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‘Shakespearean Productions at the Abbey Theatre: 1970-1985’

‘The full story of Shakespearean production in Ireland has yet to be told,’ wrote Christopher Murray in 1979. ‘When the full story comes to be told, the contribution of the Abbey Theatre will occupy no more than a footnote. Yet it is a footnote, one trusts, which is not without interest for theatre historians’ (66).

With this beginning, Murray presented an article that then set out to explore the first three productions of plays by Shakespeare at the Abbey Theatre: *King Lear* (1928), *Macbeth* (1934) and *Coriolanus* (1936) – all of which took place before the death of W. B. Yeats in 1939. As Murray points out, the loss of Yeats to the Abbey led to a long period of stagnation (and nationalism) at the theatre; this in turn produced a disengagement not only with Shakespeare but also with world drama more generally.

In his article, Murray demonstrates that the topic of Shakespeare at the Abbey is worthy of being far more than a mere footnote, however. His exploration of the design and direction of *King Lear*, not to mention the internal politics that led to the failure of *Macbeth*, offer fascinating perspectives on the history of the Abbey. By showing that the story of the Abbey Theatre is not just a story of its dramatists and artistic directors, Murray – as has happened throughout his career – creates an exemplary piece of scholarship, one that attends to the contributions of actors, designers and audience-members to the creation of the theatrical work.

If Murray’s essay aims to create an interesting ‘footnote’, my objective is to add to that footnote – and to take up the story where he leaves off: in 1971, when Shakespeare finally returned to the Abbey Theatre. I wish to follow his lead in highlighting the importance of the practitioner (directors, designers, actors) to the

reception of Shakespeare in Ireland. That analysis will be used to suggest that the alteration in the status of Shakespeare at Ireland's national theatre since the 1970s is largely due to the determination and ambition of one person: the director Joe Dowling – a case developed by a focus on Dowling's 1984 production of *The Merchant of Venice* (a production for which Murray wrote the programme note). In most countries internationally, a production of one of Shakespeare's best known comedies might not seem especially worth remarking upon, but Dowling's decision to stage this play must be seen as an unusually strong statement, especially when considered in relation to the Abbey's history and ethos.

The Abbey celebrated its eightieth birthday in that year, 1984 – yet Dowling's *Merchant* represented only their eleventh production of a play by Shakespeare.¹ It was, furthermore, the first time an Irish director had presented Shakespeare on the theatre's main stage since 1930, when Denis Johnston's production of *King Lear* was revived for a week. By exploring this production of *Merchant*, and by considering the Abbey's relationship with Shakespeare generally, it can be argued that Irish theatre history can be enriched by our paying more attention to the impact of non-Irish plays on Irish audiences and Irish theatre-makers generally. There is a need to rise to the challenge set by Chris Morash in his 2002 *History of Irish Theatre*: the 'history of Irish theatre,' Morash proposes, is (or perhaps more accurately should be) a 'history of Irish audiences' (1). Since the appearance of his book, scholars have worked to ensure that Irish theatre studies is no longer simply dedicated to plays written by Irish authors, but that the field also explores productions watched by ordinary Irish people (or productions of Irish plays watched by international audiences). In considering audiences as well as authors, there is a need to retrieve the histories of many forgotten people: the thousands of actors, directors, designers and producers who have staged

so many important works, for example. The retrieval of those histories will allow us to understand fully the significance in and for the Irish theatre of figures such as Joe Dowling. Doing so should also help to illustrate the importance to Irish culture of non-Irish writers: not just Shakespeare but also such frequently produced authors as Arthur Miller, Sam Shepard, Caryl Churchill, and David Mamet. And such a discussion may also highlight the benefit of the scholarly approach pioneered by Christopher Murray since the mid-1970s onwards: it is now unthinkable that a book about Shakespeare in Ireland would relegate the Abbey to a footnote, and this is true due to the work of both Dowling and Murray, the former as a practitioner and the latter as a scholar.

As has been implied already, the Abbey Theatre has had an uneasy relationship with Shakespeare throughout its history. It was not until 1928 (twenty-four years after its foundation) that the theatre first produced one his works, which was *King Lear* – and even then the theatre had grave reservations about that choice. While the production offered the great Abbey actor F. J. McCormick the opportunity to take on the role of Lear, the Abbey's directors had serious concerns about the rest of the company's technical abilities. They also had doubts about the professionalism of some of the players. That anxiety proved justified, as was shown when, in one performance, the final scene was delayed for several moments because Shelagh Richards (the actress playing Cordelia) was outside smoking a cigarette when she should have been onstage, playing dead. This event was recalled with horror by the theatre's senior managers for years to come.

Perhaps it was because of those risks that Yeats and Lennox Robinson had failed to consult Lady Gregory about the production beforehand – possibly from fear that her antipathy to its proposed director Denis Johnston might once again cause the

‘Old Lady to Say No’, as Gregory was reputed to have done with the Johnston play that later acquired that name. The Abbey company actors were also unhappy, with Arthur Shields considering himself to have been passed over unjustifiably for the role of director (according to Ronsley, 78), while the theatre’s manager J.H. Perrin was ‘miserable’ (wrote Gregory), because he was anticipating a heavy loss (113) – which, in the event, is exactly what transpired.

The production was not successful. Gregory was pleased mainly by the performance of McCormick: ‘*Lear* last night wonderful,’ she wrote in her journal; ‘McCormick[was] magnificent’ (117). In part, her admiration for his performance arose because she had advised him during the rehearsal period: in her journals she writes of having to reassure him about the part, due to his feeling ‘anxious and apprehensive’ about it (333). She also made the observation that ‘the task of *Lear* must have been a terrible one compressed into a few rehearsals’ (177). The diarist Joseph Holloway – himself a connoisseur of Shakespeare on the Dublin stage – also related the success of the production solely to McCormick, who had enjoyed ‘[a] night of triumph’, though only because he ‘carried the whole weight of the production’ alone (44). Yet such positivity quickly gave way to negativity. When a revival of the play in 1930 made a substantial loss, Gregory’s hostility grew: ‘*Lear* was put on to show what Denis Johnston can do’ she wrote, ‘But has but shown what he can’t’ (566).

Yeats was even more dismissive: as Murray puts it succinctly, he “hated the production” (72) – largely, it must be said, because Johnston had done what Yeats had hired him to do in the first place, which was to attempt to regenerate the theatre by adopting an experimental new approach. Faced with this antipathy from Yeats and Gregory, scholars of the Abbey have tended to overlook this production, on the

grounds that it was a commercial failure and a non-Irish play; there is also a tendency to assume that the opprobrium of the theatre's co-founders must mean that the production was an artistic failure too.

Yet the importance of this *Lear* is that it provided the first example of a tendency that has been evident in almost every subsequent production of Shakespeare at the Abbey – which is for the theatre to view the production of Shakespeare's plays as an opportunity for young directors and designers to shake the Abbey out of a perceived lethargy. 'You must wonder why Lennox and I are pushing Dennys Johnson [sic]' wrote Yeats to Gregory. 'My reason ... is that if we do not train our successors the theatre will fall into the hands of Con Curran or worse. I am thinking of Dennys Johnson as a possible director of the theatre' (778). So Johnston was actively encouraged to use the opportunity of staging *Lear* to stake a claim for the future of the Abbey. He did so by exploring ideas about theatre that he had encountered during his recent travels in Germany – as was noticeable in the designs. These are credited to Dorothy Travers-Smith but, as Murray shows in his article, they seem to have been based on sketches provided by Johnston himself. They were termed 'futurist' by Hugh Hunt (143), 'expressionist in inspiration' by Joseph Ronsley (79), and as 'jazz' by Lady Gregory (330). Those three terms mean very different things but all share a sense that the designs were innovative in quality – to an extent that may have been unnerving to at least some members of the audience. This suggests that the failure of the production was not so much artistic but that, perhaps, it was played in a style that was too unfamiliar for the Abbey's core audience, no to mention its management. In any case, the production was not a happy one, and of course Johnston did not become director of the Abbey (for more, see Lonergan and Murray).

There were two more productions of Shakespeare at the theatre in the 1930s. The first was a staging of *Macbeth* which Cyril Cusack, interviewed fifty years later, still recalled as a total disaster (ATA, *Merchant of Venice* press file²). This was followed in 1936 by a Hugh Hunt staging of *Coriolanus*, a production proposed by Yeats shortly after the theatre had first staged Sean O’Casey’s *Silver Tassie*. As Lauren Arrington writes:

The poet-statesman’s authoritarian politics and his opposition to the masses were at its height; in Yeats’s view, *Coriolanus* represented the type of intelligent political leader who was a victim of the whims of the mob An Abbey production might bring another profitable controversy to Dublin. (168)

Yeats was undoubtedly inspired by the riots that had greeted a Comédie Française production of that play in late 1933, in which, as Arrington describes it, ‘royalists and fascists used the plot as a springboard for their own political programmes, and the play bore the brunt’ (168). Yeats clearly hoped that one way of making the Abbey seem relevant again would be to provoke similar events in Dublin, and presumably he also wished to recapture something of the spirit of 1907 and 1926 when *The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Plough and the Stars* made the Abbey world famous – just as the Dubliners who ‘rioted’ in response to those plays were made internationally infamous, largely by Yeats’s subsequent writings. In the event, Dublin audiences proved themselves finally to have developed immunity to Yeats’s provocations, so although *Coriolanus* was both admired (by some) and criticised (by many), it was for the most part greeted with indifference, and failed to have his

desired reaction. It made a loss, and was quickly withdrawn, replaced by a crowd-pleaser by George Shields.

And from 1936 to 1971 no other Shakespeare play was staged at the theatre. There are many reasons for this neglect, one being that so many other people in Ireland did Shakespeare so well, from Anew McMaster's touring company, to Edwards and MacLiammoir at the Gate, to Tyrone Guthrie, whose modern-dress *Hamlet* divided opinion in Dublin when it was staged in 1950. But perhaps the chief reason was the taste of the Abbey's Director during that period, the much maligned Ernest Blythe who, when asked why the theatre would not stage Shakespeare, replied that the Abbey 'did not do foreign plays' (see Roche). That statement, incidentally, may be one of the first recorded instances of an Irish theatre practitioner defining Shakespeare in terms of foreignness: the tendency up to that point had been to see Shakespeare not as English but as belonging to the world, and indeed in their writings about the theatre, figures as diverse as Jonathan Swift and Douglas Hyde saw no inherent incompatibility between Shakespeare and Irishness (see Clare and O'Neill).

Blythe's de facto ban was lifted in 1971 when Hugh Hunt – after a 35 year wait – had a second chance to direct Shakespeare at the Abbey, when he staged *Macbeth*. The show programme reveals quite a lot about Hunt's attitude to the Abbey's history: after some advertisements, the first page of text began with the words 'Why Shakespeare?' There can have been few national theatres in the world that felt the need to ask such a question in order to justify the production of that writer's works. 'It has been rightly claimed by British and American actors,' wrote Hunt in response to the question, 'that to play Shakespeare is ... the final test of an actor's quality' and he expressed a determination to produce Shakespeare's work in a manner 'commensurate with his world importance' (7). In other words, Shakespeare

was no longer foreign – but he was perceived to represent a challenge that some actors might not be able to meet.

In the decade to follow, five further Shakespeare productions would be staged, all of them in the Peacock. The first two, which were also the most successful, were directed by Joe Dowling, who had by that time been appointed director of the Peacock. His productions were *Twelfth Night* in 1975 and *Much Ado About Nothing* in 1976. The latter play was particularly successful, touring from Dublin to Limerick, and attracting very positive press notices. That coverage focussed on the fact that the production would be Dowling's last at the Abbey Theatre – he was about to take up a role as Artistic Director of the Irish Theatre Company; and there was also some attention for the presence of Sorcha Cusack in the cast. But the major response in the media was to focus on the youth of the ensemble – with a young John Kavanagh especially praised for his portrayal of Benedick. That focus on youth was a dominant characteristic in the response to every Shakespeare production at the Peacock during that period, right up to Patrick Mason's *Winter's Tale* in 1980, which featured Liam Neeson and Colm Meeney, among others. So we see evidence here of the pattern established by Johnston in 1928: that of young actors, directors and designers being given an experimental space to produce Shakespeare – and by doing so, to regenerate the theatre in some way.

By 1980 it was well established that Shakespeare offered a way for the theatre to renew itself, especially by bringing in new practitioners. That pattern would recur in the 1990s when Gerard Stembridge produced a country and western version of *Comedy of Errors*, and has been a dominant feature of Fiach Mac Conghail's tenure at the Abbey, which in 2013 gave the young director Selina Cartmell her main-stage directorial debut with a production of *King Lear*, having previously offered Jimmy

Fay and Jason Byrne opportunities to stage Shakespeare's work. There was, however, another pattern established by Johnston's *Lear* in 1928, and that was for newspaper critics to suggest that the Abbey company lacked the strength in depth to stage Shakespeare successfully: that his works could be a star vehicle for actors such as McCormick – but that the performances in the less prominent roles were often unforgivably weak. In the 1970s, those criticisms tended to focus on the inter-related issues of voice and accent: the recurrent complaint was that too many of the actors were unable to master the verse – while others were unable to mask their Irish accents sufficiently well. Those performances were judged against what were perceived to be the norms of British theatre, the idea being that the 'right' way to do Shakespeare was to stage his work as it was being performed in London and Stratford-upon-Avon at that time – or, more precisely, as Irish critics *assumed* it was being performed in those places.

So to summarise, by 1980, the Abbey had established a pattern whereby Shakespeare could be admitted to the Abbey repertoire – albeit on its Peacock stage, and albeit as a force for innovation and renewal, rather than as the work of a comfortably accepted world dramatist such as Ibsen or Brecht. Tensions around the relationship between Shakespeare and English national identity remained evident. And there was a persistent underlying insecurity about the capacity of Irish actors to meet the challenges posed by Shakespeare, to live up to Hunt's notion that Shakespeare was the final test of an actor's quality. These are patterns that Dowling disrupted to far greater an extent when he was appointed Abbey Artistic Director in 1979: an achievement that no other director – before or after – has managed to match. He did so with two main stage productions: the first, in 1983, was of *Hamlet* and the second in 1984 was of *The Merchant of Venice*.

The 1983 *Hamlet* returned Shakespeare to the Abbey main stage for the first time since 1936 – a gap of almost a half-century. And this time the play was presented by the British director Michael Bogdanov – a brave and indeed telling appointment by Dowling, since Bogdanov had only three years earlier faced a charge of gross indecency for his production of Howard Brenton's *Romans in Britain* when it premiered at the Royal National Theatre in London. So again the notion that Shakespeare could regenerate the Irish theatre was evident – but this time Dowling was bringing that regenerative force to the theatre's main stage, hoping to bring some of Bogdanov's iconoclastic energy into the theatre. Bogdanov managed to avoid indecency on this occasion, but he did give a production with contemporary resonances. The play was, he thought, the 'story of a north European power struggle, with Claudius arming for war in a round-the-clock arms race'. Hamlet was the 'spanner in the war machine', a disgruntled student who 'should be king and isn't because he'd rather be pissing it up in Wittenberg'. Hamlet's death at the end was, he thought, a 'cover-up' on the part of Fortinbras and Horatio. And Polonius, Bogdanov claimed, was neither a buffoon nor a bore, but a 'politician of extraordinary capability. He could be the organiser of the Watergate break-in' (ATA *Hamlet* Press file)

As with Johnston's *Lear*, Bogdanov aimed for innovation not through changing the text but through design. The set and costumes sought to emphasise the military background that Bogdanov had envisaged. As the audience entered the theatre, they were confronted by the sight of drilling soldiers on stage; as the action began, they encountered not a ghost but the sound of helicopters buzzing overhead. The military setting was made clear in other ways, notably through the design of the costume of Claudius, who for most of the production appeared in full military dress.

Claudius's first lines were delivered as if from a balcony to a large crowd, the Abbey audience-members thus finding themselves addressed as if at a political rally – and therefore being involuntarily pressed into the action

Given that Bogdanov sought to present the play in a European rather than an Irish context, it is unsurprising that most of the performers delivered their lines in Standard English accents. In the lead role, Stephen Brennan seemed to have modelled his delivery on English precedents; reviewers at the time commented approvingly on the fact that he might almost have passed for a British actor (ATA). The exception to this style of playing was Desmond Perry as Polonius. Perry delivered his lines in a rural Irish accent, so that such phrases as 'so and so' (II, 1, 20) and 'by the mass' (II, 1, 54) were presented not as Elizabethan English but as contemporary Hiberno-English idiom. Bogdanov may have wanted Polonius to seem like Richard Nixon, but in Perry's performance he was much more like the Irish Taoiseach Charles Haughey: charismatic but scheming, and overwhelmingly dominated by self-interest. Perry's Polonius was, to borrow Bogdanov's phrasing, an Irish 'spanner in the war machine'. His Irish presence was unruly, mildly stereotyped, and at odds with the rest of the production. While Bogdanov used that tension well, his production also illuminated a problem at the core of the Abbey's approach to staging Shakespeare: the theatre continued to show that there was a difficulty with finding a way to perform Shakespeare that would be recognised as both good and Irish (for more on this *Hamlet* see Lonergan, 2012).

A year later, Dowling himself turned to Shakespeare, when he presented *The Merchant of Venice*. The production had a range of different ambitions, some complementary and some competing. As the advance press coverage for the production showed, the theatre was having serious financial difficulties, with Dowling

pointing out that the British National Theatre had more money for a single production than the Abbey received for an entire year's worth of performances. *Merchant* was therefore produced on a very limited budget of about £7,000, which is roughly equivalent to about \$25,000 today. It was also hoped that the production would bring in money – not only by attracting school audiences (who were specifically targeted by the theatre) but also as a Christmas-time production.

Another context was that the production offered the part of Shylock to the distinguished Irish actor Cyril Cusack – who was at that time was aged 74, and who had played in the 1930s *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus* at the theatre at the beginning of his career. And yet another context was that the play was presented during a season that gave premieres to *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* by Frank McGuinness and *Glengarry Glen Ross* by David Mamet (the former receiving its world and the latter its Irish premiere). There was also a revival of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* by Eugene O'Neill, the great Irish-American dramatist who includes in his play a joke about Shakespeare being an Irishman. Under Dowling's direction, the theatre was clearly focussing on issues of masculinity and sexuality in its programming, all of which proved relevant for the reception of *Merchant*.

For example, Fidelma Cullen, who played Portia, gave an interview with the *Evening Press* before the play's opening night, in which she explained how she was approaching her character. 'I don't know if Portia can be called the first liberated woman,' she said 'But she was possibly the first thinking woman. Portia is the one with the power and the money, the dominant character... [but] it's only when she dresses up in the court scene that she's really accepted' (ATA, *Merchant*). These themes and techniques – relating to cross-dressing, power, masculinity and money –

are also present in the work of Mamet and McGuinness. This affinity is a topic I return to below.

That is not to suggest that the play was wholly conventional – as has already been discussed, the tendency for Shakespeare directors at the Abbey is to be faithful to the script but innovative in design. Dowling’s innovation was to re-set the play to the eighteenth century, to present us with what the *Evening Press* called a ‘Georgian Shylock’. ‘That was a very interesting time visually,’ Dowling explained in press interviews at the time. ‘The age of reason and all that sort of thing. So it is interesting to speculate on how bigotry survived or even flourished there’ (ATA).

This decision certainly brings out the play’s tension between the apparent civility of the Christians and their apparent bigotry towards Shylock. The setting also brings into sharper focus the plight of Portia, whose status as a commodity in the marriage market becomes much clearer when she is viewed in a setting that recalls plays on that theme from Etherege and Wycherley onwards, including many plays by such Irish (or Irish-connected) authors as Farquhar, Congreve and Steele. But the key impact of that design was to enable a resolution of the problem that had beset *Hamlet* – that of combining Irishness with fidelity to Shakespeare. This was achieved in at least three ways.

First, and perhaps most obviously, the production seemed much closer to the works of Irish dramatists such as Goldsmith, Sheridan and Congreve: certainly, the visual style was much closer to *The Rivals* or *She Stoops to Conquer* than to the theatre’s previous productions of Shakespeare. Also interesting was the positioning of servants in the play: they acted as silent witnesses throughout the action, and their reactions – or their failures to react – provided a mute commentary on the action. Hence in performance, the first scene of the play, and its interactions between

Antonio and Basanio in particular, seemed to recall the first act of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*: in Wilde's play, a conversation about courtship is silently observed by a servant who can act (in some respects) as an onstage surrogate for the audience, and something similar happens in *Merchant*.

Secondly, the problem of accent and voice was almost – but not entirely – overcome. Rather than feeling pressured to deliver their lines in a recognisably 'Shakespearean' accent, the actors instead appeared to relax into something comparable to what they might have done for a production of Sheridan. The only Irish accents heard on stage came from the clowns, Launcelot and Gobbo, played by Barry McGovern and Eamonn Kelly respectively. These two comic actors delivered their lines in broad Dublin accents that would have been more likely to be found in the production of O'Casey that had just left the stage. This decision about accents continued a pattern that persists even now in Irish productions of Shakespeare, which is for Irish accents to be used only in the portrayal of the subordinate or comical roles.

Also notable is that Cusack in rehearsal suggested that Shylock ought to be accompanied everywhere he went by a boy – someone to hold his belongings and to carry messages for him. In some of the press coverage of the time, the boy's presence was seen as a Beckettian touch, though it may not have been intended as one. There may also have been some lingering memories of McGovern's performance as Clov in Beckett's *Endgame*, which had appeared at the Peacock earlier that summer. In any case, the change of setting allowed critics – and therefore, one presumes, audience-members – to find Irish resonances. It should also be stated that the Abbey archive contains no published criticism of any of the actors' delivery of lines – which is exceptional for a production of Shakespeare at that theatre.

Perhaps most significantly, the portrayal of Shylock can be seen as a retrieval of a key feature of British and Irish theatre history. The setting of the play in the mid-eighteenth century meant that it was being relocated to a time when on the real London and Dublin stages, portrayals of Shylock were becoming more positive – when the stereotypical make-up and accents were dispensed with in favour of a Shylock who was realistic and complex – more a victim than a villain, though still not wholly sympathetic. That transformation was led by Charles Macklin, the Irish actor who in some of his own writing sought to draw comparisons between the plight of the Irish and the status of Jewish people. Of course, the average Dublin Christmas-time theatregoer was unlikely to make an unprompted connection between Cusack and Macklin, but the association is tenable on the basis that Christopher Murray was invited to contribute a programme note about Macklin, which was joined by a second note by Ronit Lentin on the persistence of anti-Semitism. By linking Macklin with Cusack, Murray drew attention to a fascinating continuity in Irish theatre history – one that showed that the Irish engagement with Shakespeare has persevered for centuries, and is far richer than might have been evident when the Abbey first attempted to stage *Lear* in 1928.

Dowling's change of setting thus had the impact of defusing audience and critical expectation about what a Shakespeare play ought to sound like in Ireland – and by evoking associations with positive Anglo-Irish theatrical models, he also appears to have allowed the Abbey's audiences to discover unexpected relevance and resonances. The production also explored a substantial set of ideas about gender and anti-Semitism that were clearly noticed and elaborated upon in subsequent press coverage.

Yet the production also succeeded as a piece of good-natured Christmas entertainment, especially in the final act. As is often the case in good productions of this play, one of the strongest scenes was that between Lorenzo and Jessica at the start of Act V, a scene so good that it sometimes has the troubling impact of distracting the audience from Shylock's dispossession – while in this case also preparing them for a finale that included an elaborate dance, performed to music written by McGovern. Press coverage at the time, and the Abbey archive's own files, all suggest that this finale was greeted with great enthusiasm by audiences, who usually joined in, singing and clapping.

Dowling therefore presented a production that aimed to retrieve alternative Anglo-Irish histories, that considered the on-going impact of prejudice, and that used design to find new ways of approaching old ideas. Those achievements are important in their own right, but we could say almost exactly the same things about the Abbey's premiere in 1984 of McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster* – it, too, was a retrieval of Anglo-Irish histories with an innovative design and some striking assertions about the persistence of prejudice. This affinity is one simple example of how an Irish play was produced and received in a context that was determined partly by the production of a Shakespeare play at much the same time, just as the Shakespeare play was affected by the production of the McGuinness play. In short, we cannot fully understand one until we understand the other.

Shortly after *Merchant* was produced, Dowling left the Abbey for the Gaiety. He had produced seven Shakespeare plays during the previous eleven years, first as Director of the Peacock and then as Director of the Abbey. In the subsequent 21 years – until the arrival of Fiach Mac Conghail in 2005 -- Shakespeare was produced only three more times on the main stage of the Abbey. By the time Mac Conghail turned

the theatre's attention back to Shakespeare, it was as if the Abbey was starting from the beginning again – the old anxieties about voice and national identity had resurfaced, and yet again there were editorials where again the question 'Why Shakespeare?' was being asked in various ways (for one example of this tendency, see O'Toole).

To conclude, I would suggest that the history of Shakespeare at the Abbey tells us a great deal about that theatre's institutional memory, and about its institutional insecurities. Those characteristics are important in their own right, but they also offer new ways of thinking about the staging of Irish plays. Furthermore, analysing Shakespearean production reveals the importance of Dowling's leadership of the Abbey – showing how he set out to dismantle prejudices, to innovate, and to prove to Irish actors that they could actually perform in these plays.

The key point, however, is one originally made by Christopher Murray in 1979. Writing about the re-opening of the Abbey in 1966 and the new approach to Shakespeare signalled by the Hugh Hunt *Macbeth* in 1971, Murray notes that:

A new Ireland was coming into being. The old nationalist ideals were gradually giving way to outward-looking, cosmopolitan attitudes to theatre as to affairs in general. Shakespeare returned to the repertory in 1971 and since that time has received successful productions several times in a new spirit of gaiety and youthful enjoyment (78).

As Murray shows, then, one of the great fortunes of being an Irish-theatre goer is that Shakespeare's work can still be seen as something new, something youthful. It is

curious that the Irish theatre has yet to move from youth into a more mature attitude towards Shakespeare: but that, too, is a topic that would merit more than a footnote.

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Notes

¹ The full list of productions of Shakespeare at the Abbey up to 1984 is as follows.
King Lear (1928, 1930, dir. Denis Johnston); *Macbeth* (1934, dir. Blandon Peake);
Coriolanus (1936, dir. Hugh Hunt); *Macbeth* (1971, dir. Hugh Hunt); *Twelfth Night*
 (1975, dir Joe Dowling); *Much Ado About Nothing* (1976; dir. Joe Dowling), *Measure
 for Measure* (1977, dir. Pat Laffan); *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1979, dir. Tomas
 Mac Anna); *Winter's Tale* (1980, dir. Patrick Mason); *Hamlet* (1983; dir. Michael
 Bogdanov); *Merchant of Venice* (1984; dir. Joe Dowling).

² The abbreviation ATA refers to material consulted at the Abbey Theatre archive. All
 material quoted in this article refers to press clippings which as yet are uncatalogued.