The dialogue should be nothing but words; the expression only that of the dramatist.

Mooney was a conduit between the playwright and cast. Both writer and actors needed confidence building as well as a disciplined hand. As she introduced the students to a text they had never seen the like of, she had to endow them with the techniques and assurance to work in this radically new mode. Simultaneously, she worked with Yeats to ensure her interpretation of the work was to his satisfaction. Meanwhile, she assured the Abbey directorate of an upcoming success. Performing this balancing act between all involved, there was little time to consider critics' opinions.

In the event, the *Irish Times* journalist treated it as a showcase for the Experimental Theatre actors, saying 'It gives nearly every member of the cast the opportunity of playing a leading part in at least one of the five acts.' ('The Peacock' 6) He lamented that parts of the play 'might have been better in the hands of more experienced performers,' and opined the play was 'a strange piece of material.' ('The Peacock' 6)

Mooney's powers of persuasion, particularly after the death of Higgins, had their limits. When she directed Jack Yeats' play *La La Noo* in May 1942, the production would have only one performance to prove itself. That Sunday night, the curtain rose to show a dingy bar where seven women had gathered to take shelter from the rain. Coming from the nearby athletic sports, these women meet a strange man and the publican. There is much of the traditional 'peasant quality' familiar to the Abbey audiences in *La La Noo*, but also many departures from this style.

The colour scheme of the set is distinctive. The bar and dresser are 'dingy blue', at the window hangs a 'dingy claret-coloured cotton half-curtain', and the door and outside shutter are 'green'. (Yeats 1) Seven women, ranging in age from nineteen to forty-five, advance to the bar

where two men sit. Yeats has not only considered the physical aspects of each woman, but he includes notes on colour: one wears 'heather tweed' and another a 'grey felt hat'. (Yeats 1) The publican has a 'slightly blue chin' while the stranger drinking with him has a 'red-grey moustache'. (Yeats 1)

The traditional tale that seems to be opening up slips rapidly into something closer to absurdism. The dialogue does not advance the plot; it hinders it. Some commentators have called Yeats' drama 'pre-Absurd' on this basis. (Gaddis Rose 35) The women have meandering discussions about American hats and bald men. The men's conversations about motorcars, bicycles and submarines have only the most tenuous of connection to the action. At the same time, Yeats meditates on the moral issues brought up by World War II, through the musings of his characters:

1st WOMAN: [W]e are getting into the way of thinking  
very little of a life. Holding it too cheap.  
(*La La Noo* 10)

And later:  
STRANGER: The world away from us this day is full of terrible  
cruel things.  
(*La La Noo* 23)

Mooney's attraction to the piece is evident—not only in the colour-scape of the set, but in the painterly arrangement of the women on every entrance, and the gentle, abstract progress of the plot with its modernist agenda. Much of Jack Yeats' philosophy on drama is captured in one line of dialogue. The '5<sup>th</sup> Woman' declares: 'Dreams don't go by contraries. They speak the truth.' (*La La Noo* 10) Regrettably, much of the audience was confused by the ending, which presents the senseless death of the stranger as he tries to drive the others away.

If Jack Yeats' drama was 'dream-like', his concept of drama was concrete. Mooney had artistic vision; she understood his theories, appreciated his art and her devotion to his work was steadfast. Despite its reception, Yeats knew how hard she had worked, without support from Abbey directors. In a letter to Mooney dated 3 February 1944, he said:

I do certainly know that it was yourself who interested F.R.  
Higgins sufficiently in *La La Noo* to put it on. (Berg Mss 170B6454)

The morning after the premiere, Jack Yeats sent Mooney a note from his Fitzwilliam Street home:

Thank you very much for the production you made of ‘La La Noo’ to say the play got ‘every chance’ is not quite enough - you added to it. Anytime the opportunity comes I would like you to say to the company that I believe every one of the players made the play. (Berg Mss 170B6454)

He insisted the play had been given every opportunity, but he knew it hadn’t made an impression on the board or on the audience, who were baffled. Jack Yeats told Mooney on 3 February 1944 that he believed:

any audience, whose skulls weren't filled with crumpled cellophane alone, and were well shepherded into a not-too-big theatre would get entertainment out of any of my plays - that were produced as well as *La La Noo* was produced. (Berg Mss 170B6454)

Mooney could not change the contents of skulls, or convince in any other way than honouring the script in production. She also had to recognize that the limits of her influence in the National Theatre were becoming apparent. The following year, Jack Yeats’ play *In the Sand* was rejected and she could do nothing for it. It was finally staged by the Experimental Theatre group in 1949 and was not professionally produced until 1964.

### **The Gaiety Theatre**

Ria Mooney always responded respectfully to strong leadership. Seán O’Casey, Eva Le Gallienne, W. B. Yeats and F.R. Higgins: All recognised the talents of this thoughtful, hard-working actress and were treated with veneration in return. Ernest Blythe, however, who replaced Higgins as Managing Director of the Abbey Theatre in 1941, tested her patience and sapped her usually boundless energy. Under him, she entered a period in her career of gradual and painful disempowerment. Blythe was an ex-Minister of Finance, who had earned the position at the Abbey as a result of his securing the theatre’s annual subsidy. But he had little time for the ‘poetry of theatre’ that Mooney prized; he was intent on using the theatre

to resurrect Irish as the national language. He viewed the Abbey as 'an instrument of national defence.' (Dowling 163)

The general gloom of World War II and the Irish Emergency was extending over Dublin, and now when Mooney escaped to her hut in Glencree at the weekends it was to grieve in private for Higgins. Although she struggled through a few productions under Blythe, both as director and performer, she was ready to leave the institution. A chance came when the Managing Director of the Gaiety Theatre decided to start his own acting school. Mooney applied for the position.

A portrait of Louis Elliman, once the Managing Director of the twelve-hundred-seat Gaiety Theatre at the top of Grafton Street, still hangs above the stairs leading to the dress circle. The glass cover catches the light of the chandeliers and almost obscures the thin face and bald head of the painter's subject. Elliman has an aquiline nose and wears a suit more suited to an undertaker than a theatre mogul. This serious expression challenged Mooney while it also promised full support for this venture. Soon, she was auditioning five hundred applicants for the group of young performers that would be exposed to her techniques for mentoring talent.

Although a touch resentful of being pressurised to show results sooner than planned, Mooney rose to Elliman's summons and staged a full-scale production of Heijermann's *The Good Hope*. She had been cast in this play at the Civic Repertory, and again would draw on Le Gallienne's technique and the confidence this experience gave her. There were two casts under her direction: one performed for the Sunday matinee and the second for the evening performance. To cater for the students without parts in the main show, she directed Robinson's one-act play *Crabbed Youth and Age* to be performed on the same day. After her retirement, Mooney still could not conceal the delight she felt when Elliman chided her for putting professionals on the stage and claiming they were amateurs. (Part 2 69)

Mooney's workload was continually dictated by her desire to express her creativity while also earning enough money to sustain not only

herself but now her family dependents also. Thus, while running the Gaiety School of Acting she accepted work from Roibéard O'Faracháin and Austin Clarke in their Dublin Verse Society. The position was effectively a 'stage manager', blocking movement, and it increased her workload to at least forty-two hours a week. But with much of her days spent drilling young actors in movement, she was happy to work solely with language and verse in this additional task.

As a director, Mooney's visual sense had always been primary. This period of working intensely with actors and verse drama reinforced her understanding of how actors use rhythm and voice. Mooney had learnt vocal technique directly from W. B. Yeats, when performing his verse dramas, and now she had the maturity to reflect on his teaching. Yet, it seems inevitable that she would quickly grow restless with the strict form and leave the society (newly christened the Lyric Theatre).

Once again, time away from the Abbey Theatre had given Mooney time to heal her broken heart, after Higgins' death. With the war finally over, life promised better things. MacLiammóir and Edwards re-staged her adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* at the Gaiety and two years later, she was asked to direct the London production of O'Casey's new play *Red Roses for Me*. To date, she had directed only three professional productions on the Abbey main stage and a number of student productions. Bronson Albery, who had come to Dublin to engage a director for *Red Roses for Me*, may have seen a burgeoning talent. Alternatively, he may have noted that she was one of the few people prepared to work with the irascible playwright.

Mooney's devotion to O'Casey had not wavered since he assisted her stint looking for work in London in the 1920s. Now, she took to corresponding with him regularly by letter and eventually visiting his family home in Devon to discuss her ideas for staging *Red Roses for Me*. Working patiently but determinedly with him to make cuts in the script and to inculcate the cast in the uncompromising expressionism of some scenes, she was largely credited with the success of the play. It ran in London for seventeen weeks. Mooney became annoyed by a lack of discipline among

the actors as the run progressed, but the production established her as a director of note. Doors may have been opened in the UK by the success, but Mooney had an agreement with Elliman. She returned to Dublin to stage another version of *Red Roses for Me* at the Gaiety Theatre.

In 1947, Mooney had a delight tinged with nostalgia when an old charge from Le Gallienne’s company of apprentices arrived in Dublin for her new cast. Burgess Meredith, now an American star of the stage and screen, had been cast in the leading role in *Winterset*, a play by Maxwell Anderson. His glamorous wife Paulette Gordon accompanied him to play opposite him. Also turning up for rehearsals under her direction at the Gaiety were her old mentor Michael MacLiammóir and seasoned actor Anew McMaster. She was finally granted casts and production budgets worthy of her experience, but in her memoir, Mooney gives the impression that she was not overly enamoured with her power as ‘director’. Instead, Mooney enthuses about the latest developments in light and sound technology. (*Part 2* 84) Immersed in the process, she had little time to reflect on her achievements. And as always with theatre, the pleasure of a successful run ended all too soon, leaving her once again at a crossroads.

Burgess Meredith wanted to include Mooney in his plans for a theatre company in Hollywood, while the Ensemble Theatre in London had sought her out as a potential teacher of acting with the responsibility of directing every third play. She had established an international reputation but Mooney knew both the thrill and painful reality of such tenuous offers; and she was no longer young enough to live on gin and chocolate as she had in her early adventures. (Johnston TCD Mss 10066/287/2633) As she pondered this dilemma and the potential implications of leaving Dublin, the Abbey Theatre entered stage left again, this time in the person of Roibéard O’Faracháin. Mooney always clung to the narrative of the theatre that had compelled her from a young age. She had affixed a narrative of magical import, of real significance, to the Irish National Theatre. She sought to position herself as a part of that tradition and that story; no matter how grim the reality that remained her ambition.



O'Faracháin had no post to offer Mooney when he approached her. Indeed, the board were seeking a Director of Plays fluent in the Irish language; but the notion of Mooney leaving the country to use her talents elsewhere left them disgruntled. The board somehow agreed to offer her a position, most likely consenting to Blythe's demand that it be a holding position until an Irish speaker presented himself. For Blythe, hiring Mooney was a strategic move to assist in silencing the criticism appearing in the newspapers in 1947. The minor scandal followed in the wake of Valentin Iremonger's outburst from the stalls of the Abbey about the quality of the productions. 'Ria was behind it, you see,' Blythe asserted years later to Vincent Dowling, who was then on the Players' Council. (Dowling 161) Blythe advised, 'Grasp the talon and the bird is lost!' (Dowling 161)

To those looking on, Mooney's work in the theatre was all-consuming, but she did have a family life few knew about. She continued to live with her father and aunt. As they grew elderly, she arranged a house move to a small new home in Goatstown, a suburb in the shelter of the Dublin Mountains on the south side of the city. In October 1953, Mooney told a friend in an exasperated tone 'I am the MAN of this household.' (YCAL Mss 436) To use 'this' rather than 'the' may suggest there was a 'household' where she was not the decision-maker: the Abbey Theatre.

One may speculate as to Blythe's true motives in offering Mooney the position at the Abbey, but in retrospect it seems she had no intention of taking any post other than Director of Plays in English at the Irish National Theatre. Thus, in January 1948 she once again walked through the lobby of the Abbey, to take up the role. Mooney shows gratitude for 'the privilege of working for my own country', although she henceforth worked for the Abbey directorate, something arguably different. (*Part 2* 85)

While she was 'the man' at home, at the theatre, Mooney remained the quiet and unassuming if secretly furious 'little woman', doing her best for productions between the Irish-language pantomimes that had become a staple of the repertoire. She fought to maintain artistic standards without any support – practically or emotionally. Mooney's days were long and full,

but seldom joyful. The day, or night if she had to watch a performance, ended with the long bus trip out to Goatstown. There, she was called on to be the cheerful, practical provider. One of her business letters, sent to New York in April 1955, had already been used as shopping list on which she reminded herself to bring home coffee and fruit cup. At weekends, if time and weather allowed, she would potter in the garden.

After a fire at the Abbey Theatre in the early hours of 18 July 1951, a crowd gathered to survey the charred remains of the building. Among them was a weary, disillusioned and openly upset Ria Mooney. She trudged through the stalls, looking at the burnt-out roof and scorched walls. To Mooney's dismay, some of the theatre staff gathered accused her of predicting the disaster, of foreseeing the destruction of the theatre, like a witch. (*Part 2* 102) Her memoir recounts this anecdote with obvious pain, yet in some ways Mooney was a soothsayer and visionary. The old building had been a vital part of her life; its current state was destroying her.

That day brought excruciating pain for all she'd lost, but Mooney recognized the potential for new life to rise from the ashes. That night, she performed in the Peacock Theatre. May Craig was not available to play Mrs Gogan, and Mooney replaced her. The audience loudly applauded the gallant cast in their makeshift costumes on the cramped stage. Afterwards, they drank champagne brought by a relative of Lady Gregory. That night, Mooney was determined positive change was coming. (*Part 2* 104)

### **After the Fire**

In 1953, a letter from an old colleague in the New York Theatre Guild, Theresa Helburn, arrived at the Abbey. It was a business letter for the Director of Plays, requesting a script by Louis D'Alton. One evening, miserable but buoyed by nervous exhaustion, Mooney responded. In comparison with the guarded prose of her memoir, the letter is an insight into her personal thoughts. On 27 October 1953 Mooney wrote:

I wish you'd let me work for you in New York, our National Theatre is so hopelessly mismanaged that it is the grave of all

one’s hopes; ideas are smothered at birth and to speak the language of the Theatre is to be looked upon as an arty arty person with grandiose ideas - for six years I have been as a voice crying in the wilderness. It would be heaven to have a School of Acting in New York. (YCAL Mss 436)

At this point, the Company had taken refuge in the Queen’s Theatre. (This supposedly temporary arrangement would last for almost fourteen years.) To Mooney’s despair, the repertoire was full of plays that were ‘monotonously alike’. (*Part 2* 113) Helburn’s polite reply quietly killed the idea of returning to New York. On reflection, Mooney told her:

As a matter of fact I'd DIE from the strain of life in your enormous capital. How you stand the pace I do not know! (YCAL Mss 436)

The women continued to correspond, Mooney delighting in the connection with the international theatre world, and happy to share her ‘Paris plans’. (YCAL Mss 436) O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars* again was providing a joyous challenge. She was directing a production that would open the Paris Festival in May. Blythe had even been persuaded to allow Michael O’Herlihy to design new sets. To be working on a ‘good’ play was, Mooney told her friend in April 1955, ‘a holiday for all of us!’ (YCAL Mss 436)

The production was more than a holiday: the Abbey Company received third prize in the festival, behind China’s Opera de Peking and Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble. European newspapers contained positive reviews, but Mooney returned to the Queen’s Theatre after this exhilarating reprieve to find that Dublin audiences thought little of the prestigious award and the status it brought.

### **Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey Into Night***

Ernest Blythe was delighted to bring back Frank Dermody as company director, in place of Mooney, in the spring of 1959. It was not an act of chicanery; Mooney conceded the position for something more valuable—the role of Mrs James Tyrone in Eugene O’Neill’s play *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*. After years of pressure from Mooney and from the ambitious young Vincent Dowling, Blythe conceded to stage the play. He

thought the project a harmless caper, which at worst could temporarily distract from his own agenda. With no understanding of the devotion of this small team to the epic family drama, he indulged the actors, hoping to benefit from the deal in the future.

The text demanded a thirteen-week rehearsal period, extended from the usual twelve days that had become management (or Blythe’s) policy. Six days a week, three to five hours a day, the cast rehearsed. Dowling remembers:

Even after the official rehearsals, in pubs or restaurants or walking the streets, afternoons, evenings and even nights, TP [McKenna] and I and often Philip [O’Flynn] went on teasing out this long, tightly woven, profoundly personal, painful material of O’Neill’s with Frank Dermody. (Dowling 203-4)

While the men paced the streets together, reciting O’Neill in the pubs and dark streets around Dublin, Mooney worked alone.

Mrs Mary Cavan James Tyrone, the mother, is fifty-four years old. She has a face that is ‘distinctly Irish in type’ and is ‘still striking’. (O’Neill 12) In her memoirs, Mooney devotes less than a page to describing the challenge of the part. She recalls attending to practical production work in the mornings, before rehearsing for the afternoon and then memorizing lines until late in the night. In private rehearsals at home, it took two and a half hours to speak the lines on cue with a friend. While recording the practical facts, the ageing actress says nothing of the physical and mental struggles during the production that many others in the cast remember.

Mooney studied O’Neill’s description:

Her voice is soft and attractive. When she is merry, there is a touch of Irish lilt in it. Her most appealing quality is the simple, unaffected charm of a shy convent-girl youthfulness she has never lost - an innate unworldly innocence. (O’Neill 13)

But this charm is laced with ‘extreme nervousness’, much of which the character carries in her hands. They are knotted with rheumatism ‘so that now they have an ugly crippled look’. (O’Neill 12) Mrs Tyrone is ever conscious of and humiliated by her fingers. As well as the lengthy monologues to memorise, with the melodious vocal work she was known

for, Mooney tried to perfect the physical characteristics of a morphine addict, focusing on how she held her hands to conceal their deformity. Such delicate work she had seen before; this echoes Le Gallienne concealing her burnt hands on the stage over twenty-five years before.

Dermody never stopped making demands of his male actors, tirelessly working on movement, on the poetry of the text and on finding the perfect stage images to carry the story over the four and a quarter hours running time. With Mooney, he worked differently: 'He gave her notes and direction quietly and privately, in deference to her age, her sex and her position as producer of the Abbey.' (Dowling 206) Dowling does not countenance that Dermody may have been acting in deference to her experience and acting skills. Dermody worked with her as she had mentored others: quietly, respectfully.

For the first time in many years, Mooney was an ordinary cast member. The detached, disciplined persona she had developed as director began to come away as she increasingly relied on her fellow actors. Some came to her Goatstown home to help her with line runs; others gently supported her backstage during the run when she was struggling with the dialogue and with nerves. The actress Kathleen Barrington recalled (in an interview with McGlone) how marvelous she was in rehearsals, how magical to watch while reciting lines, but how on stage some discomfort set in. (McGlone 184) Her old insecurity, her faltering belief in her skills when the audience sat on the other side of footlights had never gone away. Old age and weariness exacerbated the problem. Her terror that her performance wouldn't be 'perfect' haunted her.

Despite the 6.30pm curtain-up and a running time of over four hours, the audience was prompt and attentive at the opening performance in the Queen's Theatre on 28<sup>th</sup> April 1959. The *Irish Independent* admired all the cast, saying Mooney used her voice 'beautifully' and was 'superb in the nervous desperation and moving in the final witlessness of the mother.' ('Excellent Acting' 10) But rather than breaking new ground, the Abbey was seen to be ploughing 'rather poor soil'. ('Excellent Acting' 10) *Long Day's*

*Journey Into Night* was replaced on 11<sup>th</sup> May with John Murphy's *The Country Boy*. Somehow, Mooney had found time and mental energy to direct this new play while spending over four hours on stage each night.

In one of those audiences that settled into their seats early was an engineering student who was spending too much time hanging around in the drama society of University College Dublin. Patrick Laffan was stunned by the production: the mammoth text performed without cuts and the mesmerising lead actress. Even this inexperienced student recognised while these weren't 'the starriest actors', something special was happening at the Abbey; it was a major breakthrough for the institution. (Laffan) For Laffan, 'the sheer sincerity of the production was compelling.'

Laffan had no idea that night that when the play would be revived three years later, he would be in the wings. He joined the Company in the summer of 1961, auditioning for Blythe and Mooney less than a week after his graduation. For the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1962, there was a revival of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*; it was to be performed at the Queen's Theatre on alternate nights for two weeks. Mooney would still be the small, feisty, sexy woman Laffan remembered watching from the stalls, but this time he would be prompting her from a hidden spot in the wings. Indeed, he would be *trying to* prompt her, as she flailed desperately with lines and cues. It was often impossible to save her, even with his presence stage left and an official stage manager prompting from stage right.

During that revival, the character's extreme nervousness began to seep into real life. Somebody noticed that Mooney's balance was unsteady as she blocked scenes with the director. There were rumours of a fall from the stage when she appeared using a cane to help her walk, although nobody ever asked questions. McGlone interviewed a number of actors with vivid memories of the production. The accounts vary in their depiction of her state; many return to the one word: vulnerable. (McGlone 185)

In the three years after the Irish premiere of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Mooney directed six new plays at the Abbey. Nervous anxiety was now causing her increased spates of memory loss and she was notably

weaker and openly disillusioned. Her isolation was compounded by tensions backstage: the actors were moving towards a strike, demanding more money in tandem with an improved artistic regime. The newly-established Players’ Council sought more contemporary plays with longer rehearsal periods, and some of the most influential members thought little of Mooney’s old-fashioned discipline. There were malicious complaints that ‘she couldn’t direct traffic’. (Dowling 164) But there was still work for Mooney to do and her sense of theatre remained impeccable.

**Brian Friel’s *The Enemy Within***

With his usual distaste for anything slightly unconventional, in 1962 Ernest Blythe passed off to Mooney a new play entitled *An Enemy Within*. She had been repeatedly overlooked as a director for new productions and had chosen to bear the slights to her reputation with silent dignity. Despite her frailty, when she read the script by first-time playwright Brian Friel, she was captivated by the tale of St Columba and his struggle to choose between the monastic life and his home.

*The Enemy Within* stages an imagined life of St Columba and some of his faithful followers in Iona in 587AD. With warmth and wit, it puts modern dialogue into the mouths of these mythic figures. Although it didn’t achieve the same level of popular success as Friel’s later *Philadelphia, Here I Come*, it bears the marks of a growing dramatic consciousness: fluid dialogue, compelling characters and emotional ambition. The action is gentle; the drama is in the conflicts between the characters. Mooney cast Ray MacAnally in the lead and assembled a strong team of male actors around him. She arrived into the twelve-day rehearsal period knowing that some of those actors (such as Dowling) had little respect for her methods, but she was intent on honouring Friel’s work. Mooney was amongst the first to identify the talent of one of Ireland’s foremost playwrights.

Laffan, who appeared in one scene of that production, remembers Friel as a well-heeled schoolteacher with an acerbic wit, driving the entire cast around Derry in his posh new motorcar. (Laffan) Mooney didn’t

accompany the all-male company on that tour to Friel's hometown. Laffan also remembers the script as being 'kind of perfect' and the cast were deemed 'outstanding' by critics. (Laffan) Although he felt the play had weaknesses, the *Irish Press* critic was adamant on 7 August 1962: 'Ria Mooney's vigorous direction also helps to make this play one of the most adult and interesting the Abbey has given us recently.' ('Fine Study' 6) *Adult* and *interesting* were features that drew Mooney to plays.

The final production she directed at the Abbey, *Copperfaced Jack* (1963), was plagued by rows about unauthorized script changes and a general disrespect for the author that smacks of Blythe rather than the ever-courteous Mooney. Hugh Hunt claims she had a nervous breakdown; there is no evidence of this. (Hunt 185) At age sixty, Mooney resigned her position of Director of Plays in English, when her 'way at last became clear'. (*Part 2* 116) This carefully chosen phrase conceals the truth, but personal friends believe that Mooney finally retired only when she had secured money from an old friend in America to support herself. (Laffan)

With her relatives passed away, Mooney now lived alone in Goatstown, infirm and increasingly reclusive. Having awoken from 'the nightmare' of her last few years at the Abbey, she spent time writing her memoirs. (*Part 2* 116) Sporadically, she attended the theatre, where she was amused by the huge number of production staff listed in the programmes. The Abbey's new building she thought: 'functional – and quite without character'. (*Part 2* 116)

All her life, the theatre was Mooney's home; now it offered no solace. In fact, nothing did. In July 1969, she wrote to Mary O'Malley of the Lyric Theatre in Belfast, telling her of the death of Mrs Kick Erlanger (once Rita Romelli). She told her, 'I don't know what I would have done without my friend in America.' (Lyric Archive T4/851) Grief-stricken, Mooney wrote to O'Malley: 'I have lost all desire ever to take part in any performance, in any capacity.' (*Lyric* T4/851) Old friends and colleagues did their best to help, but her health deteriorated rapidly and Ria Mooney died on 3 January 1973. She left behind her memoirs, completed but unpublished.



**Closing Scene**

There was a party hosted by Mrs Martin Beck in an apartment on West 55<sup>th</sup> Street in New York in June 1956, with Mooney as the guest of honour, accompanied by her once-intimate friend Mrs Milton (Kick) Erlanger (Rita Romelli). Mooney was spending a month's holiday in New Jersey. These women had known each other since their thirties, when Mooney's artistic consciousness had started to take shape. This time, the fifty-three-year-old Mooney, a successful director, arrived in New York by airplane. Yet despite the external changes, Mooney believed: 'Women will never change. The fashions may change but women won't.' (*Part 2* 119) She always found in her New York circle affection and warmth that energized and rejuvenated her. As Mooney told Helburn in June 1956:

I can't tell you how happy I was to be back [in New York] again. How all that warm friendship one receives in America lifts and enlarges the spirit. My debt to your country increases with the years. (YCAL MSS 436)

For the women in Mrs Beck's house that evening, it was a time to catch up, to remember old times and share new plans.

There is a temptation to trace the origins of Mooney's theatre work to one artistic theory, but in fact there are several. From Yeats and the Fay brothers, she understood the work of Andre Antoine's Théâtre Libre and the style of performance at the Abbey. Working with Le Gallienne and Nazimova, she gained a firm grounding in Stanislavski, a theoretical basis adapted by the Civic Repertory theatre. Le Gallienne combined Stanislavski's system with the semi-religious artistic principles of Eleonora Duse. Although Le Gallienne intimidated her, Mooney learnt much from her. Duse championed the destruction of the ego, the complete abandonment of the personal to allow the body serve a higher power on the stage. Ria Mooney followed that path. She also admired the ideals of the Civic Repertory: the notion that everybody, regardless of financial circumstances or social status, had the right to access art and theatre of the highest quality and to appreciate its beauty.

With Le Gallienne, Mooney trained as an implicitly feminist director and teacher, guiding and mentoring others to come to their own understanding of their craft and aiding their individual creation of characters. Like her mentor, Mooney implemented a professional rehearsal process with well-honed technique, intellect, empathy and respect at its core. The failure of this regime at the Abbey Theatre arguably is more revealing of the artistic environment there under Blythe’s management than of Mooney’s talent. Outside of Ireland, it should be remembered, her direction of O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars* in 1955 was so esteemed that it put the Abbey Company in the same rank as the Berliner Ensemble.

Mooney brought back with her from the US a firm grounding in Stanislavski technique along with a clear understanding of the European philosophies of acting and her work also bore the mark of Le Gallienne’s strident feminism. She did her utmost to impart these ideals in Dublin, where it was permitted. While it is not appropriate to deem her the first Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre, as the title did not exist during her tenure, Mooney could claim the title of the first feminist director at the Irish National Theatre. To date, this contribution to Irish theatre history has never been acknowledged. Female artistic directors Lelia Doolan and Garry Hynes would follow in her footsteps, both with a clear understanding of what Mooney had aimed to achieve with her directing and teaching and where she had met resistance within the institution.

At the same time as she developed her acting craft, Mooney increasingly drew on modernist aesthetics and abstract art. She was a radical modernist in her art and her thinking; few in Dublin understood this mode at that time. She always moved enthusiastically into the future holding firm to the principles she’d adopted in her youth. By day, she worked with Irish dramatists and actors steeped in conservative drama and by night, she rehearsed with niche groups exploring experimental modes. Out of this dense complex of influences, she drew an aesthetic of beautiful simplicity. It is characteristic of Mooney that the only documented evidence of her theories is found in a personal letter she wrote to a

student. Encouraging him to continue to work on his talent, Mooney wrote to actor Pat Laffan on 25 June 1962 in a letter he keeps in a private collection:

Follow your instinct and listen to criticism, then try to analyse that criticism in stage terms. Work, so far as acting is concerned, is learning lines, moving easily and naturally in character and RELAXING INTO THE PART. Stupid people often make better actors than the more intelligent because they are less likely to work too hard on analysing character and leave their acting to instinct. (Laffan)

This simplicity of method can be traced directly to her casting as Rosie Redmond in *The Plough and the Stars*. Above all else, Mooney sought to understand, inhabit and honour the minds of individual women:

I knew how women behaved when they wore these [costumes], what they wore underneath or if they wore anything. Best of all I believed I knew what went on inside their heads. (*Part 2* 119)

Stanislavski believed: ‘empathy can be a more powerful prompt to creativity than personal emotion.’ (Carnicke 3) Mooney followed this teaching. Knowing what was going on inside the heads and feeling what was going on inside the hearts of Irish women, everything else became possible for Ria Mooney.

**Conclusion**

In November 1959, Arthur Shields paid a visit to Dublin from Los Angeles and he reported back to his third wife, Laurie, that he'd had dinner with old colleagues from the Abbey Company: Eileen Crowe, May Craig and Maureen Delaney. He shared with Laurie his enjoyment of their 'two-hour talk about old times'. (Shields T13/A/519) Many of the old times discussed featured three actresses not there that night: Frolie Mulhern (died 1939), Aideen O'Connor (died 1950), and Ria Mooney.

The cozy scene from 1959, with Craig and Crowe united and sharing memories with an old friend raises the question: can such longevity of career be deemed success? On the surface, Craig and Crowe would appear to have managed their careers and balanced their personal lives (and religious faith) with their dramatic art in a form that brought them both fulfillment, stability and comfort. Privately, we do not know. Neither woman left a record of their thoughts. One could go further and suggest that this management of their career and personal lives was connected to the conditions and constraints imposed on their generation of women: to their theatre and social training. They were successful, but they had inherited and internalized personal and professional limits; everything they achieved and all they chose to forego was placed within these invisible parameters for women set by Irish society during the Free State period.

If one accepts that this is the case, then the later generation of women struggled because they didn't follow their predecessors closely. Or, perhaps, we could say, they chose to struggle rather than follow the old model. We may view them as victims of changing times, or casualties of bad decisions. But as set out in Chapter 1, I choose to focus on the agency of these women. All were part of the first wave of professional Irish actresses that sought to be recognized for their theatrical work and not for their lifestyle. They developed artistic integrity and technique that demanded a full separation of their theatrical performances from their personal lives, when such separation was not granted to them at the Abbey.

O'Connor made a bid for a life that was as yet out of the reach of Irish women: a theatre actress, living in Hollywood with a man already married to someone else. It may have been bound to end in disappointment, but there is much to admire in her determination to live her life differently. Mulhern passed away before she could establish her career, but many of her happiest and most successful experiences also were in America. Mooney experienced the exoticism and the discipline of performing with Le Gallienne and the Civic Repertory Theatre Company, as well as working as a lead actress at the Gate Theatre and teaching many generations of actors in New York and in Dublin. She earned her living as an implicitly feminist director with the Gaiety Theatre, the Experimental Theatre Group in the Peacock Theatre and, in the latter years of her career, at the Abbey Theatre. Despite opportunities elsewhere, she persisted in returning to use her talents in the Irish National Theatre where she was invariably mistreated. Her contribution to the work of the institution and to theatre in general has not been recognized for its complexity and variety.

It may be that the key to understanding the complex and precarious position of an Irish actress in the Abbey Theatre of the 1930s lies in the distinction between the amateur and professional performer, and how these positions can be mapped onto the public and private spheres of life in Ireland during the Free State period. As previously noted, the material and class conditions of the time enforced the ideological separation of 'public' and 'private' (or familial) spheres. (O'Dowd 33) Events such as 'At Homes' provided light entertainment in a respectable, private space occupied for the most part by the middle and upper-classes. Other forms of 'theatre' (those demanding payment for entrance and compensation for performers) were public and therefore perceived as more licentious spaces. The work in the public arena was rarely deemed to be contributing to national culture or professional artistic endeavours. Mooney and others have spoken of the 'At Homes', where they performed sketches and songs in drawing rooms for evening entertainment. They were all 'play-acting' or, in the terms of Deevy's plays, participating in 'theatricals' – a whimsical

hobby for a class with leisure time. The Abbey Theatre of this time hovered between two spaces: neither wholly private nor dangerously public.

To draw once again on Morash and Richards' concept of representational space, the Abbey of the 1930s provided a theatrical space for women to fully emote in a protected, liminal place, to 'play' with ideas of choice and experiment with liberation without ever posing a threat to the social order. (7) In this space, which mirrored but yet was distinct from social reality, they could demonstrate power that was not in any way 'truthful' in the context of the Irish Free State. They could 'represent' ideas of female liberation and independence, without embodying them. The actresses of the Company in the 1930s were at the centre of this clash between 'representational' and 'conceived' space. Women who dared to embody such ideas rather than to 'represent' them, who showed passion, independence or any defiance of national feminine ideals in their lives off-stage, were reprimanded and reminded of their subordinate position.

Much like the demarcation of 'public' and 'private' space, the delineation of 'amateur' and 'professional' status in the Abbey Theatre Company is inherently problematic. In its true sense, amateur denotes a love or passion for an activity; this activity does not provide a wage. Professional denotes a certain level of skill or competency acquired from formal training; it also suggests that it is the main and paid occupation.

In its earliest form, the Abbey Company was comprised of shop girls (such as the Allgoods) and civil servants (e.g., Barry Fitzgerald and F.J. McCormick) who performed in their spare time, rehearsing in the evenings and performing at weekends. (It is useful to remember that both of these actors adopted stage names to protect their employment.) The Dublin Drama League was another group of people who met to rehearse and perform in the Abbey on the theatre's 'dark nights' of Sunday and Monday. But in this circle, being 'amateur' often denoted a social class that was not in need of the performers' (generally measly) wage. The actors were not workers being paid for their time and industry. Rather, they could devote

their interest to dramatic endeavours without financial compensation; they contributed time and educated intelligence to development Irish culture.

The actresses in this study came from disparate social classes, and the biographies of this thesis demonstrate how their gender, class and practical (material) circumstances shaped their artistic careers. Crowe and Craig retained respectable positions as Catholic wives and mothers, by careful management of their theatrical careers and public personae. Their societal role never detracted from their commitment to the National Theatre; their acting did not affect their social integrity.<sup>17</sup> Craig, in particular, could not be deemed a 'professional' as she never received adequate compensation for her labour; yet she was a full-time actress. Mulhern's social class also allowed her to invest her time and interest in her performing, without ever being dependent on the wages she received. When Mulhern threatened to leave Ireland and end the light evening entertainments that she provided to raise funds for the church, there is clear evidence that her family intervened. (Shields T13/A/150(41))

As middle-class girls, O'Connor and Mooney most readily fit the category of working actors developing a craft. They retained their position through tireless work, on and off the stage, to maintain themselves financially. Both biographies show evidence of reading and an on-going interest in theories developing around acting, performance, teaching and in theatre outside of Ireland. At the same time, the breadth of Mooney's career and her commitment to theatre marks her out as a radical modernist artist rather than a working-class 'labourer' with a 'craft'.

Mooney, Mulhern and O'Connor were successful in forging professional and personal lives with forays into independence and liberation, very different from the women that came before them. They were exposed to the role models of certain American women that had a lasting impact on their own sense of self and potential. Overseas, in their

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<sup>17</sup> The premiere of Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* in 1926, it should be noted, is the exception that highlights this rule by demonstrating the effects of transgressing such public/private boundaries.

work and lives, they sought to be recognized as professional performers and theatre artists, not merely 'Abbey actresses'. They set the path for generations of actresses that would come after them, providing the model for Irish women that seek to impress on the world their talent and spirit, and to assert themselves as performers worthy of international honours.

The porous distinctions between 'public' and 'private' and between 'professional' and 'amateur', the overlaps and exceptions, make the careers and lives of the Abbey Theatre actresses of the 1930s a particularly complex group to study in depth. It is necessary to assert that this commentary on Irish society, and the exploration of an actress's precarious position within in, comes from an in-depth study of individual lives. In seeking out the individual, the particular circumstances of five women, clear patterns emerged. The induction of these patterns allows a new understanding of the lives and work of female performers in the Free State.

As previously referenced, Gough has cited Irish history as presenting a challenge when it comes to separating women's objective reality from their allegorical images and metaphoric constructions. (7) Jackson has also drawn attention to the 'schism between the study of the historical and the study of contemporary feminist performance.' (174) I argue that this composite biography, which incorporates elements of theatre history and of performance theory, serves as a form of feminist historiography, taking on the challenge to explore the intersection of real and allegorical female lives and present a range of female performances from the same period of history. Joan Wallach Scott has set out the ideal form for feminist history. Scott states this history should be:

not the recounting of great deeds performed by women but the exposure of the silent and hidden operations of gender. [...] With such an approach, the history of women critically confronts the politics of existing histories and inevitably begins the rewriting of history. (Scott *Gender* 27)

This thesis seeks to contribute to such a re-writing of Irish theatre history. It does so to produce a re-constituted archive of Irish theatre that may allow a re-writing of the future for Irish women.



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## Appendix 2: Interview with Pat Laffan

### Appendix 2: Interview with Pat Laffan

#### Transcription of Recording/Notes

3 July 2013

7 Beechwood Park, Dun Laoghaire  
11am - coffee and buns

Currently suffering bouts of anxiety - panic attacks.  
'I'd do filming but I couldn't do stage work.'  
English-based filming jobs only.

'She didn't talk a lot about herself - None of us knew anything about America etc.'

'I was in 3 plays directed by her.'  
Prompted her in *Long Days Journey Into Night*.  
Did an interview in the Abbey with her and Blythe - a week after left Engineering in UCD

On way to Connecticut - to direct *Deirdre of the Sorrows* - claimed to have earlier draft.

The Buddhist - the now - having the will doing the work of the imagination.

Gaiety School - continuation of Ria's work and teaching ...

By then, early 1960s - she was being eased out.

November 1961: Brian Friel's *The Enemy Within*  
Awful play: *Copper Faced Jack*

She was being muscled out - Frank Dermody and Tomas MacAnna Mooney ever came back near the theatre after her retirement.

Needed money to keep her father.

'Ria reminds me greatly of Ninette De Valois (from Wicklow)'  
'She was small, feisty, attractive, sexy woman in her youth.'

Deirdre Mulrooney: Documentary on Yeats and dance.  
(perhaps similarity = Yeats' affection for Ria).

Brian Friel's *The Enemy Within*  
3 weeks rehearsal period : the play was 'kind of perfect'.  
All knew it was high quality  
De Paor woman to consult on costumes etc  
Play worked - did it in Derry

## Appendix 2: Interview with Pat Laffan

Friel: Well-heeled school teacher with fancy car - drove them around Derry 'Cute be jaysus'. Still hammering away up there (in Donegal)

Blythe was incredibly conventional - it was more 'artistic' - didn't take off in terms of audiences (alright; well reviewed) but the play did - espec after *Philadelphia*

Vincent Dowling's animosity to Ria Mooney: She told him he'd a tinny voice or something like that and she kept casting him as villains - he played Iggy in MacAnna's plays - known as 'PQ' or 'Piss Quick' Dowling.

Ria Mooney got Laffan a job on Guinness ad - wrote to thank her and sent flowers - she sent letter from Cunard Line in reply (June 1962 - copy provided.)

Appeared in *Lovers Meeting* - was a revival; didn't know she had been in original; half-wit woman; dentures flew out - didn't matter because it was in character.

Still in college when he saw *Long Day's Journey* - 'We knew it was a huge breakthrough for the Abbey' - They were given 2 months to rehearse - 'They weren't the starriest actors - but the sheer sincerity of the production was compelling.'

Revived in new Abbey: when he prompted Mooney from stage left (with official stage manager stage right). Couldn't prompt her - 'she was all over the place.'

Between first and second time, she was put on tranquilizers - may even have said it herself, although he can't be certain of that.

Laffan directed *Long Day's Journey* with Siobhan McKenna - she wasn't great - Once marvelous in rehearsals and may have been drunk that time.

Mooney much more contained in O'Neill - 'She knew where she was at.'

Kept scrapbooks from 1964 onwards.

Pretty sure the money came from the US for her to retire - she didn't hide these things. On goodish terms with some of the older actresses. Not sure if Eileen got on with her ---

Got to know and like Eileen Crowe - in *Shadow of a Gunman* - Laffan had no training and she had a go at him.

Michael O'Briain was going away for a film and they needed to replace him - play ran on for the whole summer.

May Craig and Eileen Crowe didn't speak to each other - asked for separate dressing rooms. Craig was 'A nice old one - used to help with make up etc.'

Shelah Richards - used to meet her in Dun Laoghaire 'looking for gossip.'

## Appendix 2: Interview with Pat Laffan

'The history of the Abbey is the history of the country - everything reflects on everything else.'

Arthur Shields saw me in Lennox Robinson's *Far Off Hills* (in part he had originated).

Eileen Crowe: wonderful in Lennox Robinson – Her timing was wonderful – She was marvellous in light plays – but over the top in O'Casey.  
She was Robinson's favourite actresses - he almost wrote parts for her.

Lennox Robinson was a great craftsman, one of the best.

I wouldn't be a bit surprised [if Mooney was a lesbian.]

That whole movement in the states - Juna Barnes.

There was a 'touch of the sapphic about her.'

Ria putting about the relationship with Higgins - that may have been exaggerated.

The theatre has always been a retreat for gay people - the Gate became ghettoised –  
'You couldn't get in unless you were gay!'

The Abbey was never - no one with a gay agenda has ever thrived - Patrick Mason tried - Garry Hynes didn't last long - she worked best in studio situations.

She's a fantastic survivor - so powerful - as is Lynne Parker. Both have a sense of humour.

When joined Queens - 1st: Lower dressing room - after a few months, invited up stairs to the dressing room there.

Drink being taken - outside toilet – People having a go at you and setting you up.

Never been in a production in London when there wasn't a row from the first day.

*The Far-Off Hills*: there was talk of turning it into a musical but it never happened

Morrison 'made dogs arse of *The Big House*' and not interested any more.

*Church Street*: stage version in the Queens and then a film version .

Hugh Hunt: quite dry - but very efficient - was in the war - very young, straight from Oxford - father killed in World War 1 - cousin of Cruickshank - Irish connections - father involved in 1912 Curragh mutiny.

Dermod left - Blythe got him out of a scandal when he accosted someone in a public toilet - disappeared to London - found job as clerk in British Railways. Talented but not able to sell himself.

Ria Mooney was brought in to clear up the situation with Lennox Robinson - very messy with drink.

Good production of *Plough and the Stars* - well designed and acted - quite powerful –  
'It had a lot of balls about it.' - O'Herlihy was an architectural student.

She had a good eye for actors – 'She was a worker.' - Maybe the Abbey wasn't suitable place but she needed to work - at Abbey could audition and get start.