

CHARACTERS AS PERFORMERS IN SEAN O'CASEY'S DRAMA

The more one considers Sean O'Casey's plays today, the less one ought to fall victim to the realistic illusion, and the more one ought to become concerned with problems of staging, in so far as they are linked to devices of "collage", and to the awareness of the "play within the play", of the "performing within the performing".

These are specifically problems of the play regarded as an artefact, which indeed go far beyond the well-known difficulties of playing the breaks of tone when the realistic gives way to the lyrical or the operatic (1).

Speaking of O'Casey's characters as performers has nothing to do with the hackneyed stage Irishman, but is concerned with the basic functions and lay out of drama. For that matter, a new approach to the phenomenon of the play within the play, of performing raised to the power of two... or three, should eventually cast new light on how to stage O'Casey's plays. Propounding to consider his characters as performers has nothing in common with the acknowledgement of a technical game, but deals with the intensification of drama when it becomes or remains aware of itself. In the chronology of the plays, the "performers" first appear under the heading of comical histrionics.

In the earlier works indeed, the histrionic behaviour turns out to be a personal, psychological response to hardships, as a sort of conscious (or unconscious) self-dramatization.

Later, the "performers" appear unrecognizably in a world of magic and/or amateur theatricals which work as a stage version of praxis. It is remarkable that no overlapping of the earlier and the later type is to be observed in the sequence of plays : it looks as if, in terms of effects on his audiences, Sean O'Casey had suddenly dropped the visible stage technicalities of farce or comedy to shift towards an interpretation of earnest, even dead serious, amateur-acting.

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Oddly enough, the only exception to this unquestionable dichotomy is the dramatist's first play : *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), in which the main character, Davoren, plays at being a poet. Through the assumed role, he supposedly reinforces, or perhaps just tentatively creates his ego. His main stance consists in performing to himself in verse ; but in doing so, this serious performer appears ultimately as a tragic failure - his humbug and cheat alluring the girl next door into the sacrifice of a violent death.

However, the prominent characters of several early plays - prior to 1941 - develop through comical histrionics. Instead of living genuinely and stubbornly, they - consciously or not - merely exist while performing an assumed role. It is their alternative to responsible life under difficult circumstances, whether social or

historical ; it is their answer to dramatic ordeals. This rather poor make-believe, this way of borrowing a theatrical identity of sorts, actually include both psychological verisimilitude and the music-hall act. Sean O'Casey has chosen to make them funny, even farcical or clownish at times. In terms of relations to audiences, they make the sunny side or the silver lining of the earlier plays in their psychological disguise as pretenders : some of them are merely inefficient, others morally despicable, but they are all meant to be popular to the audiences as they provide comic relief to tenement melodramas.

On all levels they can be credited with full justification - as characters and as structural elements too.

For that matter it can be pointed out that, as early as the above mentioned *Shadow of a Gunman*, Davoren the "poet" is counterbalanced by a couple of minor characters, Gallogher, and, above all Grigson, who perform on stage, in their tenement setting, to a ready audience of neighbours, friends, and gossips. Grigson cuts indeed a memorable figure in giving his own version of a Black-and-Tan raid, in which he allows himself the part of what the audience can call the jesting hero.

And yet, predictably, the best, fully-developed example is to be found in *Juno and the Paycock* (1924). Captain Boyle's "peacockry" has become for ever famous and paradigmatic : we watch him at home, and nowhere else, performing and strutting to his family and pals, although his talk is essentially idle pub-talk : vain boasting, empty words, gullibility, a peculiar kind of sound and fury, together with male chauvinism, fantasizing, and sustained justification of laziness, in environmental family hardships and civil war outrages.

A brotherly figure, Fluther is also one of the main assets of the next play, *The Plough and the Stars* (1926). Amid the tragedy, chaos and nonsensical horror of Easter Week's epic, he performs in the right place : the pub is his stage, and the pub is on stage. A kind of "hibernicus gloriosus", he paces the platform, intoxicated in drink and words, with comparatively more comic, loud amplitude than the Peacock and probably less selfishness. His booming booze is genial and works, so to speak, as a bullet-proof device.

Purple Dust (1941) is also a play for comic "performers" - the difference being that Stoke, and Poges (sic), the English protagonists, are more consciously, and more ridiculously, disguised as peasants -cum-gentlemen-farmers. Preposterously they try to convince themselves that they are integrated in the country, but are content to perform poorly to their mistresses. They are eventually exposed as cheats by their girl-friends, the Irish natives, and the ominous flood of doom.

This early species of characters as performers can then be briefly summarized as being swallowed up in domestic, national, or universal drama : funny, pathetic, and ineffective, they are exceedingly gifted for inserting stage antics into the pattern of life's hardships, with particular fondness for the occasional purple passage.

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What suddenly breaks out in 1942 is another figure of performer in an altogether different dramatic world, the world of magic and/or amateur theatricals.

The new character - significantly, although dimly, foreshadowed in *Within the Gates* (1933) with the young Dreamer - is above all a committed character, endowed with hot enthusiasm, absolute earnestness, and genuine devotion of behaviour. Performing is to him the reverse of disguise : it is a social, cultural and/or revolutionary function. Performing as amateur actors - and staging - is part and parcel of the greatness and mystery of this new series of authentic figures. Sean O'Casey henceforth introduces the play-within-the-play technique as a meaningful and necessary, if not permanent, ingredient and will extend it.

Ayamonn Breydon, the protagonist of *Red Roses For Me* (1942) is paradigmatic in this respect, just as clearly as Captain Boyle was in the early "performing" series. Ayamonn's identity as a union militant fully includes the cultural dimension ; he is increasingly perceived throughout the play as a cultural and political charismatic figure. His outlook on political and cultural salvation expresses itself first and foremost in the sort of intellectual and physical/emotional dedication that amateur acting implies - the play actually starts with the rehearsal, in a tenement, of one of Shakespeare's historical plays (2). However, it is extended to a superior and more symbolic level later in the play (3), when Ayamonn becomes, both expectedly and unexpectedly, a supernatural director and actor in the famous transfiguration scene. It is *he* who suddenly points at Dublin as a glorious city, a new Red Jerusalem, as if he was not only the spectator but the creator of a momentary wonder ; it is *he* who, at the same time, will dance for a while, until the end of the vision, with the poor wretches dramatically metamorphosed into kingly and queenly figures of the old Celtic sagas.

A few years later, in a fantasy entitled *Cock a Doodle Dandy* (1949), Sean O'Casey introduces within his play another dramatic technique : the dumb show (4). The embodiment of revolutionary imagination, the Cock is an arch-trickster ; symbolizing sex, fantasy, freedom and joy, he performs his magic in mute dancing appearances, although he can just as well be an invisible character that rules the roost and stages odd moments of performance in a derelict, conventional, priest-ridden village of Ireland - playing havoc with the decent world and ruffling women. In this role he is appreciated in sharp contrast with the rhetorical priest and the local establishment who, in their own way, perform and stage in stiff rite the departure of a local sick girl for a hopeless pilgrimage to Lourdes (5).

The occasional presence of amateur theatricals on stage is again to be found in *The Drums of Father Ned* (1960), O'Casey's last great full-length play. The subject matter - the preparations for a cultural festival including music and drama - is itself persistently on the edge of the theatrical world, metadramatic in a way. Now, part of it, in its own right, consists in the rehearsing and directing of an amateur performance of a nameless patriotic play, by a young attractive couple, Michael and Nora. The dramatic episode featuring Ireland v. England in XVIIIth century garments and uniforms proclaims liberty, and makes use of high - faluting words, as will do any naive epic devised for some youth - club. Yet, this is in earnest a popular expression of, and genuine foundation for, contemporary cultural identity and fight for emancipation. The theatrical fuss, incidentally, takes place whereas an invisible, revolutionary priest-figure, Father Ned, stages the whole show, painting settings for the Tostal, supervising, rousing people, playing tricks. Indeed the festival-in-the-making *is* the play, and Father Ned, Michael, and Nora do stage O'Casey's play, from the inside, so to speak, just as they perform their parts as characters, now acting, now

living their "stage" everyday lives, now introducing theatrical bits on stage according to the dialogues in the playwright's text. So, the technicality of performing and staging appears in O'Casey's drama as ultimate salvation and commitment. Performing being in the last resort a magic demand for the sake of truth and liberty for mankind - never forgetting that many characters are devised by the playwright as singers of ballads too.

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Technically speaking, in terms of performance, what conclusion can one draw from all these "performing" elements in structure and characterization ? What light does this cast on fresh possible approaches to staging ?

If we add to our previous remarks O'Casey's curious insistence on disguise - funny uniforms, proposterous headgear, fancy-dress balls - and his seldom mentioned relish for merriment and celebration in his plays (6) (which is not unrelated to some kind of private or public performance), one can conclude to an only-too-often-overlooked importance of the "performance within the performance", of the "play within the play" technique and phenomenon, with O'Casey increasingly resorting, at the same time, to the theatrical specificity of magic effects, such as a Flood in *Purple Dust*, or the Transfiguration of Dublin in *Red Roses for Me*.

In other words, in spite of O'Casey's gift for rhetoric and blarney, the *text* is *not* necessarily the element of paramount importance in his plays. Consequently one may be led to change one's mind about the intrinsic difficulties of O'Casey's drama when it comes to performing it. Is it a problem arising from a supposedly realistic text interlarded with sudden lyrical outbursts and breaks of tone, as I myself once propounded (7), or is it *rather* something to do with the *handling on stage* of moments when the spectators are obviously confronted with a play within the play, including the "acts", or purple patches of the comic characters ? The garrulousness of O'Casey's comic figures or jesters, their extensive flow of words, is perhaps not so much a matter of how to deal with a sudden change of tone from reality to poetry (how to make it smooth, or at least acceptable, how to arrange it in terms of lyrical as opposed to material space), as a necessity to work out convenient and relevant stage effects of distance that, in the last resort, have only few links, if any, with the issue of realism alone.

The actual problem, to my mind, should be how to *manage and stage quotations from the stage*, whether we deal with histrionics or with inserted bits of theatricals. I suggest that one should avoid integrating the performers - in all senses - into a smooth play. On the contrary it seems that one ought to set off all *performing bouts or fits*, every moment of operatic buffoonery, every reference to play-acting or rehearsing : the underlying texture and fabric, the specifically theatrical ingredient should then be deliberately exposed and laid bare, as a "spare-part" of the play regarded as artefact. This stance should eventually help the actors find the convenient tone at the right moment and contribute to support them through disruptions in the tone too, by showing the audience that the characters as such sometimes become fully aware of their theatricality. However, this does not rule out the difficulties in performing

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relevantly the lyrical puffs, in so far as the characters can also be genuinely carried away, after minutes of stage awareness.

These remarks on theatricality do in fact bear out the frequent assessments about O'Casey's drama as one which does *not* rest primarily on psychological realism, nor on carefully devised plots. The "performing" characters, as well as the breaks of tone, evidence frequent lack of psychological integration, just as the "play within the play" device evidences *lack of dramatic integration*. In other words a distance arising from theatrical awareness appears as an important recurring feature here, and should lead, as far as directing is concerned, to an approach resting on a manner of *deconstruction*, both in the field of individual acting and general staging. It looks as if O'Casey's theatre debunks itself, is used against itself, when, at the same time, it works as a tool of self-reinforcement. O'Casey's plays can therefore appear as comments on the art of performing for all purposes.

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This is meant as a tentative contribution to renewing our present outlook on Sean O'Casey's plays ON STAGE, now that nearly thirty years have elapsed since the dramatist's death.

As the late Antoine Vitez wrote to me in October 1989 :

"Il m'est apparu qu'un temps suffisant s'est écoulé depuis que ses oeuvres principales ont été révélées en France, par le T.N.P., le T.E.P., les Centres Dramatiques, pour qu'elles puissent aujourd'hui être montées d'une autre façon, qui en fasse ressortir l'universalité".

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NOTES

- (1) See my article on Staging O'Casey's Plays in *The Sean O'Casey Review*, Spring 1979, Vol. V, n° 2, p. 151-3.
- (2) *Henry VI*, Pt 3, V, vi, 59-67.
- (3) *Red Roses for Me*, Act III.
- (4) A rather similar technique is also used in the prologue of *Oaks Leaves and Lavender* (1946) with far less enduring effect.
- (5) O'Casey also resorts to the theatricality of "counter-revolutionary rite", such as Catholic processions, meetings or mass-rallies. See for instance the background of *The Bishop's Bonfire* and the one of *Behind the Green Curtains*.
- (6) See my article in *The Sean O'Casey Review*, Fall 1975, Vol. II, n° 1, p. 12-21. See also my Ph. D. Dissertation on : *Le Théâtre de Sean O'Casey : Réalité, Rêve et Révolution* (1987).
- (7) See note 1.