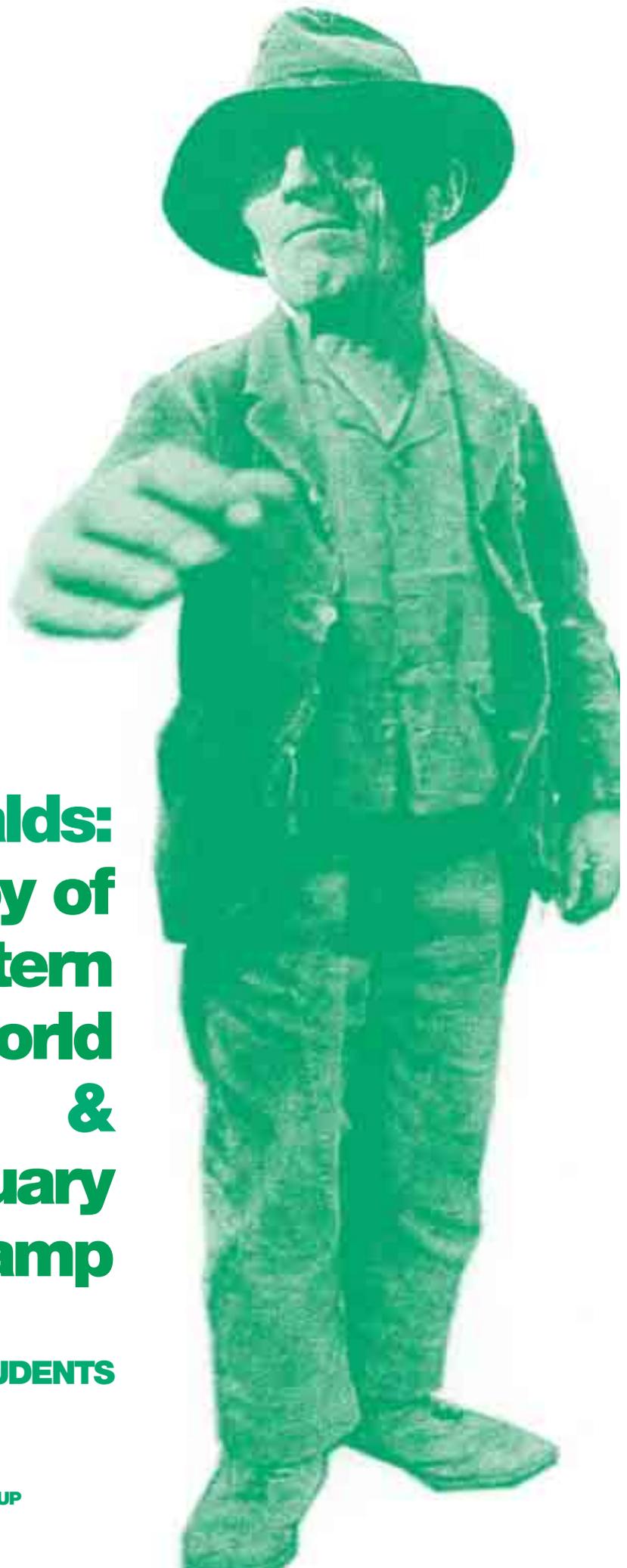




Emeralds: The Playboy of The Western World & The Sanctuary Lamp

A RESOURCE FOR STUDENTS

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First Day of Rehearsals...

- the Director introduces the play

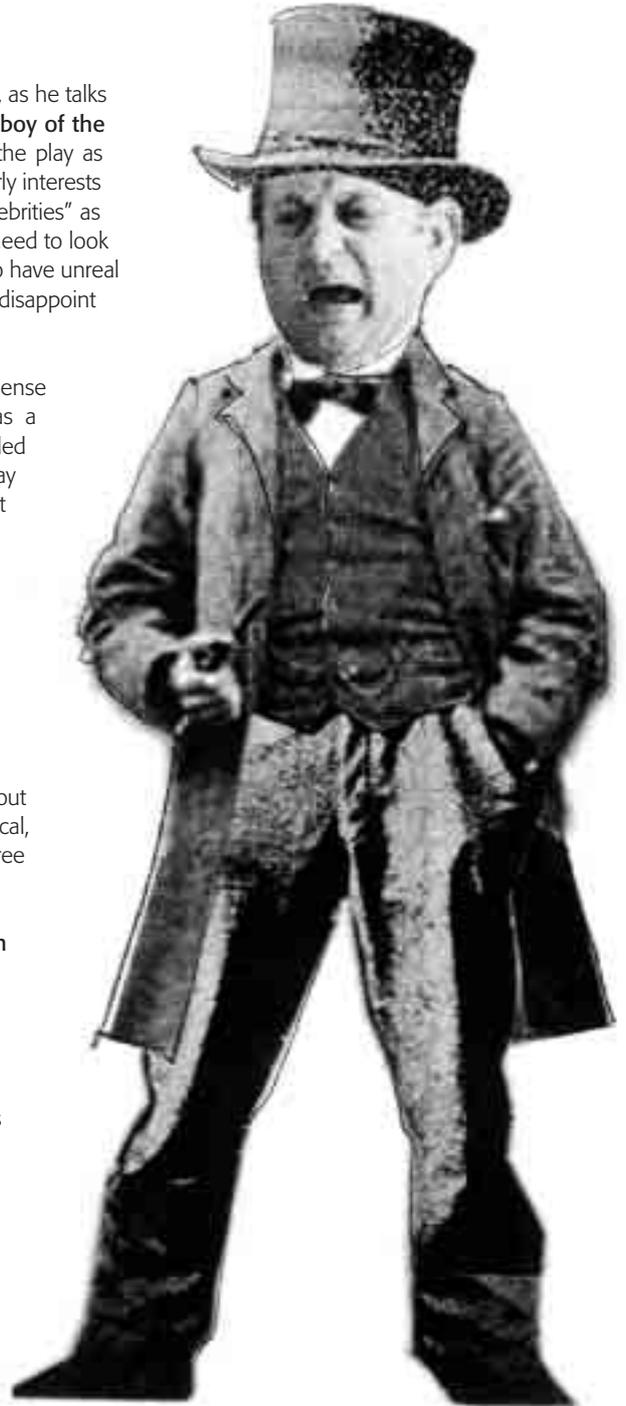
Huge enthusiasm and passion for this play is evident in the Director, Greg Hersov, as he talks to the company about his vision for the Royal Exchange production of **The Playboy of the Western World**. Almost a century on from the original production, Greg sees the play as having tangible relevance for a modern audience. One of the things that particularly interests him is the need for heroes in our lives. He talks about the current trend for “celebrities” as a possible way in which, as a society, we have come up with a new spin on this need to look up to a particular person or people. Of course, the other side of this is that we also have unreal expectations of such individuals and quickly cut them down to size when they disappoint us.

When the play was being written and staged in 1907, it coincided with a strong sense of Irish nationalism and a growing resistance to British rule. Amidst this was a particular voice for theatre and new plays, and Dublin’s Abbey Theatre was founded specifically to celebrate a sense of Irish culture. Greg Hersov observes that today there is a new colonialism in England; a sense that there is a global economy that makes everything the same the world over – our lives are packaged by huge multinational companies and we experience much the same thing wherever we are, particularly in the western world – eat, drink and consume much the same products. This very fact makes **The Playboy of the Western World** hugely significant in giving us back a sense of something uniquely human and forceful, something raw and unpacked – as J.M. Synge says about the play, it is a theatre of rich joy about all that is superb and wild in reality.

The universal voice of this play – the sense that it speaks to everyone over time – is important for Greg. Taking eight or nine drafts to write the script, Synge cut out all the local and satirical references. It was to be a play beyond something local, something more than specifically Irish. In Greg’s opinion, this is a play that floats free and stands out on its own as one of the greatest plays ever written.

There is a wonderful play with words in the title of **The Playboy of the Western World**. Preparing for this production Greg revisited one of his favourite film genres, the Western; watching movies with such great directors as Sergio Leone, John Ford, Sam Peckinpah and Howard Hawks, he thought about the role of the hero in an imaginary Wild West setting. The central character of Christy in **The Playboy of the Western World** is such a man - even if he isn’t a cowboy on an American frontier, he is a mysterious outsider, and a man with a fantasy who finds himself by playing out his imaginary life as a man who murdered his father.

Staying with the theme of the need for heroes in our lives, Greg likens the adulation of the village girls to the people who screamed for the Beatles in the sixties. Or perhaps those who shout today for Black Eyed Peas, Gareth Gates or Christina Aguilera. From these ideas will spring the characters and situations that we see on the Royal Exchange stage.



MICHAEL JAMES

Why not?

- As a group discuss what you find in this play that carries “rich joy about all that is superb and wild in reality”.
- Write your own brief script of a scene that explores a modern hero and what it is that we find appealing and admirable about the person.
- Take time out to watch a Western and see what relationship you think there is between the central characters and that of Christy, the hero of this play.

The pivotal word for Greg is *lonesome*. This is not about being lonely or finding solitude but is something deep inside each of us. In Christy there is a journey where the character romanticises himself, deals with the *lonesome* to make him bigger in the world on the outside, turns himself into the unlikely hero in the drinking house of an Irish shebeen. In doing this, Christy also finds his inner man; comes to understand himself. The fantasy becomes the reality.

A Saturated Space - Designing The Playboy Of The Western World

Days poring over the displays in the Ulster American Folk Park provided the designer, Conor Murphy, with a starting point for his thinking about the set and costumes for **The Playboy of the Western World**. Conor is no stranger to the work of J.M. Synge. He spent much of a year on a course in the Netherlands working on an operatic version of Synge's play **Riders to the Sea**. He has also seen a number of versions of **The Playboy of the Western World** over the years and part of his own challenge was to find a setting and design concept for the Royal Exchange production that was inventive and new.

The shebeen where the action takes place is an Irish country pub of a kind that has long since disappeared. Rough and ready, the space is not just somewhere to drink. Produce is sold here along with the booze - booze both legal and illegal in the form of home brewed poteen; the agricultural life outside spills into the space with a poorly pig dozing in the corner.

What strikes one is the very muted use of colour in the design. For Conor, this is entirely intentional – he wanted the set and costume to have a direct relationship with the forest green upholstery of the seating in the auditorium. It is important that the set doesn't feel like an alien world – he wants us to feel as if we are saturated in the space.

With a strong sense of his native country and knowledge of the Aran islands, this has been a pleasurable journey for Conor. He has taken himself through late 19th century photographs, including Synge's own, to find authentic reference points for the feel of the place. However, while the authenticity of period is important up to a point, here and there on the set and in the costumes are elements that tie the space to the present as well as the past.

The task has not been without challenges. For the most part, Conor Murphy's design career has been for opera and ballet. The staging of both these forms has almost always been end-on so that the audience has a fourth wall experience of the action and the imaginary world on the stage. Here at the Royal Exchange, of course, the Designer is working in the round. In order to understand some of the issues about working in this way, he came to see several plays in production in the space. Even so, he still sees working in this theatre as a constant process of discovery.

Conor Murphy's costume sketches for this production appear throughout the pack.



Why not?

- Discuss how the costume and set designs add atmosphere to the production in the Royal Exchange. Think about how the set and the use of space shape the performance of the actors.
- Choose one of the characters from **THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD** and design your own costumes for her/him for a modern dress production. How will you enhance the sense of the character whilst bringing them into the here and now? If you are not good at drawing, use magazine images to illustrate your ideas.

The Sanctuary Lamp

- Direct relationships

A conversation with Jacob Murray

I find I get angry about that. I think that nature is God. I think that we are God. Indeed, I've written about this... "God created the world, in order to create himself." We are God.¹

Having spent a decade living in London, the celebrated contemporary Irish playwright, Tom Murphy, returned to live in Dublin in the 1970s. Shortly afterwards he wrote **The Sanctuary Lamp** which received its premiere at the Abbey Theatre. This production at the Royal Exchange is particularly exciting because it is the debut production here in England.

The Director of the production, Jacob Murray, is very excited by the programming of this play in the Studio along with **The Playboy of the Western World** in the main theatre space. As Jacob observes, there is something stimulating about having two Irish plays written at either end of the century. Both these plays and their writers caused huge controversy. Just as J.M. Synge outraged Irish nationalists with his less than perfect characters, Tom Murphy upset the establishment with his criticism of the Catholic Church. Just as Synge was criticised for being connected to a life in Paris, Murphy was denounced from the pulpits for being sacrilegious. The controversy around **The Sanctuary Lamp** was such that even the Irish Prime Minister came into the fray and judged the play as one of the two greatest Irish dramas. Another Irish playwright called the writing "...an achievement that Synge would have been proud of."²

In **The Sanctuary Lamp**, three lost and damaged people occupy a city church for a night. They are Harry, an East European born Jew and an ex-circus strongman, Francisco, an Irishman and Harry's best friend, and Maudie, a lost young girl. Betrayed by his best friend and wife and grieving over the death of his daughter, Harry talks to the sanctuary lamp to try and relieve his pain, his guilt and murderous feelings. For the Director, the core of putting this play on the stage is to reveal the "deep soul" of the piece – the desire of the characters to find meaning and hope. Although the play can be seen as anti-religious, it is in fact, deeply spiritual. Jacob observes that there is "...something very refreshing about a late 20th century play that takes longing and meaning seriously rather than something to deride or attack".

Language in **The Sanctuary Lamp**, just as it is in **The Playboy of the Western World**, is a central focus. Jacob sees the play as being very much an actors' piece with great scope for realising something beautiful, funny and sad. The demand is for performances that are intimate and detailed and not for something extrovert or loud. The bottom line for the Director in bringing the text to life as theatre is to persuade every atheist or a religious believer in the audience that the play holds meaning for them.



Tom Murphy

Why not?

- Having seen the plays discuss the similarities and differences between the two plays in performance at the Royal Exchange Theatre. You might like to think about Harry in **THE SANCTUARY LAMP** and Christy in **THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD** and the fact that they are both men on the run, one ending up in a church and the other in a remote rural shebeen (public house).
- Write a review for this production of **THE SANCTUARY LAMP**. Perhaps you could focus on some of the ideas and opinions that you think could have offended people in the original performance in Dublin's Abbey Theatre. You might also like to pick up on the Director's opinion that this is an actors' piece. How did the cast for the Royal Exchange production connect with one another and what was your response to their performances? Remember to give reasons for your judgements.
- Consider the quote from the playwright Tom Murphy at the beginning of this section. How does this offer a connection with J.M. Synge? Discuss how two writers a century apart could have as much in common as these two men do. As a central question think about how Ireland and Irish theatre might have its own flavour and concerns.
- Improvise your own scene about a character (or characters) that are somehow on the outside of society and trying to find either an identity or some spiritual meaning in their life. Consider your setting for the action – how does this add meaning to your drama? Think about how you might offer a challenge to ideas and beliefs with intelligent questions or situations.

1. Tom Murphy quoted in "Reading the future: Irish Writers in conversation with Mike Murphy. 2001

2. Brian Friel quoted in Jose Lanters' "Playwrights of the Western World" in "A Century of Irish Drama – Widening the Stage" by Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan and Shakir Mustafa. Indiana University Press 2001.

What Is Irish Theatre?

Two spaces. Two companies. Two scripts. Both are Irish Theatre. Both are in performance at the Royal Exchange in Manchester. But what is Irish Theatre?

There is a difference in the way that we think of Irish Theatre than say British or American Theatre. In part it is because the idea of Irish Theatre began in the late 19th century with a conscious decision amongst a group of people to improve the quality of drama in Ireland and to produce plays that consciously linked the history of the country to a modern voice, to build an Irish and Celtic tradition. However, the people involved, although Irish by birth, often lived and worked outside the country from time to time. People such as George Bernard Shaw and Samuel Beckett.

There was a concern amongst the writers and directors involved in the Irish literary theatre that much of what was seen on the stage in Dublin and elsewhere in the country was cheap and commercial – “low” culture. Excitement was found in the idea that plays might have a different quality that related to the lives and history of the Irish people; there was an ambition to find “the deeper thoughts and emotions”³ of the Celtic tradition. It was a conscious movement to mark the difference between England and Ireland. This was Irish theatre for Irish audiences shaped by Irish

Abbey Theatre, Dublin 2000



writers. Part of the influence came from Norway where the theatre was struggling with finding a local voice after years of cultural influence from Denmark. The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen was centrally involved in the early struggle to form a Norwegian national theatre. There was tension for many critics about the people who were involved in the Irish National Theatre Society. Too



many of the people involved were seen as not being wholly Irish. J.M. Synge, having spent some time in Paris was seen as “artistically impure” and “an outside agitator”⁴. Language was also a problem. Adapting the voices heard in the Aran Islands and the West of Ireland, Synge uses a vocabulary and rhythm that is a literary device rather than a faithful record of speech. The writer Frederick Ryan suggested that this had little to do with the country as a whole and chose to write in a different idiom to recreate the existence and language of everyday urban Dublin.

In the years after Synge’s death, the Abbey became more conservative and complacent in the plays that were staged. Ironically, the box office became more successful. This led W.B. Yeats to observe that “...we did not set out to create this sort of theatre, and its success has been to me a discouragement and defeat”⁵.

There is a pleasure and a neat rounding up of the Abbey Theatre’s history that in staging **The Sanctuary Lamp** towards the end of the twentieth century, it exercised the same bravery in bringing to audiences a play that confronted and questioned ideas about Ireland and Irish Theatre.

3,4. Quoted by John P. Harrington “The Founding Years and the National Theatre That Was Not” in “A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage”

5. Quoted by Jose Lanters “Playwrights of the western World: Synge, Murphy, McDonagh” in text, as above.

J.M SYNGE - A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Five bishops and various other clergy numbered in the Synge family. Protestant and deeply conservative, the family were wealthy, owning land and property in Wicklow, Meath and Dublin. John Synge was born in 1871, his father dying of smallpox just a year later. The boy was sickly and exceptionally reliant on his mother whose narrow opinions were to plague him throughout his life. Strictly Christian, she filled the young J.M. Synge with terrors that he found hard to bear, observing that "...hell took a fearful hold on me..." and admitted that he was frightened of the idea of death and sinfulness bringing "...eternal pain..."

This was not a popular family. Their politics and deep suspicion of Catholicism made them ruthless and callous with the Irish peasants who were their tenants. On one occasion, John Synge's elder brother evicted the occupants from one of the estate cottages only to set fire to it soon afterwards.

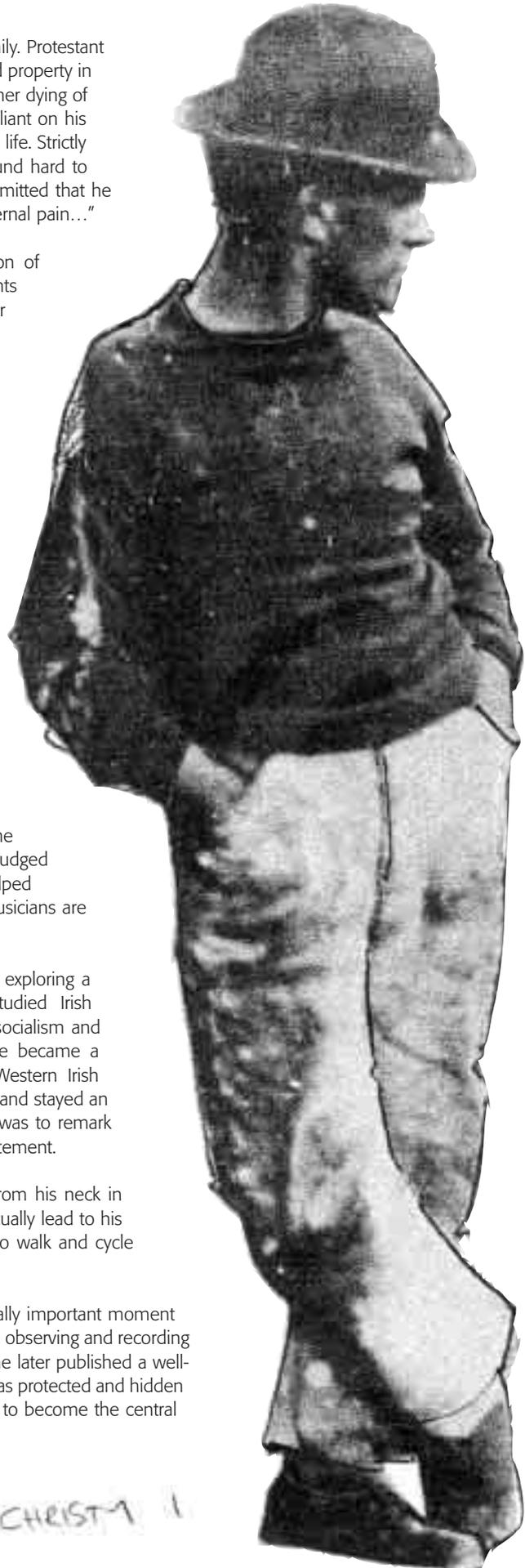
The young John Synge struggled with much of his upbringing. Thoughtful and often solitary, he took to walking in the countryside, bird watching and observing nature. At the age of sixteen he upset his mother hugely by announcing that he had become an atheist. The discovery of evolutionary theory that Darwin had so recently promoted further fuelled the young boy's sense that orthodox religion was wrong. However, rejecting the strong moral code that he was brought up with was not an easy journey and he was to say, in later life, that it left him with a chasm and huge difficulty.

His university career was not particularly brilliant – a student diverted with a passion for music and what he called "vague private reading", he only managed a basic pass in the final assessment of his degree. John Synge had fixed on a future as a musician, took violin lessons in Dublin and later went to Germany to continue his music studies. Brief months into the German experience, his confidence faltered and he realised that he did not have the stomach for solo recitals and judged that his ability was not up to scratch. This may not have been helped by his mother's criticism of him that he was an "alien" and "...musicians are not a nice set of men..."

Later time in Paris and then back in Dublin saw the young man exploring a wide range of interests. He attended anarchist meetings, studied Irish antiquities, explored the Italian and Irish languages, touched on socialism and dabbled with the occult and the psychic world. Temporarily, he became a member of the Irish League, an organisation that supported Western Irish peasants in their opposition to despotic landlords. Synge became, and stayed an ardent Irish Nationalist although his friend, the writer W.B. Yeats, was to remark that he rarely if ever heard Synge make any obviously political statement.

The sickly child became an unwell man and a lump removed from his neck in 1897 was the beginning of Hodgkin's disease, which would eventually lead to his early death. Despite this, he took pride in his fitness, choosing to walk and cycle insatiably and even showing off with gymnastic tricks.

Visiting Aran at the suggestion of W.B. Yeats was to prove a pivotally important moment in his life. Not only did Synge spend a considerable amount of time observing and recording the lives of the islands' people in both photography and writing, he later published a well-regarded book. The story of a man who killed his father and who was protected and hidden by an Aran peasant until the murderer could flee to America was to become the central story for **The Playboy of the Western World**.



CHRISTMAS 1

Aran, for the playwright, was an escape from middle-class respectability and constriction. He saw the islands and their people as "...a world of inarticulate power..." and imbued with the miraculous and the supernatural.

Increasingly drawn to the revival of Gaelic, he also found something of an Elizabethan dialect in Aran language. A visit to Kerry compounded his sense of the rhythm and vernacular that colours the play.

His writing was surrounded by controversy and he was often criticised for demeaning or damaging Irish women; Synge's plays were peopled by flawed characters and events that confronted a rather idealised and romanticised idea of a sweet and pure Ireland. He responded to criticism by suggesting that it was important that "...writers deal manfully, directly and decently with the entire reality of life.." Centrally, and controversially, for a conservative nation, this was a reference to sex.

John Synge's relationships with women were not altogether successful and early relationships were met with snubs. The poet John Masefield observed that Synge was much happier in the company of women and had both charm and lightness in his manner. However it was not until he was almost 35 that he was to fall in love with someone who returned his affection. The much younger actress, Molly Allgood, was to be his companion for the rest of his life although they never married

Inevitably, his mother and family frowned on John Synge's relationship with Molly. The fact that she was an actress put her under suspicion, as did her uneducated working class, Catholic background. Having lived with his mother's disapproval throughout his life, there was wretchedness in the fact that he only outlived his mother briefly. He died in 1909 at the age of thirty eight.



Abbey Theatre, Dublin 1900



Why not?

- Having seen the Royal Exchange production of *THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD*, discuss what relationships you can see between the playwright's life and the writing of this play.

JUNIA FARREL

Crisis and Controversy

Early productions of *The Playboy of the Western World*

From the outset, crisis and controversy surrounded *The Playboy of the Western World*. As it went into rehearsal for the first time on the 8th of January 1907, there was disquiet from the theatre directors and the company about the violent oaths and some of the phrases in the script. Whilst J.M. Synge relented on some of the language, he stood by most of his writing and the process of rehearsal was very much a screwing up of courage – everyone knew to expect criticism when the play opened later that month. This was nothing new for the playwright; he had been subjected to great disapproval in the newspapers before, condemned for the way that he represented Ireland and, in particular, Irish women. The national mood was for a sentimental and romanticised nation of wholesome and virtuous people – Synge's flawed and robust characters did not fit well.

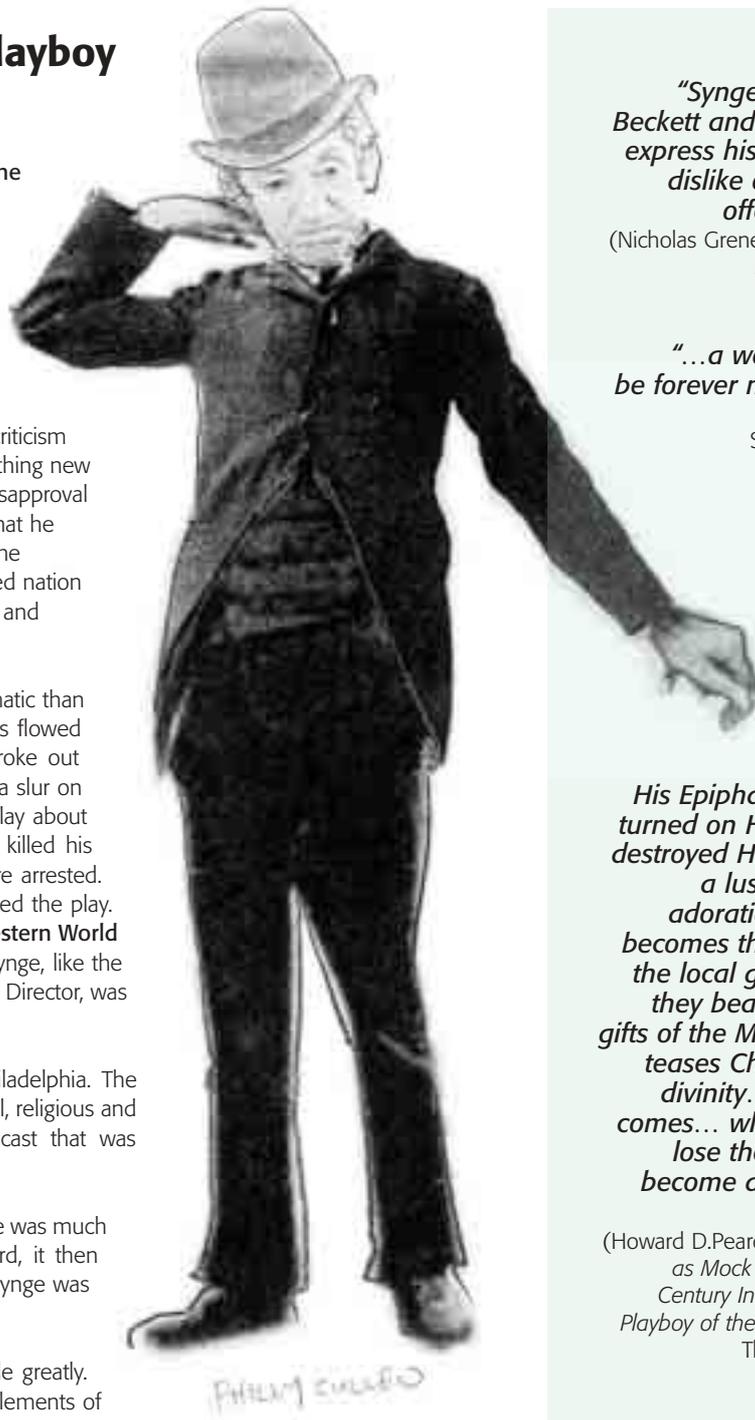
In the event, the opening night was even more dramatic than the company might have expected. The first two acts flowed without incident but in the third act a small riot broke out amongst a group of men angry at what they saw as a slur on Ireland and its people. They did not want to see a play about an Irish woman making a hero out of a man who killed his father. The police were called and some people were arrested. Nationalist groups in Ireland and Liverpool condemned the play. It was not just the content of *The Playboy of the Western World* that worried people – it was also the fact that J.M. Synge, like the great poet W.B. Yeats, who was also an Abbey Theatre Director, was from an Anglo-Irish Protestant background.

This fierce reaction was to be repeated later in Philadelphia. The audience and the critics objected to the play on moral, religious and political grounds. This time, however, it was the cast that was arrested.

The English tour following the Abbey Theatre premiere was much more successful and appreciated. Opening in Oxford, it then transferred to London where it was acclaimed. J.M. Synge was recognised as a dramatist of genius.

However, the play has continued to challenge people greatly. The contrast of the very naturalistic setting and the elements of farce, with the undertones of violence, offers some people a contradiction that they find difficult to understand. It has been suggested that this play is a "dark comedy". In Synge's own opinion, it was not a play with a purpose but one coloured by extravagant comedy. He qualified this by adding that it was also a serious play when looked at in a certain light.

Despite T.S. Eliot's criticism that the poetic language of the play was a difficulty, an eccentricity, and not a foundation for later playwrights, Synge became a profound influence on a generation of Irish writers and writers abroad such as W.B. Yeats, James Joyce and Eugene O'Neill. The play has endured as a major classic of the theatre for almost a century.



"Synge uses farce, as Beckett and Ionesco do, to express his suspicion and dislike of what society offers as normal."
(Nicholas Grene *Synge – A critical study of the plays*)

"...a work destined to be forever misinterpreted."
(Patricia Meyer Spacks *The Making of the Playboy*)

"Christy bears... dramatic irony in his paralleling Christ. Where He was adored in His Epiphany, His people turned on Him at last and destroyed Him. For Christy, a lusty sex idol, the adoration of the Magi becomes the adoration of the local girls... The gifts they bear... parody the gifts of the Magi. Sara even teases Christy about his divinity... The betrayal comes... when the people lose their illusion and become again fearful of the law."
(Howard D. Pearce *Synge's Playboy as Mock Christ in Twentieth Century Interpretation of The Playboy of the Western World* ed Thomas R Whitaker)

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