Synge, Wilde, Shaw, and the Irish Renaissance: Crash Course Theater #36

Crash Course: Theater
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Hey there. I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is Crash Course Theater, and today we'll be discussing Irish drama. Nope, not for it. There are going to be no leprechaun jokes, no Lucky Charms, no Faith and Begorrah, because the culture that produced the most linguistically expressive and inventive canon of modern drama does not deserve dumb jokes. It deserves smart ones. We're going to try. York is probably going to come back later with a shillelagh.

We're going to look at the founding of the Abbey Theatre and the work J.M. Synge, the first legit literary star the the Abbey produced. Then, we're going to head to England where a couple expats shook up bourgeois drama with some very funny plays. Let's crack on. Ok, sorry. That's the last one.

[Intro]

In the late 19th century, Ireland experienced an Irish Renaissance. It was different from the English Renaissance in that it was Irish, came later, had less plague, and it was an explicit reaction against England, which had colonized Ireland since the 16th century. The Irish Renaissance was largely a literary one, celebrating Irish history, folklore, and the Gaelic language. Eventually, a couple of its adherents, the poets, W.B. Yeats and Edward Martyn, and the writer and folklorist, Lady Augusta Gregory, thought that it was time to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland. They founded the Irish Literary Theater, which eventually merged with another theater to form the Irish National Theater Society, first performing in the Molesworth Hall.

In 1904, they took over a mechanics home on lower Abbey Street and acquired an actual physical stage, the Abbey Theater. It's opening performance was a short, symbolist play by W.B. Yeats, "On Baile's Strand," along with Lady Gregory's "Spreading the News," a gentle comedy about how a piece of gossip travels through a community. This theater is still going, by the way, albeit in a different location

Yeats was a great poet; Lady Gregory, a fine folklorist and champion of Irish literature and culture, she basically invented the Irish folk drama. But, neither of them was a great playwright. The Abbey's first great playwright, whose play "The Shadow of the Glen" on the theater's second night, was John Millington Synge.

Synge was born into an upper-middle class Protestant family. After college and music school, he moved to Paris to study literature and met Yeats. Yeas was like, "Leave. If you really want to be a writer, you should go to the remote Aran Islands, which are really great if you like whiskey and knitwear and drowning." And there, Yeats told him that "you should express a life that has never found expression. Synge was like, challenge accepted, pal. For several summers, he studied the people and the customs of the Aran Islands, and especially the language, a dialect that's rich, musical, and eloquent. This language really cracked open his writing.

As he wrote in a preface to his later play, "The Playboy of the Western World," "in a good play ever speech should be as fully flavored as a nut or apple, and such speeches cannot be written by anyone who works among people who have shut their lips on poetry. In Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery and magnificent, and tender; so that those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers in places where the springtime of the local life has been forgotten."

Between 1902 and 1909, Synge wrote 6 plays, 5 of them set in contemporary Ireland. Like Chekhov, he died young, at the age of 38. At first glance, his plays seem romantic, concerned with forbidding landscapes and the noble rural people who inhabit them. But, Synge was no romantic. He was an unsentimental realist whose work was tinged with myth, because the rural people that he encountered lived with myth in their daily lives. His work is naturalistic, too, but like the later plays of Isben and Chekhov, it pushes toward the symbolic, mixing comedy, tragedy, and satire... forming a heightened realism that borders on magical.

Synge was controversial in his day; not so much among the elites of the Irish renaissance as with audiences, who decided that his dramas were an insult to Irish nationalism and especially Irish womanhood. When the Abbey stages "Playboy of the Western World" (about a man who has claimed to killed his father), crowds tried to shout down the play every night, and the police were called. The crowd was especially upset by the use of the word "shift," meaning a woman's slip or undergarment. Which, either means that underwear is really scandalous or that audiences had already come prepared to hate a play that didn't square with their ideas of Irish nobility, or both.

Let's take a look at one of Synge's less controversial plays, and one of the greatest one-acts ever written: "Riders to the Sea," which was first performed in 1904 and revived at the Abbey in 1906. Help us out, Thought Bubble.

In a fisherman's cottage on the Aran Islands, Cathleen is baking bread when her sister, Nora, comes in with a bunch of clothes pulled off a drowned man. Is the drowned man their brother, Michael? The clothes will tell. The sisters have already lost four brothers and their father to drowning, so this would be bad.

Their mother, Maurya, comes in worrying about her youngest son, Bratley's plans to sail to a horse fair in Connemara. Bartley enters and asks for his mother's blessing, but she won't give it. "If it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?" She tells him.

Bartley leaves anyway, riding a red mare and leading a grey pony, and his sisters tell their mother to go after him, give him her blessing, and a bit of bread. She does and, while she's gone, the sisters discover that the clothes are Michael's.

Maurya returns and says that she couldn't catch Bartley, because she had a terrible vision. She saw Bartley riding the red mare, and riding beside him was dead Michael. Soon after, some villagers bring in Bartley's body. The grey pony knocked him into the sea where he drowned, because this family cannot catch a damn break. Maurya has no more sons, but she accepts her fate, saying, " They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me... I'll have no call now to be crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other... I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening."

Thank you, Thought Bubble. That was fatalistic.

You can see Synge's attention to realistic detail with the bread cooking in the cottage stove, and you can hear it in the dialect. He was so concerned that the setting be realistic that he imported Aran fabrics and tried to make sure that the set gave off the correct smells. But, there's more than realism here, too. The play has links to Greek tragedy, and also to Celtic mythology, especially to the malevolent spirit called the Puca, who often appears as a horse.

For Synge, the natural and the supernatural were linked among the rural Irish. As Yeats wrote after Synge's death, "He loves all that has edge, all that is salt in the mouth, all that is rough to the hand, all that heightens the emotions by contest, all that stings into life the sense of tragedy."

But, Irish writers weren't only reinventing theatre in Ireland. They were re-imaging theatre in England, too, because English theatre came to modernism a lot more slowly. Melodramas gave way to hand-wringing social problem plays that ultimately reinforced the bourgeois order, and really weren't that different from domestic melodramas. I mean, if you're going to promote a conservative moral order, at least have everyone die in an avalanche, right? But, along came two Irishmen to rehabilitate English drama, and they did it with wit.

And, to wit, Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, AKA Oscar Wilde. When he was at university, he told a friend, "I'll be a poet, a writer, a dramatist. Somehow or other I'll be famous and if not famous, notorious." And, he was right, totally right.

After writing the tragedy "Vera" and then the censored symbolist drama "Salomé," Wilde had his first theatrical hit, "Lady Windermere's Fan," in 1892. About a seemingly unfaithful husband, it looks like a social problem play. It seems to resolve conventionally the way that social comedies and problem plays are suppose to, nice and comfortable, bourgeois people out of trouble. But, Wilde spends most of the play making fun of society and undercutting the whole idea of conventional morals. The play demonstrates his belief that, quote, "We should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality."

His most brilliant and subversive work is the 1895 play "The Importance of Being Earnest," one of the great stage comedies. It's a sparkling whirl of disguise, coincidence, and mistaken identity, and there's a bit about muffins that you might say I am particularly found of. But, amidst all the snack food jokery, Earnest is also earnestly undermining comfortable, conventional beliefs about love, marriage, family, and hard work. It argues that the truth, the thing that's usually at the core of any problem play, is actually overrated and unstable.

The same year that Earnest premiered, Wilde was put on trial for gross indecency, which at the time was a euphemism for being gay. He served two years hard labor and died penniless a few years later of meningitis. In "De Profundis," his final work, he wrote, "I took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or the sonnet."

And, George Bernard Shaw did that, too. A brilliant critic and political philosopher, his plays are both brainy comedies and articulations of his particular, and sometimes weird, beliefs about men, women, evolution, and civil society.

Shaw was a huge fan of Ibsen, paying tribute to him in "The Quintessence of Ibsenism." Like Ibsen, he believed that the theatre could help audiences see through the fictions of conventional morality and into life as it really is. He used humor as a social critique in plays that are spikier and more pointed than Wilde's. His works, "Pygmalion," "Man and Superman," "Major Barbara," and "Mrs. Warren's Profession," includes debates and dialectics, a dance of ideas. Some of these ideas are provocative, contrarian, and even dangerous.

"What drama can do," he wrote, "is to take this unmeaning haphazard show of life that means nothing to you, and arrange it in such a way as to make you think very much more deeply about it than you ever dreamed." That is drama, and that is a very important public service to render.

Thanks for watching. Next time we're going to take a look at symbolism, surrealism, and also dadaism, a theatrical form that makes literally no sense on purpose. But, until then, flapjack, carburetor, culottes, I mean, curtain.

[Outro]

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