

Lecture by Dr. Conor O'Malley at the *Sean O'Casey Summer School*, Open University of Ireland, given on Saturday, 22nd May, 2010.

From Printed Page to Performance – Sean O'Casey's Within the Gates

Within the Gates was presented by Dublin Lyric Players in the Larkin Room, Liberty Hall between 25th April to 1st May, 2010 as part of Five Lamps Arts Festival.

The first problem about *Within the Gates* was how to read it. The cockney slang, stitched into the vocals meant that you could not read it easily, especially if you are Irish. The extensive stage directions on settings were hard to visualise – if you're not naturally a visual minded person. The music cues meant nothing if you did not have the technical resources to hand with which to pick out the melodies. And how did you gauge the effectiveness of each shift of mood - in the abstract - without a cast to help you work things out. And then there was the complexity of the text itself, the seemingly overwritten language, the funny but diversionary subplots and scenes of dialogue that seemed to add nothing to the forward movement of the action. What was the purpose of four people endlessly discussing about life when the outworking of the main action was being becalmed? What was the purpose of the Old Woman's rant against the contemporary world and then giving us an apparently random song about lost love and the sacrifice of the soldiers who died on the Front line? Was O'Casey still hankering over some lost opportunity that he didn't pursue when he was writing *The Silver Tassie*? How on earth could any director hope to dramatise effectively and truthfully a death scene packed full of sentimentality and extravagantly lush poetic language? and then add a music score to all of that, complete with dance tunes, perfected attuned to the dramatic conflicts as Jannice dies, in a layered process with at least four different transitions on the pathway to death? How could any actor, particularly the Dreamer, be expected to speak such ornate lines with a straight face and then sing them to the tune of a melody line in the form of a religious chant? How was the Bishop and his Sister to be portrayed other than as total caricature and buffoons. On the face of it, not much possibility for subtlety here. And how would you find a cast willing to participate in the play who would not be conversant with O'Casey's experimental forms. Nor had O'Casey shown inclination to consider the sensitive issue of a theatre's budget. Thus, he was now asking any prospective theatre company to find, not just a Young Woman of exceptional acting ability, produce a strong supporting cast of 15, a group of Down and Outs, assorted Evangelists, several courting couples, teams of young girls and boys. He was demanding "a cast of thousands" so to speak! Oh, and by the by, the crowds all needed to be able to dance and sing difficult songs. The songs. These were not adapted Irish Moore's melodies. Every one of them was strange, Brechtian even and, of course, written in minor keys with exceptionally high notes needing to be reached, and with ease. Otherwise forget them. The song and dance routines gave the impression that this was a musical but clearly this was a musical quite unlike anything you had ever seen. How on earth was one to stylise the individual performances? Does the Dreamer sing to Jannice or the audience and to whom does the Gardener sing – the flowers? And then there were the logistical problems, how, on a budget, were you supposed to convey gates opening and closing, the four seasons in a year and create other essential working sundries as a quickly sturdy, moveable and working Maypole?! Ah, yes - and the girls and boys have to dance around it too while singing the difficult lyrics in Brechtian mode. Phrasing of the songs was not going to be easy either as the beat

seemed to change pattern with every bar. And there were other large warning signs. The play had not been presented in public performance in this generation. This was an ominous sign. There is usually a good reason for a play not being performed. The few pundits who took the trouble to comment about the play admired certain scenes but skirted around giving an overall judgement and nobody had expressed an all round cogent view as to its theatrical merit - some great scenes, flaws a many, but no specification as to what these actually were. All bemoaned O'Casey's absence of access to an empathetic company of actors. There were only two well known productions in O'Casey's day actually to refer to, one with an English cast and a failure in performance. The other in Broadway, a success, but no information on the production itself, apart from a terrific performance from the lead actor. O'Casey was displeased with the London outing but nothing was available to indicate what exactly the problems lay. And how on earth could a contemporary Irish, Dublin based cast hope to interpret a text that is in English cockney and to put across to a 21st century Dublin audience, the angst of a foreign long forgotten society, time and place – complete with contemporary commentary? Who remembers what the “gold standard” was and who cares that Jimmy Douglas wrote for the Daily Express? And last, and by no means least, the common wisdom was that the O'Casey plays don't work, that they ain't a patch on the Big Three and that, really, they are of interest only to the academics.

So there it was. The play had too many characters, too many subplots, too many ideas, no discipline in the writing, too localised in its appeal, and too dependent on too many things being right to save it from becoming an embarrassment in performance. No wonder productions were scarce! You would be mad to attempt it.

But I knew other things about O'Casey. I had directed four of his plays. Apart from *The Plough* and *Juno* I had directed *The Silver Tassie* and *Red Roses for Me*. Thus, I had learned how to present the Expressionist War Scene in the *Tassie* and the Bridge scene in *Red Roses*. Neither was a naturalistic scene and both depended heavily on careful handling of the shifts of mood, integration of the songs and utilising actors who had a sensibility for O'Casey's *Dublinese* speech patterns. I could sense that the cockney accents counted less than an ability to put across the phrasing patterns – still manifestly of a *Dublinese* variety. Characterisation was not difficult at all – once you knew who each of the characters resembled. There were elements of Nora Clitheroe, Rosie Redmond and Mary Boyle all bundled up in the Young Woman (Jannice). The Men with hats acting as the chorus reminded one of *The Covey*. Bits of Uncle Peter were findable in the Bishop. Aspects of the Dreamer could be found in Ayamonn. *Within the Gates* was familiar territory after all. The Dreamer's chant echoed the “Hymn to the Gun” chant in the War scene of the *Tassie*. The cockney slang had its mirror image in the *Dublinese* slang of earlier plays. You just had to take your time and work out the content and the inter-connections of images and words. The songs were Brechtian – quite a surprise when I first heard them played – but this too was familiar territory. I had learned about Brecht's ways of theatre through having directed *Arturo Ui*, *Mother Courage*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *The Life of Galileo*. Lots of short scenes, large themes, use of offbeat songs, epic scale, intricate argument. *Within the Gates* was now beginning to reveal itself. Then the issue of the actors. Who could play the Young Woman? For this particular part would need someone of exceptional ability, trained in classical forms of theatre particularly Shakespeare, with lots of energy, a strong interpretive capacity, a wide vocal range and an ability to fill the stage through precise and consistently applied stage movement. Once she was found and on board – good fortune had shined on us the

moment her name was whispered in my ear. The next priority was a person to play the Dreamer. This person needed to be able to sustain the final scene with credibility, have a fine vocal sense and be able to sing well. He needed to exude natural charm and have an easy swagger. The actor chosen to play this had already played the title role for Dublin Lyric, Yeats's version of *Oedipus the King*. No problem for him! Once that part was filled, the parts of the Old Woman and the Bishop needed people with long life experience, absolute consistency of performance, accuracy of delivery, and a keen sense of the full potentialities of experimental theatre. Every part had to be carefully filled - for any gap would betray the play in performance, and no lapse – not even on a word - could be afforded as the performance would have fallen into ridicule. Gradually, and over the course of the six weeks of rehearsal, all the parts were filled, last, but by no means least, 4 young people under the age of 18 all trained in the most demanding medium of musical theatre.

How to conduct the rehearsals? I had seen productions of O'Casey where the end results lurched forward in a jerky fashion but with no seamless flow from one scene to another. This happens when individual scenes are rehearsed and not joined together until late in the rehearsal process. That type of approach would be disastrous here where each of the four scenes or Acts needed to be rehearsed as integrally as possible, otherwise the actors would not be aware, in micro terms, of what the dramatic mood or demeanour or degree of physicality was needed to fit that particular part of the play. It would not do, for instance, for the physical movements in the Autumn scene to be as lively as those in the Spring scene. To achieve the necessary degree of coherence, this needed the running of entire scenes, again and again, so that the actors would be thoroughly familiar with what were non linear sequences. Each "scene" had many sub-scenes in them – incredibly, at least 12 "sub-scenes" or "movements" in each scene, or I estimate, about 50 in the course of a two hour show. An early surprise was actually the length of the show. I had guessed on a length of about 2 and a half hours, based on 110 pages of text and assuming the play remained uncut: but in rehearsal, each scene played in only 30 minutes. This was an unexpected bonus. Little room for an audience to be bored – so much was happening! Then came the issue of what cuts to make, if any. I had been asked "I presume you're cutting the songs..?" but how could I do that? – these were part of the action of the play – if you cut the songs you are unbalancing the shifts of mood and maybe upset the whole applecart – how could you cut a movement from a major playwright without the most compelling of reasons? Nonetheless, I had started rehearsals with one cut in mind and that was the Old Woman's memorial speech to the Unknown Soldier and her song. The scholar, David Krause thought this was a ridiculous scene and prior to finding his comment I had independently formed that opinion too. But in rehearsal I rapidly had second thoughts, for the rest of the scene was becoming destabilised, the character of the Old Woman now seemed incomplete and the point of having her in the play at all now seemed unclear. Her song provided a natural buffer sandwiched between the knockabout humour of the chorus and an ideal precursor to the then epic last scene. The Old Woman's arguments raised the stakes of the play, raising the game from one of individualised bitterness to a broad commentary on the state of society and the state of the human soul. Her words were full of lyrical beauty that gave the reason for the use of the park as it transformed itself through the seasons of the year. Life, death and rebirth were all in it. It would be a terrible mistake not to leave all of her scene in. Then gradually and as a cast we began to appreciate the importance of every single stage direction and learned to trust on their usefulness. Where a scene creaked or simply did not play well in rehearsal, we found if we followed the directions, their meaning would become apparent. Thus, a simple direction like, for instance, the Bishop's sister to

interject "quickly" immediately alerted the audience to the fact that the Bishop's sister knew all along that the Old Woman was the lover of her brother, the Bishop and that Gilbert was therefore Jannice's father. In the last scene, by following the exact stage directions on the use of the song of the Down and Outs, alternating between humming and singing, and then by incorporating, exactly as instructed, the dance tunes - at first bright and then mournful – the theatrical effect became abundantly clear and workable. More than that, the epic ending became, paradoxically, much easier to build into a coherent and theatrical whole.

Finally, there was the language. We discovered, sometimes with surprise how every word was interconnected by way of imagery. The seemingly innocuous words and images of the first scene came at us, recycled in ever interesting and different patterns. The "beautiful little birds" became later the chorus's "chirrupers." The Gangway for the Countess's baby became the Gangway for Jesus Christ. The Evangelist's promise to save the sinner becomes the call to "save" the souls of even the Attendants. We discovered that you could not substitute the word "road" for "way", for "way" is the critical word in Jannice's search for meaning. In fact, we learned that not a word was found to have been wasted. Not one. But rather, layer upon layer of multiple meaning was uncovered. When Jannice exhorts the Bishop to pick the yellow "primroses," she infuses the image with savagery and speaks the speech, as Shakespeare would have her, "trippingly on the tongue", and "not too tame" either. The image of the dance follows you through the play, from the fertility dance around the Maypole, from her waltz dance to the chorus, and then, finally, to her two dances of death to the strains of bright and then mournful dance tunes. Another lesson was to leave the actors to speak the cockney as written. O'Casey had written the play that way and it was necessary to let it be. The Dreamer, the Bishop and Jannice do not speak in cockney and again the author had made the distinctions deliberately.

Describing the play for the press release proved elusive and not possible for this deficient promoter. How do you sell a play by saying it is modern man's Everywoman to medieval man's Everyman? Too academic. Saying the play was Expressionistic was no use either. No "bums on seats" for saying its experimental theatre. A musical? Well, not quite and where's the orchestra? A serious play about the post war depression – closer, and thanks to Chris Murray's own facility for explaining things, a very good way of explaining the play. Sell the play as bringing us through the gates of O'Casey's mind? Even closer again. Yet I felt Declan Brennan's design for the poster spoke better than all the words of explanation. But best of all what explained the play was the performances that released the powerful forces of a great poet at work and that resulted in a wonderfully fulfilled multi-media and multi sensory experience. A play for our time in post Celtic Ireland and for all time where the heart of any Everywoman is "troubled." We had set out in our presentation to unlock the secret codes of the text. In so achieving this, O'Casey challenged the players as, from now on, he challenges the audience.

Perhaps at the end of all, the play is still flawed. But we did not come across any that seemed to us to need fixing. The main quality that was needed was enough knowledge and faith in the playwright to implement his directions and leave the text to speak for itself. The author amply repaid specific acts of faith. He had already signalled in the play itself that faith was needed, for he had put such words into the mouth of the Dreamer as he pursued a "troubled" Jannice through the Park, "I shall follow after loveliness all the days of my life." This play holds poetic "loveliness" in abundance - in Jannice's outbursts of anger and bitterness, her falling for the

Dreamer's song and charm, her plea to the Gardener for a normal life, her defiance of her Atheist father, her naivety in the face of the persuasive tones of the Evangelist, her expressions of abject disappointment with the Bishop, terror in front of her mother, the conjuring of "peace" in her final vocalised moment of life, the Dreamer's concluding epiphany in song and his beautiful Horatio-like utterance of "You fought the good fight Jannice, Hail and Farewell."

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