

Performing Political Opposition: Sean O'Casey's Late Plays and the Demise of Eamon de Valera

Bernice Schrank
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Abstract

Using literary criticism, theater history and historical accounts of Ireland and the United States, this article argues that interpreting O'Casey's late plays requires an understanding not only of the social and political realities to which his plays refer, but also of the social and political conditions under which the criticism and reviews of O'Casey's plays were written. It focuses on Sean O'Casey's last five plays, *The Bishop's Bonfire*, *The Drums of Father Ned*, *Behind the Green Curtains*, *Figuro in the Night* and *The Moon Shines on Kilyenamoe*, works which have been almost totally neglected both by theater producers and literary critics. None has been a success on stage, and there have been few revivals. Most reviewers of these plays dismiss them as flawed and inferior O'Casey. This neglect and negativity is noteworthy because Sean O'Casey is universally acknowledged as a master of twentieth-century drama in English. I argue that if O'Casey's last plays are understood in relation to (1) the political views the plays express as well as (2) the political realities of Ireland in the 1950s, which is their subject and (3) the political attitudes and concerns of the critics of the early 1960s who made O'Casey into a respectable academic subject, the reasons for their neglect become apparent. They are, in my opinion, rooted not in any intrinsic deficiencies of the work, but in their radical Marxist critique of contemporary Irish society, their attempts to subvert the status quo, and their efforts at political transformation and change through cultural intervention.

1. The Politics of Neglect

O'Casey's late plays have always had bad press.¹ To start with, a substantial number of theater reviewers disliked them. Then, from the early sixties on, many literary critics made disparagement the dominant critical response.² Typical are the attenuated assessments of Robert Brustein and David Daiches, two highly regarded critics of the previous generation. Brustein writes confidently and briefly that O'Casey "has always struck [him] as an extremely overrated writer with two or three competent Naturalist plays [by which he means presumably the three early Dublin plays] to his credit followed by a lot of ideological bloat and embarrassing bombast"

Performing Political Opposition: Sean O'Casey's Late Plays

(1964, viii). With similar brevity and assurance, although with greater politeness, Daiches advances a judgement of equivalent dismissiveness:

In his later plays O'Casey's own passions and prejudices tend to come between him and the dramatic work he is trying to create, and when in addition he turns to expressionist techniques suggested by German dramatists and the American Eugene O'Neill the result is generally unsuccessful. (1968, iii)

Global in scope, mandarin in tone, devastating in effect, these pronouncements brook no opposition.

Neither critic believes that O'Casey's later plays merit any attention, or that their political preoccupations—which Brustein captures in the phrase “ideological bloat” and Daiches in the kinder, gentler, but no less denigrating words, “passions and prejudices”, both being 1960s code for Marxism—warrant any explication. In fact, they seem to be saying, at least in part, that because O'Casey's later plays have ideological content they deserve to be neglected. Perhaps even worse, in their opinion, is O'Casey's way of giving dramatic expression to those political beliefs, which Brustein faults as “embarrassing bombast” and Daiches criticizes as bad imitation Expressionism. Using the language of apparently value-neutral aesthetic judgement, Brustein and Daiches advance an ideology of art as autonomous at odds with O'Casey's commitment to drama as a vehicle for social change, and they judge him on their terms.

It is possible, of course, that O'Casey's late plays deserve their bad press, but I for one would like to come by this position via cogent argument rather than cavalier assertion. This article is an inquiry into the reasons for that glib negativity in relation to O'Casey's five last plays, which bear the brunt of theatrical neglect and critical hostility: *The Bishop's Bonfire* (1955; hereinafter referred to as *Bonfire*), *The Drums of Father Ned* (1957; *Drums*), *Behind the Green Curtains* (1961; *Curtains*), *Figuro in the Night* (1961; *Figuro*) and *The Moon Shines on Kyleneamoe* (1961; *Moon*). I argue that if these plays are understood in relation (1) to each other, (2) to the political views the plays express, as well as (3) to the political realities of Ireland in the 1950s, which is their subject, and (4) to the political attitudes and concerns of the American critics of the early 1960s who made O'Casey into a respectable academic subject, then the reasons for this negativity become apparent. Certainly there may be deficiencies in the plays, but, whatever they are, they are not explained by their bad press. In my opinion, the negativity of reviewers and critics alike is rooted in the plays' radical critique of the last days of Eamon de Valera, their attempts to subvert the status quo, and their efforts at political transformation and change through cultural intervention.

This attitude is most apparent in the responses of Irish theater reviewers to the Dublin premieres, reactions which then lend weight and

credibility to the dismissive maneuvers of academic critics like Brustein. In general, while paying lip service to production values, the Irish theater reviewers are fairly explicit and vociferous in rejecting O'Casey's late plays because of their strident assault on the repressive domestic policies of Eamon de Valera, who held power in Ireland almost continuously from the 1930s to the end of the 1950s (Schrank 1996, 14–20, 27–30, 32–3, 42). These reviewers deny that O'Casey's catalogue of de Valerean social failure is accurate. It is, to be sure, a sweeping catalogue. According to O'Casey, by the end of de Valera's tenure in office, this failure ran the gamut from clerical domination with its attendant sectarianism, censorship and sexual repression to economic backwardness and emigration.

Beginning in the middle 1980s, revisionist Irish historians (Brown 1985, Coogan 1993) produce studies which support O'Casey's view of the increasing stagnation of post-revolutionary Ireland. These revisionist historians agree with O'Casey that de Valera pursued ultra-conservative policies that were parochial, repressive, anti-modernist, male chauvinist, and biased in favor of the Roman Catholic clergy, farmers and small business interests. O'Casey was a premature opponent of de Valera, launching his immoderate attacks before the demise of de Valera as a political force made those positions broadly acceptable. In such circumstances, it is not surprising that O'Casey's pre-revisionist Irish contemporaries distanced themselves from his later work.

At least as damaging to his chances of acceptance as his hostility toward the government of Eamon de Valera was O'Casey's advocacy of revolutionary social change. It was American literary critics who were to make O'Casey a respectable subject for academic scrutiny. Unfortunately, by the time O'Casey was discovered by American literary critics in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the United States was experiencing the effects (and then the after-effects) of its most recent red scare.³ University professors had been fired for being Communists, or for being associated with Communist causes. The signing of loyalty oaths remained a requirement of employment at major post-secondary institutions like the University of California (Schrecker 1986). In this period, in an American university, to deal with Marxism as a respectable philosophical tradition, even if it were in relation to a prickly and iconoclastic Irish dramatist like O'Casey, was risky business.

McCarthyism inevitably influenced the assessment of O'Casey's plays by American critics. It is not surprising that critics making their way in academia during the period of McCarthyism found O'Casey's politics deeply troubling. For these and later critics, strategies like periodicity were a godsend. Periodicity, or chronological compartmentalization, allows critics to separate early plays like *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), which lend themselves to interpretations that focus on transcendent human values, from later ones, which are inescapably and unapologetically Marxist. At least in part a result of the segmenting and then privileging of O'Casey's 'early

period', the number of articles written on any one of the three early Dublin plays easily exceeds the number of articles written on *Curtains*, *Figuro* and *Moon* combined.⁴

It is, of course, just as easy (maybe easier) to demonstrate that O'Casey's plays and political concerns are not neatly divided and hermetically sealed into periods. Rather, from first to last, O'Casey's drama offers a socialist critique of Irish society. In the early plays, O'Casey presents the Rising and all that flowed from it as compromising the interests of Irish working-class; that is, in O'Casey's opinion, the struggle for independence marginalized workers, socialists and Protestants as it empowered the Catholic middle class (Schrank 1985). After 1923, O'Casey's attention shifted from the failures of the independence struggle to the weaknesses and absurdities of post-independence Ireland and then to the stultification and bourgeoisieification of Irish life associated with the government of Eamon de Valera. Marxist preoccupations form the subtext of all of O'Casey's writings, but the political climate in the United States made it convenient for American critics not to notice.

Taking into account the reactions of the Irish reviewers and the lacunae in the American academic criticism, the narrative of O'Casey's neglect illustrates the degree to which socially created cultural artifacts create responses which are likewise socially created.

2. Neglecting O'Casey's Late Plays Part One: *The Bishop's Bonfire* and *The Drums of Father Ned*

It needs to be emphasized that O'Casey's neglect is partial only. Certainly, O'Casey's earliest plays, *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Junos and the Paycock* (1924) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), are frequently produced. With a well-received staging of *Shadow* in 1999 off-Broadway at the Irish Repertory Theater, and with countless productions of this and the other two early plays in Dublin, London, New York and elsewhere, these early plays are recurring theatrical events (Schrank 1996, 263–75, 232–45, 246–58). Nor has academic scholarship ignored these early works, which are the subject of substantial critical scrutiny. Although less popular than these three early works, several of the 'coloured' plays written in the 1940s—in particular, *Red Roses for Me* (1943) and *Purple Dust* (1945)—have enjoyed successful revivals and sustained critical analysis. Using a numerical yardstick of productions and critical commentary, it is the five late plays, *Bonfire*, *Drums*, *Curtains*, *Figuro* and *Moon*, taken as a group, that have been consigned to the garbage heap of theatrical history and academic indifference.⁵ Even so, the five have somewhat different performance and reception histories.

To better appreciate what O'Casey, the reviewers and the critics are up to, it is helpful to begin by examining the reception of *Bonfire* and *Drums*. These companion pieces, taken together, depict a dialectic of oppression and

resistance. *Bonfire* portrays the Roman Catholic Church in the Ireland of the 1950s as creating and enforcing political, economic and social practices best described as clerical fascism; *Drums* dramatizes the other half of that dialectic, the desire for liberation in sexual relations and revolution in political and economic arrangements, desires which are, in O'Casey's view, the inevitable and intensified consequences of repression.

It will not come as much of a surprise that these views were unwelcome in 1950s Ireland. The premiere of *Bonfire* in Dublin in 1955, directed by Tyrone Guthrie and produced by Cyril Cusack, was a popular success (Barrington 1955) despite (or perhaps because of) intermittent disturbances during the opening night's performance (Schrank 1996, 20-1). The disruptions within the theater were nothing compared to the hysteria in the Irish press. Quite simply, Irish reviewers declared war on O'Casey. Some were quietly disdainful (M. 1955, K. 1955). Others were openly vituperative. The *Standard*, a conservative Catholic weekly, was the worst of all, and led a lengthy campaign to discredit the play and the playwright (Byrne 1955, Anon. 1955a, 1955b, 1955c, 1955d, 1955e). O'Casey, however, found most provocative and off-base those commentaries (Anon. 1955f; X. 1955; Finegan 1955a, 1955b) which claimed that his long Devon exile rendered him incompetent to comment on the contemporary realities of Ireland, a view he forcefully disputed (O'Casey 1956a, 1956b). Subsequent productions in London (1961, Mermaid) and Boston (1988, Lyric) generated none of the buzz associated with the Dublin performances, and the play receded into theatrical obscurity where it now resides.

Given the reception of *Bonfire* in Dublin in 1955, it is curious that in 1957, the Dublin Tostal (Festival) Council, in preparation for a theater festival in the spring of the following year, invited a submission from O'Casey. Despite the hostility that *Bonfire* generated only two years before, it would appear that there was a recognition, possibly quite begrudging, that a Dublin theater festival could not be launched without including Ireland's best known living playwright. O'Casey offered the Council a new work, *Drums*, which dramatized the liberation of an Irish country town from clerical domination through celebratory preparations for a festival. Although O'Casey's new play mirrored the activities of the Tostal, its contents were more provocative than placatory.

O'Casey's play was to be produced along with a dramatization of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) entitled *Bloomsday* and three mime plays by Samuel Beckett. By early 1958, plans for the theater festival began to unravel. *Bloomsday* was dropped from the program. The Tostal Council raised various objections to O'Casey's *Drums*. These objections (like the dropping of *Bloomsday*) were fueled by the refusal of the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, J. D. McQuaid, to open the festival with a Votive Mass if either *Drums* or *Bloomsday* were to be performed. Under increasing pressure to make changes which he did not approve of, O'Casey withdrew

Performing Political Opposition: Sean O'Casey's Late Plays

his play. Reading between the lines, it appears that the Tostal Council was reluctant to reject O'Casey's play outright and be seen to be censoring his work, so they demanded revisions they knew O'Casey would find unacceptable in order to force him to withdraw the play and assume the onus of cantankerousness.

In this way, like *Bonfire* two years earlier, O'Casey's newest work became the center of an Irish controversy. In the by now usual manner of O'Casey controversies, articles were written, letters to the editor were sent and answered, rumors and accusations abounded. Perhaps the most dramatic moment of this particular imbroglio comes when O'Casey, in a tit-for-tat response to the de facto censorship of his work, banned the production of his plays by any professional theater in Ireland and refused permission to Radio Eireann to broadcast *Juno and the Paycock*. (O'Casey did not lift the ban until shortly before his death in 1964.)

In the midst of the growing furore, as a gesture of solidarity with O'Casey and a rejection of clerical censorship in whatever guise, Beckett withdrew his plays. Without any of the plays originally scheduled for production now available, and without sufficient time to make alternative arrangements, the Tostal Council was forced to cancel the Theater Festival (Schrank 1996, 27–31; Krause 1975, 212–17).

Drums had an inauspicious world premiere in 1959 at the Little Theater, Lafayette, Indiana, directed by Jeanne Orr and Robert Hogan, who was then a young, untenured professor at Purdue University, having just completed his doctorate at the University of Missouri on O'Casey's experimental dramatic techniques. Even though Hogan enters the story as a director, his engagement with O'Casey is primarily text-based, and illustrates the transformation of O'Casey within his own lifetime from living dramatist to academic subject, a transformation in which he participated, as his letters responding to inquiries primarily from American academics attest (O'Casey 1989; for example, 306–7 to Robert Hogan acknowledging receipt of Hogan's dissertation, 477–8 to Harry Ritchie and 525–27 to David Krause concerning an article about O'Casey).⁶

In 1966, two years after O'Casey's death, Thomas MacAnna tried to breathe new life into *Drums*, directing a production at the Olympia (Dublin). Some twenty years later, MacAnna tried again. As Artistic Director of the Abbey, he embarked on a revival of O'Casey's works, including *Drums*. The Dublin reviewers were underwhelmed. In a typical commentary, Michael Sheridan, of the *Dublin Evening Press*, found nothing of interest in MacAnna's effort. "*The Drums of Father Ned*," Sheridan writes, "is a classic example of how even the great may fail, and Thomas MacAnna's overplayed and pompous production cannot rescue the diaphanous material" (1985, 4). Like *Bonfire*, *Drums* receded into theatrical obscurity.

Although the academic interest in these plays has not been great, it is nonetheless true that scholarship has been more attentive to *Bonfire* and

Drums than the theater. The survey form of many of the book-length studies of O'Casey's drama invites treatment of all his plays (Kosok 1985, 258–85; Krause 1975, 202–224; Mitchell 1980, 267–300; Smith 1978, 116–70). Particularly in contrast to the visceral hostility of the Irish reviews, these studies are tolerant and intelligent. Nevertheless, in dealing with the late plays, there is a well intentioned tendency⁷ to translate O'Casey's feisty Marxism into a refined communitarianism, a tendency which effectively displaces the immediacy and topicality of O'Casey's critique of the domestic policies of the de Valera government into generalizations about the affirmation of life. It is not that these readings are in themselves obtuse or inadequate; far from it. It is just that, in de-emphasizing their social connections, the abstractions, which the plays undoubtedly embody, appear remote, bloodless and apolitical. The attention given to these plays in book-length studies is unmatched by an equivalent attention in articles in the scholarly journals.⁸ Consequently, unless they have reason to consult these books, those in the academic and literary community who do not specialize in O'Casey studies are rarely reminded that the late plays exist. In this way, neglect perpetuates itself.

To conclude, although *Bonfire* and *Drums* were regarded as subversive by the Church and the State in Ireland, they nevertheless generated substantial interest when they first appeared. O'Casey's anger and disappointment at the way *Bonfire* and *Drums*, the major efforts of his old age, had been received in Ireland frame his last three dramatic works, two of which, *Curtains* and *Figuro*, repeat and elaborate the concerns of the previous two plays in absolute defiance of the views of the Irish Church, the government and the Dublin cultural establishment.

3. Neglecting O'Casey's Late Plays Part Two: *Behind the Green Curtains*, *Figuro in the Night*, *The Moon Shines on Kilenamoe*

It is not surprising, given O'Casey's fierce determination to contest the suppression of his work, that two of O'Casey's last plays, *Curtains* and *Figuro*, published together with *Moon* in one volume, return to the same preoccupations as were found in *Bonfire* and *Drums*. Here again O'Casey continues his dissection of Irish society from a Marxist perspective. If anything, the persistence of the Cold War and the heightened anti-Communism it sanctioned in an Ireland already opposed to the godless atheism of the Soviet Union made O'Casey even more determined to infuse his plays with his political reading of the failures of de Valerianism.

Taken together, *Curtains* and *Figuro* project a vision of Ireland perhaps even bleaker than that presented in *Bonfire* and *Drums*. O'Casey's Ireland is a cultural backwater; its inhabitants are old, often unmarried, and sexually repressed; even the weakest political opposition leads to persecution; good jobs depend on political patronage and religious affiliation; exile is the primary method of liberation. By restating these views even more

emphatically than in his previous work, O'Casey sends a strong message to his Irish detractors that, however unpopular his opinions, and regardless of the consequences, for as long as he lived, he would not be silenced. Opposition is, after all, what O'Casey does best.

Although the plays were published in 1961, *Curtains* and *Figuro* were probably written between 1956 and 1959, based on internal references to events in Hungary and based too on the mid- 1950s view of Ireland that these plays reflect. The dates the plays were written are of interest because they support the argument that *Curtains* and *Figuro* were influenced by, and are responses to, the *Bonfire* and *Drums* controversies. The demonstration at the end of *Curtains*, organized by the Irish Church, is in support of Cardinal Mindszenty, the highest ranking Roman Catholic cleric in Hungary, and whose perceived ill-treatment by the Hungarian Communist government became one of the rallying cries of the 1956 anti-communist uprising in Hungary.

Although the Hungarian uprising was supported in the West and taken by many as a sign that Communism lacked popular support in Hungary, O'Casey regarded it as a counter-revolutionary effort. In an off-the-cuff comment about the events in Hungary in one of his letters of 1956, O'Casey provides a seed that was to take root in *Curtains*: "Let them ... cast the beam out of their own eye before they complain of the mote in the eye of their brother" (1989, 347). As I understand his comment, O'Casey underscores the unintentional irony of those organizations in Ireland, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, which advocate religious tolerance in Hungary, and practice religious intolerance at home. So, while many of O'Casey's contemporaries were engaged in opposition to events behind the Iron Curtain, and in particular, Soviet intervention in Hungary, O'Casey, playing with the curtain metaphor, would focus on events nearer at hand and reveal what life was like behind the green curtains.

Hungary was in O'Casey's mind again when he worked on *Figuro*. It is dedicated to, among other things, the Hungarian postage stamp, issued in 1958, of the Manneken-Pis, a statue located in Brussels, of a naked young boy urinating.⁹ O'Casey was clearly delighted that a Catholic country like Belgium would allow public display of male nakedness, even if immature, and that the Hungarian government, regarded as repressive, would celebrate it on a postage stamp for the whole world to see. That statue is central to the action and meaning of *Figuro*. When O'Casey imagines it as if mysteriously appearing in the center of Dublin, it is condemned by Church and State. Such institutional opposition is unable to contain the orgiastic release experienced by the women of Dublin, who, in a collective moment of sexual awakening created by years of sexual frustration, are reported to be attacking men, and some of the men appear to be enjoying their attentions.

Not only do the references to Hungary help date *Curtains* and *Figuro*, they also provide one of several links between the two plays,

creating the same kind of mirror effect O'Casey achieved with *Bonfire and Drums*. The repression dramatized in *Curtains* and in Scene I of *Figuro*, like the censorship in *Bonfire*, generates the joyous and anarchic release in *Drums* and Scene II of *Figuro*. Unlike *Bonfire* and *Drums*, however, which have rural settings, both *Curtains* and *Figuro* dramatize Dublin. In both, Dublin is presented as depleted and nearly dead. *Curtains* begins with a funeral, and music from the "Dead March" from Saul can be heard intermittently throughout Scene (Act) I. O'Casey achieves similar effect in *Figuro* by creating a setting which divides the stage between those who died in the Nationalist cause and those who died in the Unionist cause: "*An Obelisk to the memory of men who fell in the Great War stands at one end of street; a Keltic Cross to the memory of men who fought and fell for Ireland stands at the other end*" (1961, 89). All the action of *Figuro* is played out between these monuments to violent death. Dedicated to the "ferocious chastity of Ireland", as well as a Hungarian postage stamp, *Figuro* suggests that what has not been accomplished in war may well be achieved by sexual repression: childlessness, loneliness, sterility, depletion and death.

The connections between *Curtains* and *Figuro* are apparent in other ways as well. In both, obviously still reeling from the treatment he received in the *Standard* and other Irish newspapers, O'Casey attacks journalism and journalists for their bias and ineptitude. In the prefatory material to *Curtains*, O'Casey quotes an editor of the *New York Times* as he was quoted in the *Irish Press* of 10 October 1959: "The business of a Journalist is to destroy the truth, to lie outright, to pervert, to vilify, to fawn at the feet of Mammon, and to sell himself, his country, and his race for his daily bread" (1961, 1). O'Casey's play then introduces us to two journalists, Jack McGeelish, a columnist always poking around trying to find unsavory tidbits of gossip, and Christy Kornavaun, a writer for *The Catholic Buzzer*, who supports the Church no matter how outrageous its policies, and attempts by threats and bullying to intimidate the other writers and journalists into obedience.

There is more whimsy and less bitterness in O'Casey's presentation of two journalists in *Figuro* as a pair of clowns able neither to see nor hear. Undeterred by their deficiencies, these two attempt (unsuccessfully) to function as news gatherers:

[Two men, arm in arm, come in; one is deaf, the other is blind. The blind one is wearing thick, dark glasses that, masklike, cover more than half his face. Both wear tall-hats, one light grey, the other, black; one wears a coat with tails, the other a dinner-jacket; one wears red trousers, the other green ones. Both sport collars and ties. The blind one carrying a natty walking-stick. They come to the centre, one looking back towards the houses, the other looking frontways. Both of them seem to be in something of a flutter.

They are linked together in a reverse way so that they have to walk in a revolving manner, and when they stop, each looks forward in a reverse way to the other.]

Blind Man to Old Men. What's going on in the city's centre? Didyas hear?

Deaf Man turning to face Old Men. Didyas see? I'm a Reporter from the *Irish Horn* and me friend's one from the *Dublin Flute*. I tell him what I sees. He tells me all he hears.... (1961, 108)

Whether it is the malice, pettiness and opportunism of the journalists in *Curtains* or the incompetence of the reporters in *Figuro*, it is no wonder, O'Casey suggests, that he has been so mistreated in the Irish press.

O'Casey's critique of the fifth estate is part of a more general assault on the Irish intellectual establishment, which is the central concern of *Curtains* and which distinguishes this play from all his other work. This is O'Casey's first and only foray into the middle-class drawing rooms of the Dublin intelligentsia. Given the role played by that group in the condemnation of *Bonfire* and the de facto suppression of *Drums*; given, too, O'Casey's inability to turn a blind eye; and, more dangerous, given O'Casey's view of drama as a weapon, it is not surprising that, in the last plays, he again went into attack mode. Particularly in *Curtains*, he portrays the Irish cultural élite as terrified, resentful, dispirited and compliant in the face of the intimidation and meanness of Church and State. Although their private lives are subject to unwelcome public scrutiny and vigilante violence, they are too frightened to offer effective opposition. The fear the characters in *Curtains* experience is grounded in their knowledge of the tactics used by Church and State to enforce its ideology. To oppose the status quo, they know, is to be humiliated, physically beaten, or forced into exile.¹⁰

Because surveillance is constant, the intellectuals of *Curtains* feel the need for concealment, but concealment is a debilitating strategy that feeds their fear, thus creating an ever greater need for concealment. The curtains are a vital prop, temporarily isolating the lackluster group of playwrights, poets, journalists and hangers-on (several of whom may well have been identifiable to a contemporary Irish audience) who gather in the drawing room of Chatastray, a patron of the arts, from the demands of the dominant ideology. Behind these green domestic curtains, they express modest disagreement with Church policies; yet they do not have the courage and the will to give public voice or artistic form to their mildly oppositional sentiments.

Worse, their public statements and behaviour, whether willing or coerced, conform to the dictates of the Roman Catholic Church, thus furthering its hegemonic domination. So, for example, in Scene I, despite their stated desire to honour their dead colleague, a Protestant playwright, and attend his funeral at a Protestant church, they yield, after much dithering,

to the Catholic Church's decree that Catholics must not participate in the services of other faiths. This same inability to act in accord with their personal beliefs is dramatized in Scene II and III in relation to the plans for a demonstration on behalf of Cardinal Mindszenty. At first the intellectual coterie that meets in Chatastray's drawing room is opposed to participation. But by the end of the play, their independence in words is revealed as conformity in action. Despite their objections, in the end they march together under banners approved by the Church.

The curtains are, for O'Casey, also a complex metaphor for Ireland. Ireland has created cultural and political hegemony, but it has done so by processes of repression and intimidation which are carefully hidden from the rest of the world.¹¹ What is revealed behind the green curtains is the spectacle of fear and self-abasement that constitutes intellectual life in the late days of Eamon de Valera.

If the characters within the play are doomed to live out their lives behind the green curtains, O'Casey's drama intends to open them so that the world may see that it is in the supremely anti-Communist world of Dublin that thought control, religious intolerance, political violence, sexual repression and cultural timidity have dominion. This exposure of the weaknesses of Dublin's intellectual elite also provides an explanation of why O'Casey's earlier plays, *Bonfire* and *Drums*, had such a hostile reception, and it justifies O'Casey's engaged dramatic practice. In the end, the curtains in the play's title are also the curtains of O'Casey's oppositional theater, in which O'Casey creates through his work the kind of radical critique that is otherwise unavailable in Ireland.

Although included in the same volume, *Moon* differs from *Curtains* and *Figuro* in its rural setting and its gentle tone. Yet it critiques de Valerean policies of cultural isolation, Gaelicization, and rural underdevelopment. *Moon* is a parable about harmonious relationships between historic enemies. Arriving unexpectedly in the Irish countryside, an English lord, once he abandons his imperial lordliness, discovers companionship amongst the Irish peasants so technologically backward that they lack electricity, telephones, cars, hotels, even bed and breakfasts. The Irish country-people, once they set aside their parochial suspicions and officiousness, are able to offer kindness. Each gives the other the things necessary for survival. The peasants provide the lord with food, a bed to sleep in and a donkey cart to transport him to his destination. The lord gives his hosts gratitude for their kindness and reasonable payment for their services. This view expresses O'Casey's belief, first articulated in such early plays as *The Plough and the Stars*, that there is a reservoir of fundamental goodness in people that can be drawn on despite their political, religious and economic differences. Such optimism may be 'moonshine', as the title suggests, but it is a nice conclusion to the spectacle of dysfunctional social relationships O'Casey dramatizes in *Curtains* and

Figuro, and a touching conclusion to the corpus of work of a dramatist so often criticized for his contentiousness.

By the time O'Casey's final three plays appeared, profound economic changes were taking place in Ireland. In 1958, de Valera's government adopted a programme of economic development that was quickly to bring Ireland from its economic backwardness into the modern world. In 1959, de Valera retired as Prime Minister and became President of the Republic, a ceremonial position. He was succeeded by Sean Lemass, who implemented the programme of economic development, producing, almost overnight, according to Brown, a sense that a new day had dawned in Ireland:

The First Plan envisaged a growth rate for Ireland of 2 per cent per annum. Between 1959 and 1963 the annual growth rate achieved was in fact a very encouraging 4 per cent per annum. In 1962 therefore a commentator could report that the Gross National Product had increased by 15 ½ per cent, volume of production by 28 ½ per cent, total imports by 30 ¼ per cent, car registrations by 29 ½ per cent and volume of personal expenditure by 11 ½ per cent between 1958–61. Between 1957 and 1962, another commentator noted in 1965, the number of people 'engaged in the production of transportable goods alone, rose from just under 150,000 to just over 170,000, an increase of 13 per cent. The fact that commentators began so soon to remark on the economic changes that were occurring ... suggests how deeply a sense of a new age had entered the Irish collective mind. (1985, 242)

Since the prevailing atmosphere in the Ireland of the 1960s was of dynamic change, O'Casey's portrayal of the stagnation of de Valera in *Curtains* and *Figuro* undoubtedly seemed out-of-date when it appeared. *Moon*, at least in part, appears to capture the new outward looking spirit of post de Valera Ireland, but it was, by reason of proximate location, tarred with the same brush as the other two plays.

When O'Casey's critique had immediate relevance, it was politically unacceptable; when it became politically acceptable, it was perceived as irrelevant. Each of the three last plays had its world premiere in 1962 at an American university theater, *Curtains* at the Strong Auditorium of the University of Rochester (Rochester, New York); *Figuro* at the Hofstra Playhouse of Hofstra College (now Hofstra University, Long Island, New York); and *Moon* at Kirby Memorial Theatre of Amherst College (Amherst, Massachusetts). Whatever the merits of such performances, they do not generally attract the kind of attention that enables a commercial production in a major metropolitan centre. Each has been revived only once, in the summer of 1975, in Dublin; *Drums* at the Project Arts Centre, directed by

Frank Murphy, *Figuro* and *Moon* at the Peacock, the Abbey's 'little theatre' directed by Thomas MacAnna. These were the plays' first and only professional productions.

They did not fare well. Typical of the reviewers' disdain were the remarks of John MacInerney, writing of *Figuro* and *Moon* for the *Irish Press* of Dublin. In MacInerney's opinion, these two plays demonstrate that O'Casey had lost his talent for play writing. As for the Theatre Arts production of *Curtains*, the influential Dublin theatre reviewer Desmond Rushe of the *Irish Independent* insisted that "*Behind the Green Curtains* is really an embarrassing piece of work [and] no one in his right senses would consider putting it on the stage" (1975, 11). How much of Rushe's irritation was caused by O'Casey's criticism of cowardly Irish journalists is not known. There were no further revivals of these plays.

Academic criticism of O'Casey has been no more sympathetic to these efforts than were the theater reviewers. In the revised version of David Krause's early and well-received study of O'Casey, *Sean O'Casey: The Man and His Work*, he devotes less than two sentences (in a study of nearly 400 pages) to these plays (1975, 306, 317).¹² Heinz Kosok's equally well-received and comprehensive survey of O'Casey,¹³ a work I regard as the best single study of O'Casey, takes a closer look at these three works than did Krause, but finds them inferior and tired, especially *Curtains*, which he regards as O'Casey's weakest effort (1985, 291–309). Kosok rightly points out that there are technical problems with *Curtains*, which is deemed to O'Casey's waning creative powers.¹⁴ Kosok may be right, but I think he does not sufficiently credit O'Casey's rush to strike against the Dublin establishment while the memory of their offences against him was still fresh. Such haste may be one reason why there are technical problems in this play. Although *Figuro* and *Moon* do not have any technical difficulties, Kosok finds them negligible.

4. Conclusions

The combined effect of these critical responses to O'Casey's later plays whether on the stage or the page has been to establish a durable paradigm of diminished expectations, making subsequent re-readings appear defensive efforts of nostalgic rehabilitation. Even so, the narrative of O'Casey's neglect raises interesting issues of art and politics, history and individual sensibility. For a start, responses to O'Casey's late plays reveal a great deal about the beliefs of the reviewers and critics, and the social realities from which those beliefs emerge. Those responses also tell us something about O'Casey's plays. By decrying their preoccupation with the conditions of Ireland, those responses confirm, by implication, O'Casey's Marxist engagement. An examination of the reception of O'Casey's late plays thus illustrates the complex matrix that oppositional cultural practices

Performing Political Opposition: Sean O'Casey's Late Plays

establish between intentionality, audience, cultural establishment and the historical moment.

NOTES

¹ The term 'late plays' is elastic, and can be used to refer to everything after *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), or, as is more common amongst O'Casey scholars, it can be used to refer to the plays O'Casey wrote in his old age from around the time of *The Bishop's Bonfire* (1955).

² In dealing with O'Casey, it is necessary to distinguish between North American and Western European academic critics whose work belongs to the political and academic 'mainstream', and reflects its anti-communist ideology, and Marxist critics. Brustein, Daiches, Hogan and Krause belong to the first group. Jack Mitchell, a British-born scholar who was a lecturer in British and Irish literature at Humboldt University, Berlin (in the former East Germany), where he received his doctorate, belongs to the second group. Himself a committed Marxist, Mitchell's study of O'Casey (1980) is an old-style, doctrinaire Marxist analysis, with a great many interesting things to say about O'Casey's politics, but his approach is very different from the other critics to whom I refer. Mitchell does not express the kind of irritation or unease with O'Casey's politics that characterizes the dominant critical line.

³ The seminal studies of O'Casey by David Krause and Robert Hogan appeared in 1960, when McCarthyism was still a feature of the American political landscape. It is not surprising that Hogan's study of O'Casey's experimental technique floats free of any analysis of the politics that infuse those techniques. Krause's more comprehensive study essentially redefines O'Casey's Communism as primitive Christianity. I would not like to be understood as saying that either Hogan or Krause consciously trimmed their views of O'Casey to fit the cloth of McCarthyism. What I believe is that the political climate of the United States at the time unconsciously framed their views of O'Casey and made it attractive and easy for them to de-politicize his work. Their great strength is that, unlike Brustein, they found a vocabulary in which to deal with O'Casey's achievement and did not condemn him on the questionable ground of aesthetic failure.

⁴ It is not that the early plays had a thirty-year head start on the later plays. Scholarly articles on O'Casey did not start appearing until the expansion of American universities in the late fifties. By that time, *Bonfire* and *Drums* had appeared on the page and then the stage. The last three were soon to appear.

⁵ I emphasize that I am looking at these five plays as an aggregate of sustained neglect. There is the occasional one act play like *Cathleen Listens In* (1923) or *Time To Go* (1952) that has sunk without trace, but one act plays raise a host of special production problems different from the kinds of considerations taken into account in the selection and production of longer

plays, and these may account in part too for the disappearance of *Moon* from the boards. In a nutshell, it requires more than one short play to produce an evening of one act (or short) plays, and finding short plays that work well together often proves difficult. The only full length O'Casey play that has achieved anything like the neglect of the group of five is *Within the Gates* (1934), but its production raises economic questions of feasibility unique to itself. It seems clear that the expense of a full-scale production for a play that at the time of its world premiere in 1934 (it had only one other production), employed about 45 actors and which requires four different settings (Schrank, 1996, 282), would appear prohibitive when its success is uncertain. In this regard, it is useful to remember that producing plays is a business venture which combines economics with politics and aesthetics.

⁶ O'Casey also corresponded with the English-born Ronald Ayling, who became a professor of English literature at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.

⁷ Mitchell is the exception.

⁸ The most influential article on the late plays, "Illusion and Actuality in the Later O'Casey" (1969), was written by the Irish critic John Jordan, then teaching at Memorial University of Newfoundland (Canada). Jordan does not give any attention to either *Figuro* or *Moon*, and provides a mixed review of *Curtains* and *Bonfire*. Jordan is at his best on *Drums*. Jordan's study appears in a collection of essays on O'Casey, and not in the scholarly journals. I emphasize the absence of coverage of the late plays in scholarly journals because those journals are often less specialized than an essay collection on a specific author, and therefore are seen by a wider audience.

⁹ See *Michel 1721* for pictures of this and the other stamps commemorating Hungary's participation in the Brussels World Fair of 1958.

¹⁰ Two characters, Noneen and Chatastray, are assaulted by masked men acting as enforcers of the policies of Church and State.

¹¹ The concept of a 'hidden Ireland' was advanced by Daniel Corkery in the late 1950s (Corkery 1956). Corkery argues that the Protestant cultural élite (i.e. Yeats, Synge, Lady Gregory) had occluded Catholic Ireland. O'Casey appears to be writing against Corkery's specifications of what is being hidden in Ireland. Catholic hegemony is assured; oppositional voices, Protestant and Catholic, are, using Corkery's term, but O'Casey's meaning, 'hidden', that is, suppressed behind the green curtains.

¹² The first edition of 1960 appeared before *Curtains*, *Figuro* and *Kylenamoe* had been published.

¹³ Kosok is a German critic whose work is less influenced by a visceral hostility to Marxism than is American criticism. But as a then West German, Kosok would I believe be troubled by O'Casey's support for Communist control of central and eastern Europe, which *Curtains* advances by its criticism of Irish opposition to the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising.

¹⁴ Perhaps the most serious lapse is the attribution to the journalist Kornavaun of speeches that were not said by him or anyone else in the play. We hear a heated exchange between Kornavaun and Noneen in Scene II (32–33). Kornavaun leaves; Noneen reports their conversation to Chatastray and the others; her report of the conversation is full of details which were absent from the exchange the audience just heard (36–37). The discrepancy between what the audience hears and what is reported as having been said is inexplicable. There is no reason why Noneen should invent a speech by Kornavaun. Although Kosok does not mention this lapse, it is another example of the problem to which he refers.

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Performing Political Opposition: Sean O'Casey's Late Plays

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