

**Notes on a Talk given by Dr. Conor O'Malley
at the Roger Casement Summer School,
Eblana Club, Dun Laoghaire, on Saturday, 27th April 2024.**

Prisoner of the Crown by Richard F. Stockton presented in a staged reading version at the Lexlcon, Dun Laoghaire on 9 to 11 April, 2024 and as directed by Conor O'Malley.

How this project came about. My interest goes back to my father and the publication of an article published in 1962 about the determined forged diaries contained in a Northern Ireland literary journal **Threshold** owned and edited by my parents; and a childhood memory from the mid 1960s of being at Murlough Bay in Northern Ireland at a public event commemorating the life of Roger Casement; and lastly a memory of seeing *Prisoner of the Crown* at the Abbey Theatre in 1972, a pivotal year of the Troubles.

The presentation of rarely seen political drama is a core objective for our theatre group - Dublin Lyric.

Drama tells its story by way of live performance and its greatest strength can be to present a core truth to a collectively gathered audience in more immediate and visceral ways than a written biography or a documentary or a film. And the more political and topical the subject, topic, the more compelling can be the receiving of the message.

So, successful political drama must at least contain a core nugget of authenticity as well as providing a compelling narrative.

In approaching this play written in 1972, do you try to update it for an audience in 2024 or leave it as it was written? And then where do you do it? I chose to have it presented in Dun Laoghaire on account of the physical presence of the statue of Casement now adjacent to us. And as to timing for the presentation two weeks ago, the show was not presented as part of any anniversary, nor a commemoration but was brought forward now as a warning from history reflecting and *revealing of our* times: Fake news, the uses of propaganda in wartime as an indispensable weapon of war, and the undermining of the core value of human rights. Directors need an image or a metaphor on which to present a play. This was provided by the famous picture of the trial by Sir John Lavery and a copy of which was projected as a backdrop in the production.

The author's thesis is certainly not neutral and the clarity and single mindedness of the author's line of thought is striking. Purely as an aside, I wonder is a dimension here that Stockton was American. I am doubtful that an Irish person could have written a version like it (because we tend to be quite indirect in our expression).

In the play, and as part of setting out the themes, the play relentlessly exposes the misuse made of the controversial entries in the diaries with the author assuming the diaries are forgeries – reflecting a commonly held understanding *in Ireland* in the pivotal year in Ireland of 1972 to the effect that the driving need of the then British Establishment was to extinguish both Casement's life **and to destroy** his reputation *comprehensively* and forever.

In Casement's case, the misuse of the diaries was but one spectacular example of fake news. Another fake news route considered during and shortly after Casement's trial but not needed, was simply **to rebrand Casement as insane or....mad.**

About the title of the play

From the title of the play, Prisoner of the Crown - the play is actually more about the treatment of the Prisoner and the motives of everyone else rather than of Casement per se. Mostly he is presented as the victim of the prevailing System of coercive control during a time of War. The original title was The Rape of Ruairi Macasmunde, but the consciously provocative titling was judged as unacceptable by the Abbey in favour of the more nuanced title.

Format of the play is based upon 12 jurors – the actions take you from Casement's landing at Banna strand all the way to his execution. The structure of the play shows the jurors deliberations and they enact the many players as they re-enact the historic actions on Banna strand, Tralee police barracks, tower of London, the Old Bailey courtroom, Pentonville prison. The 12 jurors - who take on some 30 other roles - are cast in roles that are consistent with their basic role. Thus, the Casement juror turns out to be the major hold-out on the juror and those both least, and most hostile to him take broadly similar roles in the re-enactments.

The **play text is as originally presented**. The script chosen is as contained in National Library of Ireland (NLI) and as submitted to the Abbey and that version contains significant differences to the version eventually published. There are at least 5 different versions by Stockton. A scene with Casement's close friend, Richard Morton is later introduced with both discussing the content of the diaries and touching on homosexuality and a personal scene with Casement's close friend, Gertrude Bannister is introduced. A US Senate debate scene in the original version is dropped from the published version of the play, but, in my view, each change takes from the original driving energy and focuses on the treatment by the Crown.

Several extravagant theatrical pantomime-like features in production style are described in all versions but I preferred to tone down these, taking the view that they added too much of a cartoon element. Intuitively I preferred treating the characters as real people.

So, in assessing the role of the artist in bringing to life a historical character, bear in mind how much thought goes into the preparatory or research stage – from the author, the director and the actor, all with differing approaches. And when you next gaze down at the statue outside near us, Casement in traditional tragic heroic stance, bear in mind the internal creative travail that must have occurred in the sculptor, Mark Richard's mind as he was sculpting it!

The resultant play text is quite **Shakespearean in reach**. There is an epic scale put across. The tragic heroism of Casement is allowed to shine through all that is perpetrated upon him by the forces of the Crown. We even have darkly complementing comedic characters, through the characterisation of the guards in the Tower of London prison cell scene and as the zealous curators of the 14th century statute.

On the substance of the material... what I found surprising is the extent of historical accuracy.

- The opening scenes with the story about St. Brendan.
- The imprisonment in the Tower.
- The machinations over the military and civil law options for prosecuting Casement.
- The trial's focus on the validity of a 14th century statute.
- The depiction of the homophobia of the times as imaginatively portrayed through the jury deliberations.
- The truth in the story as memorialised by the chaplain present at Casement's execution.
- Accuracy in the depiction of roles of key players from the Crown's side, Captain Hall of the Intelligences services, Blackwell, legal advisor to the Home Secretary and Frederick. E. Smith, attorney general (who many will know by the later name of Lord Birkenhead).

- **The differing responses of the press in the treatment of the controversial diary entries** - those who resisted the temptation to publish the diaries and those who did not.
- **The aftermath of the trial.** Smith's conflict of interest and on insisting on speaking last and threatening resignation to ensure the Government blocked an appeal to House of Lords. Blackwell in his role as legal counsel to home secretary advising King against clemency.

Commenting on Roland Philips' recent biography on Casement* I am impressed at its forensic detail on the role of MI5 and other black arts activities – the magnifying glass, the role of Blackwell and the words he uses – referring to the “pathetic” from the legal advisors' memo to government....

(*the biographer gave a talk at the Summer School)

....notwithstanding the extent of historical accuracy, there is a core fault-line in the “**faction**” of **the play**. Conveyed as a fact in the play is the role of British Intelligence in concocting **forged diaries**. It is posited (and this accords with known facts) in the play that the content of the disputed entries was not brought to his attention until he was in the condemned cell. In the play Casement thunders the question – “am I the last to know???”

The question is still valid in 2024.....even though handwriting expertise in the early 2000s have pronounced on the authenticity of the controversial entries by coming from Casement's hand: not speaking now as a director but my own sense of where we are now – I am confident that in any judicial process setting *in Ireland*, not least for the absence of testimony from Casement himself and the contextual highest level malign political misuse of the controversial diary entries – that a “settled” conclusion of authenticity, would find itself under some stress.

In **Casting Casement** – what was I looking for? A gaunt statuesque physical appearance, characterisation that pointed at homosexuality, an imposing or perhaps non-descript presence? What I found myself intuitively seeking was an ability to put across a strong intellect, a frailty of character when presented with harsh realities, an equanimity in spirit and a person with an innate ability to reach the level of Shakespearean hauteur and grandeur, the process revealing aspects of a more than ordinary human caught up and consumed by extraordinary events.

But then again – all of the main characters in the play needed to be recognisable and by no means could be reduced to being cartoon and/or pantomime villains. That would be to let *them* off the hook.

Staged reading format. Suspension of disbelief concept is challenging for audience and actors. But a big help was the internal textual rhythms that adopt the Shakespearean technical rulebook of sentence construction. The role of the narrator was introduced by me to help the audience with identifying the multiple characters and scenes. And they also acted as a form of Greek chorus commenting on the action.

Audience reaction was broadly positive, (although a few disappearances at half-time – *but audience present later assured this was purely on account of having to leave at half time in order to catch a later bus or train*) and some understandable chaffing at the play being a bit long. All acknowledged, but what was being put forward was a “proof of concept” and it was important not to pre-empt an outcome of that test. Some cuts were made, targeting parts where exposition takes the place of action. Scenes involving the Blackwell and post-trial intrigue were left intact because those were part of the core metaphor and objective.

For the actor, it's a difficult balancing act to use the imaginative words of both the author and words from the historical record. As well the actors were still constrained by having to hold their scripts in hands, by virtue of the event being a staged reading. The most satisfying audience feedback was a common comment that all the cast were excellent in their respective roles and the author's wife, Irene Stockton who came all the way from NYC to see the play, declared all of them "perfect." Thanks Irene!

The talk ended with giving an introduction to two of the scenes being presented to the Summer School audience with a briefing about each scene.

The first scene showed Smith trying to get Sullivan to persuade Casement to plead guilty but insane. The incident is true but the terms of Sullivan's rebuttal, I sense, is the voice of the author.

As to the extract from the trial itself....

The speech from the Dock is derived from Casement himself but contains commentary given in private. There is a strong imaginative echo that can be found in George Bernard Shaw's play St. Joan and her own speech from speech "from the dock".

The defence council Sergeant Sullivan and the F. E. Smith's speeches in the play draw on selected transcripts from the trial itself but also include some of the author's artistic license – to make sure the audience, theatrically, does not miss the point!

Ends