

IRISH IDENTITY ONSTAGE: HOW IRISH CULTURE, NATIONALISM, AND REBELLION MOLDED THE ABBEY THEATRE INTO IRELAND'S NATIONAL THEATRE

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If W.B. Yeats had ever written a play about the history of the Anglo-Irish War, the 1916 Rising may well have been the inciting incident – the occurrence that set subsequent events in motion. Not only did it set events in motion politically or militarily, though it certainly had those effects, it also became a point of inspiration for subsequent Irish Republicans who went on to fight for the IRA or at least tacitly support it. Of course, events like the Rising do not just happen without cause. The backstory is as important as the story it engenders. Just as the architects of the 1916 Rising sought to increase Irish national consciousness leading up to the clash (O'Malley 47), the founders of the Abbey Theatre sought to do similarly, except with performance in the place of violence.

On a rainy afternoon in September 1897, three Irish writers sat in a drawing room in a house in County Galway and decided to form a theatre. These were not just average authors, but Edward Martyn, Lady Gregory, and W.B. Yeats. Lady Gregory later noted that “though [she] had never been at all interested in theatres,” it was “a pity [there was] no Irish theatre where such plays could be given” (Gregory 6). Indeed, when all three came together they realized that a theatre was just the creative spark that Ireland needed. They were inspired to form a performance space that was not commercial, but based on a system of patronage. What was at first called the Irish Literary Theatre and the National Theatre Society became the Abbey Theatre in 1904 and the National Theatre of Ireland in 1925 (Morash 115). However, it is the tumultuous years leading up to 1925 that proved the most crucial for the development of the cultural and political nationalism that shaped the artistic vision of the Abbey Theatre and led to its designation as Ireland's National Theatre.

When embarking upon this discussion of national theatre, it is important to determine a definition of the term, what this designation means and why is it so important to have one. A national theatre is a playhouse that is subsidized by the government in its home country. It can be partially or fully funded (the National in London and the Abbey have subscriber bases as well), producing plays that contribute pieces to the puzzle of its home state's national identity. Even though it is not necessary for a country to have a national theatre, if a state has a good one it provides a sense of national pride and a reference point for foreigners looking to learn more about the country. Good theatre also attracts tourists and can add to the cultural and artistic reputation of a state.

The Abbey was not just a theatre; it was the first national theatre in the western world ("Abbey Theatre"). Yes, it had seats, lights, and a stage, but it represented much more than that. Seeking to depict Ireland as "not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment [...] but the home of an ancient idealism," the founders produced plays written for Irish audiences that described particularly Irish ways of life (Gregory 8-9). In its aims to capture only the Irish experience, the theatre was not only "national," but "nationalist."

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson defines the nation as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 7-8). Yes, most nations have delineated borders marked by signposts and map lines. However, a nation is also formed as a place in the imagination. Though a man may never meet most of the people in his country, he can identify with them based on the fact that they are of his ilk; a part of the nation formed not only on paper, but in his mind. Therefore, nationalism is the love of one's nation and its contents: the people, the land, and the sunrises and sunsets. This zeal for a country can include the willingness to defend it and even to die for it (7-8). In the Irish case, nationalism has long been a way of subverting English rule in Ireland and keeping alive the dream of an Irish state.

Though Ireland's history of oppression is a key inspiration for Irish nationalism, Irish myth and ancient traditions have also been focal points for the movement (English 37-38, 483-484). In his introduction to *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm discusses how states or groups can create new rituals even while referring to them as ancient customs: "What it does is to give any desired change (or resistance to innovation) the sanction of precedent, social continuity and natural law as expressed in history" (Hobsbawm 2). The founders of the Abbey called on a practice of traditional Irish folk theatre (as well as characters from mythology) to justify why Ireland should have its own Irish theatre that produced plays created at the source (Yeats, "Preface" 1). Hobsbawm goes on to say that "inventing traditions [...] is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition" (4). Indeed, the Abbey put on plays like Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* and *Cathleen ni Houlihan* as well as Lady Gregory's *The Rising of the Moon*, which depicted times past. The founders of the theatre sought to create a contemporary theatre scene by relying on Ireland's folkloric history to show that their playhouse was a natural continuation of this tradition.

Irish nationalism also takes on a distinctly Catholic flavour. According to Richard English, "from the Reformation onwards, Catholic faith and Irish distinctiveness were interwoven, and religion rather than ethnic unity was the binding element in the seventeenth century Irish proto-nation" (442). Indeed, nationalist skirmishes often focused on Catholic problems. Though one did not have to be Catholic to be a nationalist, many elements of the nationalist struggle came to be defined by principles of Catholicism. In constructing an Irish identity, nationalists focused on what most of them were not:

namely not British, and by association, not Protestant. This opposition allowed for a specific type of Catholic nationalism to be created. From the Fenians all the way down to Sinn Féin and the IRA, many Irish people took nationalist stands and followed nationalist political parties, defining themselves in opposition to what they viewed as an occupying power (179-181, 257, 442, 503-506).

Though Yeats and Gregory were Protestants, they were not necessarily Unionists. In fact, both “chafed under the dead hand of conservative Irish Protestant society and [were] conscious that change was afoot” (Foster 1: 109). Yeats and Gregory would drift back and forth between enthusiastic and more tepid nationalism throughout the first and second decades of the twentieth century. However, at the threshold of the new century, both seemed optimistic about the idea of Irish independence. Yeats joined the “armchair-Fenian” Young Ireland Society in 1885, and Lady Gregory professed her nationalist leanings in a magazine article in 1900, just as the Abbey was getting up on its feet (Foster 1: 43, 169). Clearly, political ideology would increasingly take precedence over religious affiliation for both theatre founders.

In this way, the Irish National Theatre also came out in resistance to Britain. Indeed, the Abbey was an endeavour of “nation-building,” as Yeats, Lady Gregory, Martyn, and company chose and wrote plays that defined what it meant to be Irish (Trotter xiv-xv). “To enact an idealized image of the Irish nation on the stage was to embody a representation of the Irish counter to the negative images found in English discourse and to the oppression or colonialization” that Irish nationalists claimed they dealt with every day (Trotter 6). Indeed, the three founders began to create a picture of the Irish nation as it was and as they wished it to be. Irish republicans were starting to do this as well. The push for nationhood would come to a head in the next decade.

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The second decade of the twentieth century was a pivotal one in Irish history. In 1916 the Irish nationalist struggle for a republic left the arena of rhetoric and occupied the Dublin General Post Office in a violent revolt. After the rebellion was put down and its leaders executed, the Anglo-Irish War followed several years later and thousands of Irish rebels fought for Ireland’s freedom. This struggle finally culminated in a treaty in December of 1921 (Norman 259-262, 272).

W.B. Yeats constantly sought to resurrect a notion of “Romantic Ireland” that he perceived to have perished in the early nineteen-teens with the defeat of the third Home Rule Bill and the creation of both the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1912 and the Irish Volunteer Force in 1913 (Norman 249-250). For Yeats, the formation of these units cemented the reality that there were “two rival nationalisms” at work in Ireland that had differences in religion as their driving force. He commemorated the month of September 1913 with a lament about the momentum he thought Irish people had lost

during the centuries-long fight for self-determination. In his poem, titled plainly “September 1913,” Yeats wrote:

What need you, being come to sense,
 But fumble in a greasy till
 And add the halfpence to the pence
 And prayer to shivering prayer, until
 You have dried the marrow from the bone:
 For men were born to pray and save;
 Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,
 It’s with O’Leary in the grave. (*Collected Poems* 107)

John O’Leary was a founding member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a rebel organization formed in resistance to British rule in the nineteenth century. He organized opposition to the Irish Parliamentary Party. Later in life he was also a supporter of nationalist writers and rebels and became friendly with Yeats. He died in 1907 (Maume, McGee). Yeats equated the death of O’Leary with the fading of “Romantic Ireland,” because O’Leary was a staunch nationalist who fought for Irish freedom and self-governance. In the poem, Yeats despairs at the apathy and shortsightedness of the Catholic and bourgeois classes who will not lift a hand for Irish freedom. The twin strictures of Catholic morality and rigid adherence to laws imposed by England constrained the Irish capacity to support the fight for self-determination. This lack of heroism from a generation who “were born to pray and save” rather than act is an attitude that Yeats regarded as unfortunate as well as disrespectful to the memory of John O’Leary and other men who fought and died for an Irish Free State (Waters).

Yeats was also a participant. In April of 1912 he signed his name “to a public letter from Irish Protestants who supported Home Rule and contradicted the claims of unionist politicians that they feared for their future in an independent Ireland” (Foster 1: 459). Those who signed the letter were mainly average middle-class professionals living in Dublin, not radical nationalists. This group believed that a new Irish government with a Catholic majority would not discriminate against the Protestant minority. However, though Yeats was a Protestant who was tolerant of Catholicism, he would not go so far as to support the establishment of the British Board of Film Censors (1912) in Britain, which, he feared, the Irish Catholic church might use to limit media coverage of issues which they viewed to be morally reprehensible like divorce. Barring the two extremes of Catholic discrimination against Protestants, or Protestant discrimination against Catholics, Yeats was a Protestant for Home Rule and he wanted the same benefits his minority religion was given under British oversight for the followers of the majority religion in Ireland (459). Despite his dealings in the realm of policy, Yeats also thought “that a man of letters should have no part with [politics], for his life if it has meaning at all is the discovery of reality” (qtd. in Foster 1: 460). Though Yeats’s dramatic work hardly ever broached politics (he reserved his political laments for his poetry), they were certainly allegories for the modern Irish situation. This was never truer than in the nineteen-teens. Therefore, though Yeats’s statement is technically accurate, there were also artful nationalist thematic undercurrents at

work. As can be seen in the plays the poet wrote for the Abbey, Yeats was for Ireland before he was affiliated with any religion or creed. However, in those days, supporting Ireland in its unadulterated, purely Irish form – that “Romantic Ireland” that Yeats so eloquently bemoaned the loss of in “September 1913” – was a political statement nonetheless.

The situation in Ireland was becoming more intense. The realities of a country rehearsing for an insurrection crept its way into everyday life. People who normally would not pick up a pen were writing plays and staging them in avant-garde ways in order to express how they felt about the current tense political and social situation. These same people would then rush “from rehearsals to the drill hall” in order to be literally prepared for any kind of violent clash. One actress even began performing in variety shows to raise funds for the purchase of weapons (Morash 152). In short, things were getting seriously dangerous, and those involved with the Abbey Theatre would either be close observers or participants in this impending madness.

Just three years later, the 1916 Rising presented itself as the cataclysm that Irish nationalists were waiting for. On Easter Monday, 1,000 Irish nationalist Republicans descended on Dublin, taking over the General Post Office. A week later it was over and many were executed (Norman 259-262). One of the Abbey’s actors was the first man to die in the Rising (McHugh 105). In the aftermath, the members of the Abbey were obviously shaken. Roger McHugh has noted a shift in the general attitudes of the public after the Rising. He quotes the autobiography of IRA Officer Ernie O’Malley, who recognized a change in the Irish population: “Something strange stirred in the people, some feeling long since buried, a sense of communion with the fighting dead generations, for the dead walked around again” (qtd. in McHugh 105).

The rebirth of this revolutionary spirit was something that Yeats recognized as well. He lamented the violent change in Irish society wrought by the Rising and the subsequent Anglo-Irish War. In the poem “Easter 1916” he called out some of the instigators of the rebellion:

MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born. (*Collected Poems* 182-183)

Though Yeats looked positively toward the idea of an Irish Free State, this “terrible beauty” gave him pause. He saw the repressive, though familiar status quo of Irish society transitioning from a grumbling hegemony to violent rebellion with an irreversible momentum. He even thought that he might have played a part in causing the rise of patriotic fervour, and the idea seemed to nag at him. He reflected over a decade later in “Man and the Echo”:

I lie awake night after night ...
 Did that play of mine send out
 Certain men the English shot? (*Collected Poems* 353-354)

With the mention of “that play of mine” Yeats was referring to *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, a piece that was first produced back in 1902 before the Abbey building was in use. So though Yeats worried that he had influenced young men to die for Ireland with one of his first plays, the theatre responded in that crucial year not with more pieces which might contain hidden revolutionary messages, but by producing works which were more escapist than relevant.

George Bernard Shaw’s work *John Bull’s Other Island* was an example of this trend. Performed at the Abbey five months after the Rising, the play featured dual protagonists, one Irishman and one Englishman. The Irish character was stoic and cynical, while the English character was a romantic. Shaw was playing with stereotypes and perhaps painting a comic picture of future relations between the English and Irish that had less to do with nationalism and identity than economic improvement. For example, at the end of Shaw’s play the two characters go off to buy a hotel together (Morash 158-159). However, audiences may not have been focusing on the underlying lessons in *John Bull’s Other Island*. Most just found the play humorous and it seemed to provide an escape from the serious events taking place outside the Abbey’s doors. Though there is more than one kind of good theatre, and comedy can be a powerful cathartic tool – letting the audience forget about their troubles for a while and just have a laugh – the Abbey had started out with a more comprehensive and purposeful mission than that. So ironically enough, in 1916, the year when it would seem that a strong and meaningful theatrical voice was needed most, the Abbey reached a point of decline (158-159).

W.B. Yeats also seemed to lose interest in his theatre that year. He began leaving many of the larger duties to Lady Gregory. The 1916 Rising did not seem to directly precipitate the poet’s disinterest in theatre, as he had long had a short attention span. Yeats always spent time away from the Abbey in England, taking breaks when he needed time off (Foster 1: 457, 2: 5). However, this was a particularly difficult period for Yeats to be disengaged. Just when the Abbey needed the voice of arguably its strongest literary figure, he handed the reins to Lady Gregory. However, she was no slouch. She handled the daily operations of the theatre during this time and “she wrote more for the theatre than any other dramatist of the period, having thirty-one opening nights [...] at the Abbey between 1904 and 1921” (Morash 161). Her hard work paid off and Yeats was not unaware of it. In 1919 he thanked his friend in an open letter, acknowledging that she had made the majority of the effort to keep the Abbey running. The Abbey was not totally out of Yeats’s mind, however, as he wrote six new works of drama between 1910 and 1920, but only two new pieces and two revisions were produced (160).

Though he declared that writers should stay out of politics, Yeats did pen one overtly political play that was inspired by the 1916 Rising. It was called *The Dreaming of the*

Bones. He wrote it in the spring and summer of 1917, but held back from producing it. He told Lady Gregory that it was “too politically explosive” to be performed right away (qtd. in Morash 160). The play was set during the Rising and had three musicians acting as a Greek chorus of sorts. A rebel who is running from the Rising happens upon the ghosts of Diarmuid and Devorgilla (The two were responsible for welcoming the Normans into Ireland in the 1100s.) At first, the young man thinks that he can find forgiveness in his heart for the pair, who are apparently condemned to wander the earth in sorrow for their deed. However, the next morning he changes his mind. He tells them that they can never be forgiven for opening Ireland to conquest and mayhem for thousands of years hence. According to Christopher Morash, “if the future had been open and mutable at the time of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in 1902, by the time Yeats wrote *The Dreaming of the Bones* [...] it was locked into the implacable logic of war” (160). Indeed, it seems that Yeats’s distance from the situation did not hurt his perception of it. Ireland was hurtling towards war with Britain and that was not going unnoticed by its bard. Though the play would not be produced at the Abbey until 1919, Yeats was indeed taking stock of the situation and putting it onto the page. Even if he wrote it with the 1916 Rising as a backdrop in his mind, the fact that he waited to have it produced placed it into an even more critical juncture for Irish nationhood.

As the curtain rose in 1919, *The Dreaming of the Bones* would serve as a side-note to the larger picture of political maneuvering and violence. During that year, another parliament was established to counteract the British one. It was named Dáil Éireann. A Declaration of Independence was also drawn up. However, there were skirmishes happening outside of the negotiation rooms. In January of 1919 the IRA shot and killed two members of the Royal Irish Constabulary in Tipperary. This is the event that is referred to as the inciting incident for the Anglo-Irish War between England and Ireland. According to Richard English, “there then developed a cyclical pattern of vicious violence: republican, state and loyalist brutality marred life across much of Ireland in gruesome, repellent and vengeful fashion” (287). It was against this grim backdrop that Yeats’s play was produced and during this bloody and contentious time that the Abbey had to soldier on by either cheering up the population or providing catharsis for them.

In 1919, the Abbey Theatre began to pick up steam again, producing plays with political messages. Not only was *The Dreaming of the Bones* performed, but *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *The Rising of the Moon* were staged again, as well as another Yeats play set in a fictional ancient past called *On Baile’s Strand*, about the Irish folklore hero Cúchulainn. Gregory and Yeats chose a very topical play for August 1919. Written by Brinsley MacNamara and called *The Rebellion in Ballycullen*, the story is set in 1917 and 1918 in a town somewhere in the Midlands. The play focuses on how the Rising affects the attitudes, politics, and daily lives of the people residing in the small town as seen through the eyes of a young man who is coming home from university in Dublin and decides to write a book about his birthplace. The Abbey closed out

1919 with a comedy, *The Whiteheaded Boy* by Lennox Robinson, about the son of a rich family who retaliates when they decide to stop sending him to medical school (Robinson). All in all, it was a well-balanced year of theatre where humour coexisted with topical drama.

The 1920 season was very similar to its predecessor. *The Enchanted Trousers* by Oliver St. John Gogarty is a satire with a message. It is about the strings the aristocracy had to pull to get political appointments in the Irish countryside before 1922. Lady Gregory's *The Rising of the Moon* was produced again in May of that year, as it continued to provide valuable commentary about the Irish situation. A comedy by W.F. Casey, *The Suburban Groove*, ended the year on a humorous note (Casey).

While these two theatrical seasons came and went, Lady Gregory had been working on *Aristotle's Bellows*. While writing the play, she remarked in her journal that her goal as a writer was to keep away from politics. "My formula has long been 'not working for Home Rule but preparing for it,'" she said (qtd. in Morash 162). *Aristotle's Bellows* focuses on Conan, a man who is obsessed with the teachings of none other than Aristotle. He realizes that he can harness the power of the philosopher with a bellows. He decides to use the power to change the attitudes of the people in his town by eradicating their ignorance (Gregory, "Aristotle's Bellows"). Though slightly absurd in premise, the play is also an allegory for how Gregory and others at the Abbey hoped that Ireland would be transformed once the Anglo-Irish War was over and independence was a reality.

The possibility of change in Ireland may not have been as far-fetched as Lady Gregory portrayed it. The next year, on 7 January 1922, the Dáil, now Ireland's parliament, ratified the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which ended the war and created an Irish Free State (English 307). Several days later, T.C. Murray's *Aftermath* (a fitting title for the first Abbey play performed in a free Ireland) premièred. The piece tells the story of an old woman who dreams of getting her people's lost land back. In her mission to do this, she ruins the lives of her family and friends. Obviously Murray could not know that the Anglo-Irish Treaty would be signed days before his play opened. However,

he could have been writing a prescription for the culture of Free State Ireland, which was to be dominated by a harsh tone of disappointment, shot through with a resentment that the young should be sacrificed for the ideals and cravings of a previous generation. (Morash 172)

Indeed, though in this case the grass was greener on the side of the Free State than under British rule, Ireland had new problems to deal with. When people collectively fight for something for so long and they finally get it, the form that it takes can never be as perfect as they imagined. Therefore, there was some disappointment with the Irish Free State. This dissatisfaction extended to the Abbey, where patrons were tired of its penchant for idealism and grand patriotic statements (173). That era seemed to be over, having been replaced with an Irish constitution, the realities of running one's own country and the hardships and impossibilities of molding it to fit those ideals.

Even as the new government settled into place, there were some Irish forces that were against the treaty. This group, known as the Anti-Treaty IRA, was holed up at the Four Courts judicial building in Dublin, and Irish Free State forces tried to flush them out. On 30 June 1922, the Free State Army bombarded the Four Courts. Meanwhile, Sean O'Casey was writing *The Shadow of a Gunman* and was perhaps inspired by the events going on around him. The play was set in a 1920 Dublin tenement. The protagonist is Donal, a writer who pretends to be a gunman to impress the other residents of the complex. The themes of subterfuge and violence in this piece were certainly perfect for a year in which things were still not quite certain and Ireland was on the precipice of another war – one which would pit Irishman against Irishman.

The next year, on 12 April 1923, *The Shadow of a Gunman* had its opening night at the Abbey. Two days earlier, the leader of the Anti-Treaty IRA had been killed at the Four Courts. There were threats to the Abbey by other members of that organization so two Free State Army guards were stationed at the theatre during the performance. One helped an actor playing a Black and Tan (or British soldier) with the accuracy of his costume and instructed him on how to carry his gun. The play was topical enough that it “disconcertingly merged with the world outside the theatre, pointing up the uncomfortable similarities between what had been seen as the glorious struggle of the War of Independence, and the sordid viciousness of the Civil War” (Morash 174).

Certainly this play, of all the plays performed at the Abbey in the previous nineteen years seemed to get at the heart of the pain and suffering caused by the struggles of the past seven. This was never more apparent than when art melded into life backstage before curtain.

This ability to cross the line from dreams to reality and back again in the effort to quantify and define the Irish experience in these years is perhaps what prompted the Irish government to designate the Abbey Theatre as Ireland's National Theatre in 1925. The Free State was to give the playhouse an annual subsidy, and as the first cheque from the government rolled in the Abbey Theatre became the first theatre in the English-speaking world to be funded at all by its state (“Abbey Theatre”).

Yeats and Gregory did not want to be beholden to anyone. However, whether they were using the theatre to promote nationalism and the creation of a free state or whether they had turned their attention to focus on enriching Irish culture: they always had a responsibility to the people because they were creating something that was supposed to belong to the citizens of Ireland. The new Irish state was involved in the same type of social contract between the people and the establishment, promising to create a society that was beneficial to all Irish citizens. The theatre, its actors (some of whom were nationalist activists in the early days), and the government were attempting to cater to the entirety of the population of Ireland, functioning as a voice for Ireland and attempting to express the general social and political landscape in the alternate universe of theatre and through the reality of legislation (Trotter 7, 95, 110; Pilkington 87).

The founders' motives in accepting the money might not have been totally altruistic, however. Eileen Morgan suggests that the Abbey took this money because it was almost bankrupt, not because it felt any kind of kinship with the new Irish Free State (Morgan xviii). I would offer that there were deeper links between the two bodies than financial need and the wish to expand the state's cultural horizons. This seems especially true since the situation remains the same today (almost ninety years later), as the theatre receives a yearly sum from the Arts Council of Ireland ("Abbey Theatre"). Thus, though the Abbey Theatre was not the only playhouse in Ireland, least of all in Dublin, its trajectory seemed to mirror that of the state it inhabited: full of controversy and battles (both ideological and bloody), not always smooth, but ultimately successful nonetheless.

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The Abbey Theatre has come a long way from a mere kernel of an idea at a gathering in a parlour in 1897. However, in many ways the modern Abbey retains similarities with the initial concerns of its founders. It continues to explore the roots of Irish identity, promoting Irish playwrights, directors, actors, designers, crewmembers and ideas. Though the National Theatre in London has become probably the première national theatre in the west, if not the world; it was the Abbey that came first. I would argue that it is that idea that theatre can represent a nation (a courageous one in that tenuous time and contested space of 1897 Ireland) that the Abbey brought into western popular consciousness. With its greater resources, the National Theatre in London does dominate the international arena. However, new incarnations in Scotland and Wales continue to elbow their way into the conversation with increasingly louder voices. The wonderful thing about theatre though, especially in this globalized world, is that fresh ideas are always being heard. These theories are not just new, they are ancient themes rebroadcast; a discussion of old topics of identity made visible and fresh for a new generation.

From the one, to one among many in Europe, the Abbey has retained many qualities of its original identity. But what kind of theatre was the Abbey originally? How did it negotiate its aims of creating a national identity or nationalist drama? In the end, there are major differences between the words "national" and "nationalist," both semantic and ideological. An Irish national theatre would be a playhouse with the purpose of producing the work of Irish playwrights and employing Irish actors and directors, while also strengthening a communal sense of Irish identity. An Irish nationalist theatre, on the other hand, would be dedicated to espousing nationalist political and cultural values as well as openly advocating for an Irish Free State. In its early years, the Abbey – still Irish National Theatre today – held a middle ground between the two terms. Its nationalism was perhaps a by-product of its national aims as well as a reaction to the political turmoil sometimes literally going on down the street. However, the founders' mission was to promote Irishness rather than explicitly advocate for Home Rule or a Free State. Their aims seemed to err on the side of creating strong

Irish theatre before espousing a specific political agenda, though it appears that during the later years of the Rising and during the Irish Civil War, they had more trouble containing their views.

The Abbey started out as a national project that would create a body of Irish theatrical work to be performed for Irish audiences. It was not always well received. However, whether an audience member liked a play or abhorred it, it became a part of the national conversation about the nature of Irish culture and identity. Though Yeats might have once said that he wished his theatre to be a closed space for those who really appreciated the performing arts, that is not how he usually felt. Yeats and Gregory wished to create a place where Irish people could learn, invest, and take pride in their heritage. Does this motive of promoting Irish culture also extend into the nationalistic desire to place one's state over all others? The answer is yes and no. Though Lady Gregory was originally in favour of British rule, she changed her mind. Yeats would have rather not have been involved in politics and, in fact, believed that creative people should stay out of such things. However, with his plays he did sometimes step into the arena of nationalism. For example, he worried about whether *The Countess Cathleen* would encourage young men to join the War for Independence. Though the founders did not show the most nationalistic works possible, the *zeitgeist* of the beginning of the twentieth century certainly fed into their choice of plays and their own creative output, as it would for anyone who bothered to read the newspaper or talk to a friend or even step outside into the street. It is the cultural impulse that made and continues to make the Abbey a strong theatre.

The choices that Yeats, Gregory, and Martyn made ensured that the plays that graced the stage of the Abbey Theatre in its early years were not necessarily all "nationalist," but they were all certainly "national." These national dramas taught lessons to everyone involved not only about the nature of the group of creators, but the spirit of the Irish audience. These plays were not plain peas in the soup of Irish national identity; however, they were also good. The dramas were well written (by some of the preeminent writers of the twentieth century working in any country). The actors were accomplished, and so were the directors. Thus, the Abbey was a national theatre that had the ability to attract the old, stalwart, upper-middle-class audiences, and new ones, too. Through it, many of the most famous Irish plays of the twentieth century were performed. The strength of the founding mission is still apparent, as the Abbey remains the National Theatre of Ireland and continues to produce plays that delve into the various layers of Irish identity.

Every country can benefit from a national theatre. It creates a cohesive voice for the culture and identity of the state. An organization like this was especially crucial for Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century. Carving out the differences between English and Irish people, in mythical, folk, historic and contemporary terms was very important. In marking these differences in basic culture, the Abbey and its founders created a defined sense of singular Irish identity that they thought was previously ab-

sent. The Abbey continued to play a vital role (both as instigator and commentator) in the seminal events taking place in Ireland in the first two and a half decades of the twentieth century. As the Irish Free State was born in 1923, so was the Abbey designated as the theatre of the new nation two years later. The Abbey's role in those years is impressive, but the fact that it still survives today with the essence of its original mission intact is even more noteworthy. Currently, the Abbey Theatre is also representative of a broader need for states and regions all over Europe to have venues for the expression of unique national identities. Whether that freedom is spoken through educational plays about national culture or vehement nationalist pieces, the beauty of having one's own playhouse, just like a free state, is that it provides a space and a stage for a unique type of identity expression that speaks to the population and the individual in only the way that a national theatre could.

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