

Raising the Curtain on Cork City's Amateur Dramatic Heritage, 1923-1930.

Presented by Dr. Fiona Brennan.



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1920-1923
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Amateur drama in Cork during the early 1900s:

“Coincident with the country’s emergence from political servitude . . . Cork is still a centre of activity in the fostering of a native stage.” (*Cork Examiner*, February 1922)

The contribution by Cork’s amateur dramatic fraternity to sustaining the city’s ancient theatre tradition is indisputable. At the turn of the 20th century, when the Celtic revivalist spirit was at its peak throughout Ireland, numerous cultural groups, including the Gaelic League, promoted the Irish language through social, cultural, and artistic means. The League and other amateur cultural organisations were central to the founding of Ireland’s national Abbey Theatre in 1904 – which was originally amateur in ethos – and sought to create an authentic Irish drama and playwriting tradition.



Cork Dramatic Society, *Cork Examiner*, April 1911 (Courtesy of the Irish Examiner Archives)



Munster Players, *Irish Independent*, May 1917

including *Duty* by Seamus O’Brien and *Blind* by R. Cooney. Subsequently, Leaside Players and Munster Players, founded in 1915 and 1916 respectively, would help set in-train a greater sense of ambition in terms of amateur dramatic activities after the Civil War.

WILL BE REPEATED TO-NIGHT AT 8
IN THE
IMPERIAL HOTEL,
“THE HARD HEARTED MAN”
AND
“S O L D,”
By the CORK
National Theatre Society.
CORK SCHOOL OF MUSIC ORCHESTRA.
ADMISSION 2s., 1s., 6d.
J. L. FAWSITT, Hon. Sec.

Cork Examiner, December 1905

Some of Cork’s artistic aesthetic advancements and fraternity, including its Dublin-centric nature. They were determined to form a theatre company in opposition to the Abbey’s ongoing development. As a result, the Cork National Theatre Society/CNTS was founded (1904-1906) and

was a predecessor to the Cork Dramatic Society/CDS (1908-1913). Both companies upheld their amateur status and produced an incredible twenty-one original plays. During the same period, the Castle Players and the Gregg Players staged new plays

This exhibition focuses on the period from 1923 to 1930, featuring aspects of contemporaneous amateur dramatic activities and the development of a selection of drama groups. The exhibition also profiles some of Cork’s writers, both in terms of their contribution to theatre in the city and their significant position within 20th century Irish theatre history.

the Opera House, in 1913, but the members of the Queen St. society the pleasure of performances by such nature was not a success, and the were among the active personnel The 18 F. J. McCormack, Michael J



The Leaside Players in the “Passing Of ‘Miah.” Left to right: Jack Gilley as Morgan, T. O’Connell as O’Mullane (publican), Ignatius Dennehy as Twomey (a farmer), A. Weldon (sergeant), P. Gilhooly as Carey (a handyman), Jack McCabe as ‘Miah’ (of the Department, Dublin), G. J. O’Gorman as Constable Quirke.

Leaside Players, *Cork Examiner*, 1959

In July 2024, Minister Catherine Martin announced the inscription of the Amateur Dramatic Tradition on Ireland’s National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Under Ireland’s obligations to the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which it ratified in 2015, this National Inventory exists to promote, protect and celebrate Ireland’s living cultural heritage. It provides official State recognition of those cultural practices that are currently inscribed.

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Amateur drama in Cork 1920-1922:

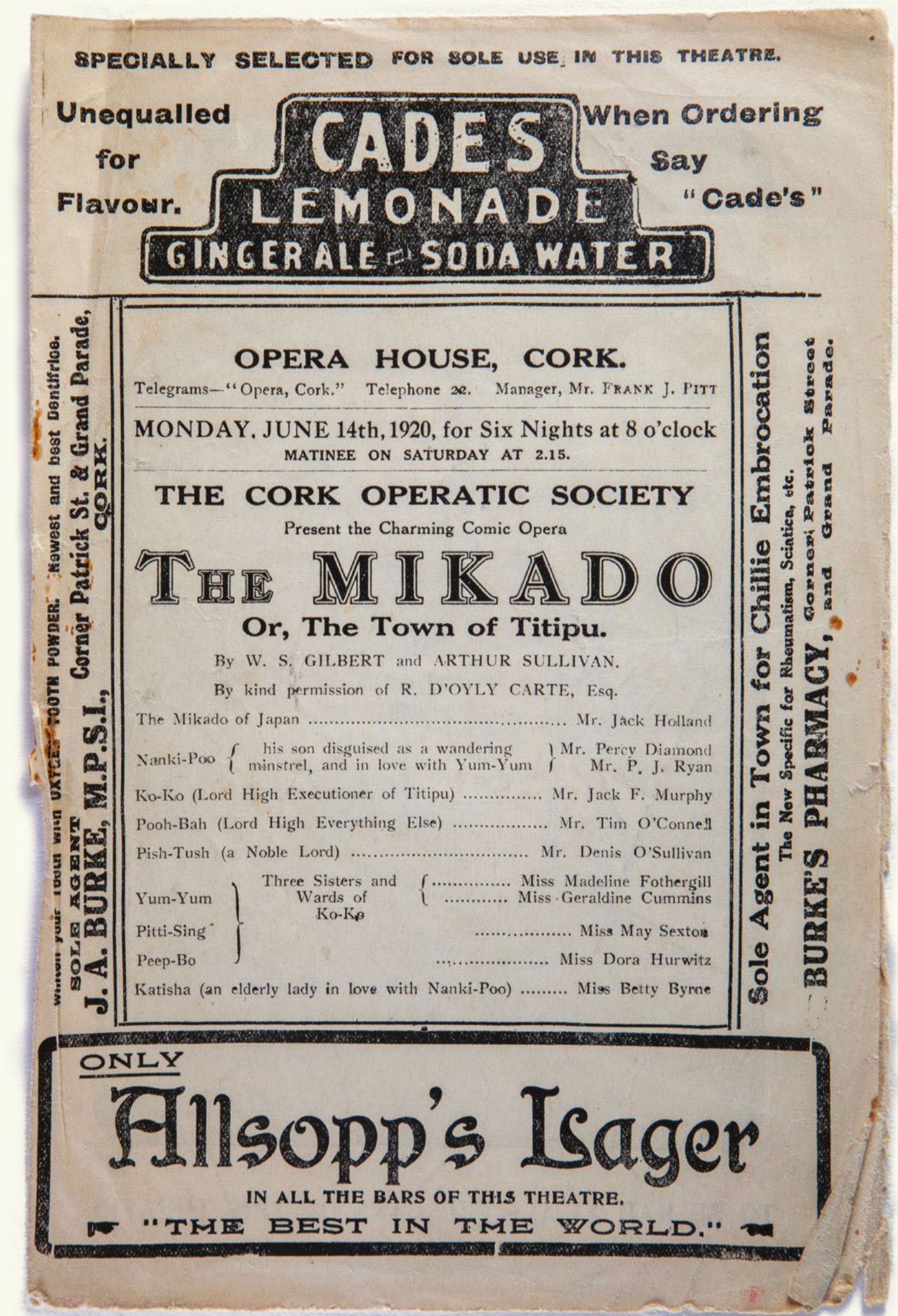
“... our Cork people have the flair for play-writing and acting ...” (*Cork Examiner*, January 1930)



Cumann na mBan, March 1922 (Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)

Despite the escalating tensions during the War of Independence, and the subsequent burning of the city by the Black and Tans in December 1920, for the most part, large-scale operatic productions at the Opera House, and colourful musical entertainment shows at the Everyman Palace, continued to operate.

In terms of amateur drama, there was a general lull in activities by some of the smaller groups at this time, save for the work of formidable entities such as the Cork Operatic Society. Founded in 1918, it performed throughout this period by staging *The Mikado* in 1920, *The Pirates of Penzance* in 1922, and *HMS Pinafore* in 1923.



Cork Operatic Society Programme, 1920
(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)



Colmcille Pageant, *Cork Examiner*, February 1922

Cork audiences were undeterred by any threats of violence or potential raids by the Tans, such as that which had occurred at the Opera House. On one occasion, during a performance by the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, a group of Tans broke into the auditorium, forced the orchestra to play *God Save the King*, and instructed audience members to stand throughout.



The cast of HMS Pinafore, Cork Operatic Society, 1923
(Courtesy of Cork City Archives)

Corkery, as well as plays by Maurice Dalton – a pseudonym of Joseph Wrenne – Thomas Daniels, Parker K. Lynch, and J.K. Lyons. Corkery remained a central figure within amateur drama for over three decades while also succeeding in having his work produced by the Abbey Theatre. Meanwhile, during the mid-1920s, Leaside Players performed Irish plays by the Cork writers J.B. McCarthy and Lennox Robinson.



St. Francis Hall, Sheares Street
(Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)



Leaside Players, *The Hollybough*, December 1963

In 1922, *Cumann na mBan* produced a series of tableaux, including *Erin and Her Daughters* – designed by Birdie Conway – at the Opera House. Newspaper reports confirm Michael Collins' attendance at one of these performances.

Elsewhere in the city, the North Monastery and Ursuline secondary schools continued to delight audiences with productions of popular pageants and later staged formidable productions of various dramatic interpretations of the Easter Passion play.

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Amateur drama's development in Cork from 1923:

“... the future of the theatre lies with ... amateur dramatic societies ...”

(Andrew Malone, *Theatre Critic, Cork Examiner, March 1931*)



Fr. Mathew Choral and Dramatic Society, 1923 (Courtesy of the Capuchin Archives, Dublin)

By 1924 St. Aidan's Dramatic Society, Ballincollig – which had once competed with Leaside Players and Munster Players – had reformed. It began to produce challenging dramas such as the 1912 one-act phantasy Thompson in *Tir na nÓg* by Gerald MacNamara, in which Thompson, an Orangeman, is transported to that Celtic mythical land.

THE I.C.I.C.Y.M.A. DRAMATIC SOCIETY
WILL PRESENT
“Tilly of Bloomsbury”
ON
WEDNESDAY and THURSDAY
2nd and 3rd MAY,
IN
Gregg Hall, 52 South Mall.
LUNCH AND DINE
AT
Hotel Imperial, Cork.
A La Carte at Moderate Charges, or
Table d'Hôte.
Afternoon Tea in Lounge, 1/6.
9686

Cork Examiner, April 1928

During the 1920s, the Fr. Mathew Hall – which had been used as a centre for dramatic entertainment since 1907 – took on a central role in the ongoing development of the city's amateur dramatic activities. In 1923, the in-house Fr. Mathew Choral and Dramatic Society resumed its activities, having committed to producing at least one pantomime annually. Meanwhile, a new society, the Fr. Mathew Players, was also established.

In 1924, an edition of the *Cork Examiner* newspaper records that the Hall was becoming “... more than ever, a popular centre for Irish amateurs.” The Fr. Mathew Players demonstrated a marked ambitiousness in terms of its repertoire by performing contemporaneous Abbey Theatre dramas such as *The Drone* by the Ulster playwright St. John Ervine. Eventually, the Fr. Mathew Hall would become synonymous with the Feis Maitiu annual competition, which was founded in 1927.



Fr. Mathew Players, Date Unknown (Courtesy of Cork Public Museum)

Among a number of other groups to reform during this period were the ICICYMA Dramatic Society, (Incorporated Church of Ireland Cork Young Men's Association), which was regarded as a particularly vibrant group. The O'Neill-Crowley Dramatic Society staged comic plays scripted by its members, and the Gaelic League tradition inspired a resurgence of activities by the North Parish Dramatic Society. Meanwhile, Cumann na mBan continued to produce plays.

At that time, the resident group at the Ancient Order of Hibernians' Hall on Morrison's Island, which styled itself as the “National Dramatic Society”, supported local writers by staging plays such as Cormac O'Daly's *Saggart Son* and Michael O'Brien's *As Others See Us*.



Cumann na mBan group, *Cork Examiner, June 1925*

By 1926, it was estimated that between 600 and 1000 amateur groups were active throughout Ireland. Significant support was also increasing for the development of a national body to oversee the promotion of drama and support these groups.

COME AND SEE
The Mathew Players
IN THE FOUR-ACT COMEDY,
“THE DRONE”
(First Time in Cork).
EASTER WEEK—Each night at 8 o'clock.
Admission—2s (reserved), 1s, and 6d.
Musical Items by the Mathew
Orchestra.

Cork Examiner, April 1923

ST. FRANCIS T.A. HALL.
O'NEILL CROWLEY DRAMATIC SOCIETY.

At the St. Francis T.A. Hall last night an enjoyable entertainment was provided by the O'Neill Crowley Dramatic Society, who produced for the first time in Ireland

Cork Examiner, May 1924

QUICHEFORD, to-morrow (Sunday)—Performance by St. Aidan's Dramatic Society, Ballincollig, of “The Singer,” “Thompson in Tir na nÓg,” and “Workhouse Ward,” with vocal and instrumental items, at 8 p.m. Admission 2s 4d and 1s 3d; children 1s 3d and 6d.

St. Aidan's Dramatic Society, Cork Examiner, May 1928

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The production of Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* in Cork in 1924:

"... an exceptionally strong attraction." (*Cork Examiner*, May 1924)

In May 1924, the Abbey Theatre performed Sean O'Casey's Civil War play *Juno and the Paycock* at the Everyman Palace, just weeks after its Dublin premiere. Juno Boyle, the family's breadwinner – played by Sara Allgood – supports her lazy, self-centred husband "Joxer" and her son Johnny – invalided during the War of Independence – whose fears of being executed by the IRA for informing on his friend continue to escalate. Her daughter Mary is engaged to the solicitor Charles Bentham. When he informs them of a forthcoming inheritance, the family borrows heavily on the strength of it. Tragedy strikes when his error in drafting his client's will is finally revealed. He duly absconds, leaving his pregnant fiancée behind. As feared, Johnny is arrested, while Juno takes Mary away to her sister's where they plan to raise the baby together.

NEXT WEEK'S BILL

AN EXCEPTIONALLY STRONG ATTRACTION—"JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK."

If any proof were needed that the management of the Palace Theatre provides only entertainment of the most enjoyable and best kind obtainable, such should be readily forthcoming in the exceptionally strong attraction which he will supply to the public of Cork next week, when Miss Sarah Allgood and the Abbey Theatre Players, Dublin, will present Sean O'Casey's great three-act tragedy "Juno and the Paycock." When this tragedy was produced at the Abbey Theatre by precisely the same talented company as will present it at the Palace Theatre, it drew crowded audiences to each performance and was voted by one and all as the greatest of the many successes achieved by the Abbey Players. The first two acts of the tragedy, the scene of which is laid in the living apartment of a two-room tenancy of the Boyle family in a tenement house in Dublin, are full of genuinely humorous comedy and are certain to keep the large audiences that should be attracted to the Palace each night next week highly amused. Into the last act, however, has the gifted author worked all the pathos of a work which in the capable hands of Miss Sarah Allgood and the Abbey Theatre players will lack for nothing in its true presentation. Owing to the length of the play the management desires that all patrons—and there should be crowded audiences at each house nightly during the engagement—should be in their seats at 6.45 and 9 o'clock each night as the performance will start punctually at both houses every night.

Cork Examiner, May 1924

Surprisingly, although it was only months after the Civil War had ended, the Cork production was a resounding success, despite the management at the Everyman having insisted that all references to Mary's pregnancy be omitted. Audiences were not in the least fooled by the management's instruction that actors refer to Mary's "diagnosis" as tuberculosis, during every performance.

ABBEY THEATRE

— DUBLIN. —
THE NATIONAL THEATRE SOCIETY, Ltd
Proprietors
Directors W. B. YEATS, LADY GREGORY, LENNOX ROBINSON
Manager MICHAEL J. DOLAN

Monday, March 3rd, 1924, and following nights at 8
Matinee Saturday, 2.30
(Theatre will be closed on Ash Wednesday)

First Production of
JUNO AND THE "PAYCOCK"
A Tragedy in Three Acts, by SEAN O'CASEY

Characters:

"CAPTAIN" JACK BOYLE	} their children	Residents	Barry Fitzgerald
"JUNO" BOYLE (his wife)			Sara Allgood
JOHNNY BOYLE	} in the	Tenement	Arthur Shields
MARY BOYLE			Eileen Crowe
"JOKER" DALY	} in the	Tenement	F. J. McCormick
MRS. MAISIE MADIGAN			Maureen Delany
"NEEDLE" NUGENT (a tailor)	} in the	Tenement	Michael J. Dolan
MRS. TANCRED			Christine Hayden
JERRY DEVINE	} in the	Tenement	P. J. Carolan
CHARLIE BENTHAM (a school-teacher)			Gabriel J. Fallon
FIRST IRREGULAR	} in the	Tenement	Maurice Esmonde
SECOND IRREGULAR			Michael J. Dolan
FIRST FURNITURE REMOVER	} in the	Tenement	Peter Nolan
SECOND FURNITURE REMOVER			Tony Quinn
COAL-BLOCK VENDOR	} in the	Tenement	Tony Quinn
SEWING-MACHINE MAN			Peter Nolan
TWO NEIGHBOURS	} in the	Tenement	Eileen O'Kelly, Irene Murphy

ACT I.—Scene: The living apartment of a two-room Tenancy of the Boyle Family, in a tenement house in Dublin

ACT II.—The same.

ACT III.—The same.

NOTICE—Owing to numerous Complaints, the Management insist that ladies Sitting in the Stalls shall remove their hats

Juno and the Paycock—continued

A few days elapse between Acts I. and II. and two months between Acts II. and III.

During Act III. the curtain will be lowered for a few minutes to denote the lapse of an hour.

Period of the Play, 1922.

INTERVAL OF TWELVE MINUTES BETWEEN ACTS I. AND II. INTERVAL TEN MINUTES BETWEEN II. AND III.

Play produced by MICHAEL J. DOLAN

The Orchestra, under Dr. J. F. LARCHET, will perform the following selections:

Morceau "Gavotte Tendre" Gluck (1714-1787)
(From "Don Juan" Ballet)

Excerpts Op. 64 { Andante } Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
{ Allegretto con grazia }
(From "Symphonic Pathétique")

Excerpts Op. 21 { Menuetto—Allegro e Vivace } Beethoven (1770-1827)
{ Finale—Allegro molto e Vivace }

PRODUCER—MICHAEL J. DOLAN
STAGE MANAGER—F. J. MCCORMICK

TEA ROOMS IN VESTIBULE
CHOCOLATES, ETC.
REFRESHMENTS WILL BE SERVED IN THEATRE IF DESIRED

Abbey Theatre Programme 1924 (Courtesy of the Abbey Theatre Archives)

PALACE THEATRE.

"JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK."

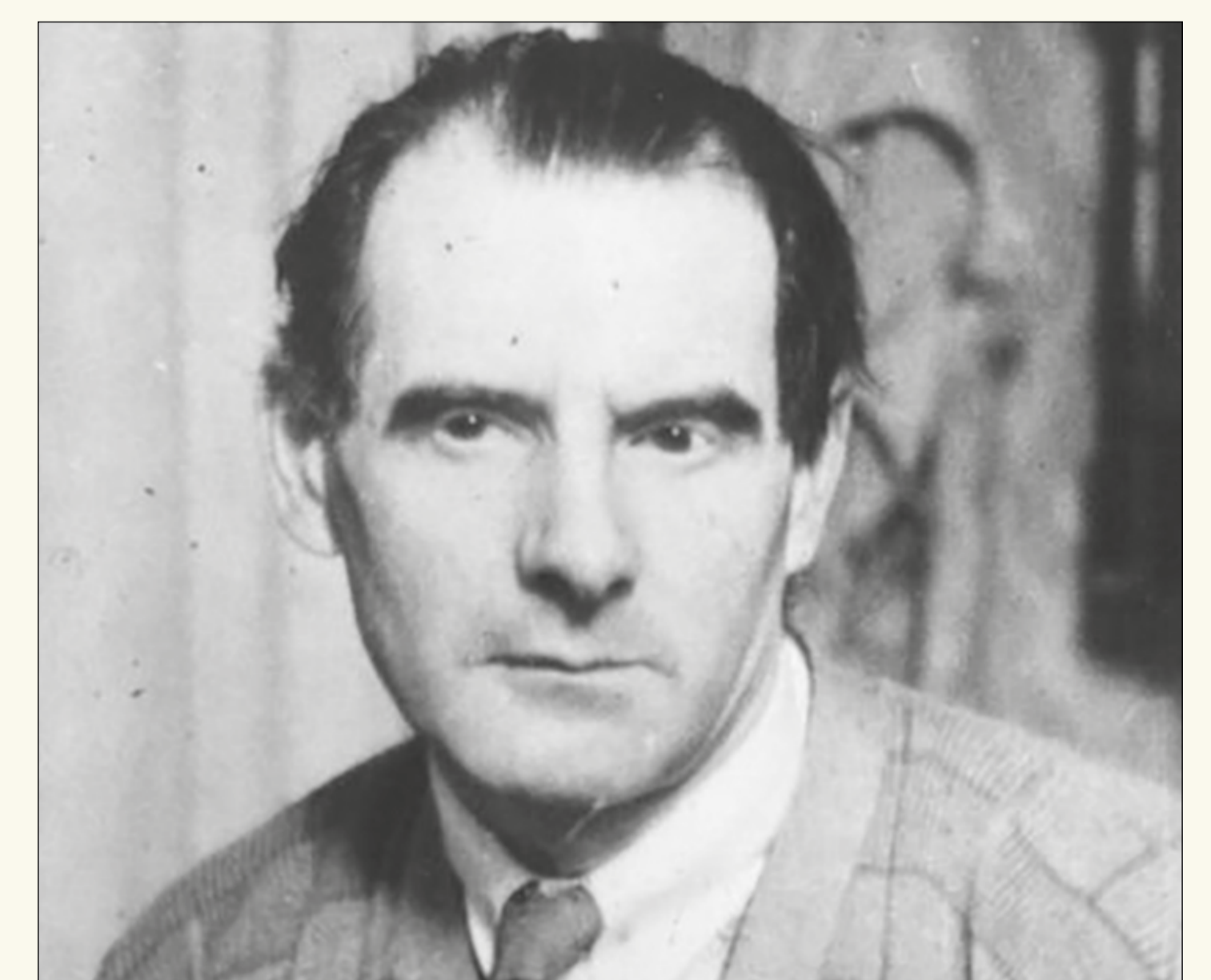
Crowded audiences continue nightly thoroughly to appreciate the excellent programme presented to them by Miss Sara Allgood and the talented company of Abbey Theatre (Dublin) players, who support the gifted Irish actress in Mr. Sean O'Casey's great three act tragedy "Juno and the Paycock." The portrayal of the tragedy enacted in a two-roomed Dublin tenement, as written by the talented author, by the very capable and first-class company engaged at the Palace, should draw equally large and enthusiastic audiences for the remainder of the week, so that intending patrons had better not delay in booking their seats if they would avoid disappointment.

Cork Examiner, June 1924

Perhaps the management's demands epitomised the increasing repressiveness of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland at the time and its domineering rhetoric regarding people's moral and social lives. There was an increasingly contemptible air of superiority by those who branded unmarried mothers as morally reprehensible.



Juno and the Paycock, Abbey Theatre UK tour, Irish Independent, November 1925



Sean O'Casey

O'Casey's drama certainly dispelled any lingering thoughts of past idealisms and the bravery of the revolutionary dead. Two of O'Casey's contemporaries, Cork's renowned playwrights, T.C. Murray, and Lennox Robinson, also sought to convey themes that demonstrated the problems associated with living in an increasingly conservative society.

Meanwhile, the Cork dramatist, J.B. McCarthy – another firm advocate of the amateur stage – continued to enjoy unrelenting success at the Abbey Theatre. In contrast to those tragic themes, his comic drama and farcical plays were immensely popular with audiences and would continue to be performed by professional and amateur companies alike for many years to come.

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Three of Cork's revolutionary playwrights:

“... minds who are likely to be the dramatic imagination of Ireland for this generation to come.” (W.B. Yeats)

In 1909, W.B. Yeats, the co-founder of the Abbey Theatre, declared a group of three of Cork's playwrights, Lennox Robinson (1886-1958), R.J. Ray (1865-1939), and T.C. Murray (1873-1959) as the “Cork Realists”. It was high praise indeed from Yeats who was enamoured by their writing prowess and ability to create true-to-life dramatic themes.



Lennox Robinson, *Irish Press*, February 1933

Douglas-native, Lennox Robinson, was the son of a Church of Ireland clergyman. A prolific writer, he was an important advocate of the national amateur dramatic movement. In terms of revolutionary themes, his play *The Big House* is set during the War of Independence and the Civil War. Its action is based at Ballydonal House, which is home to the Anglo-Irish Alcock family. While its themes deliberate on the complexities of Irish identity, the play ends

THE BIG HOUSE AT THE ABBEY THEATRE

DRAWNS A RECORD AUDIENCE

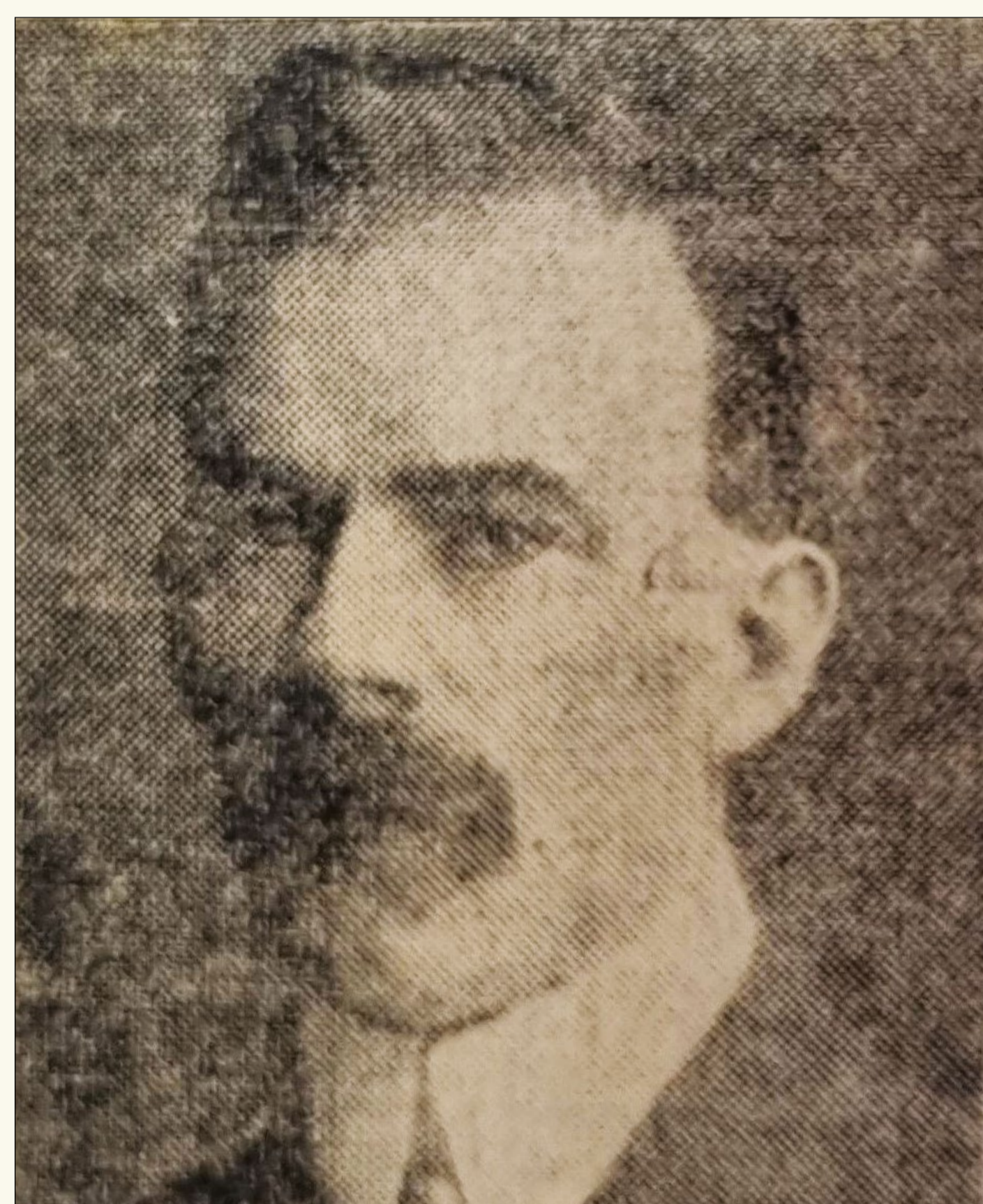
In his new play, “The Big House,” which drew a record audience for its first production at the Abbey last night, Mr. Lennox Robinson has gone for his theme, like Mr. O’Casey, to the “troubles,” as we have agreed to call them.

In a sense the piece does supplement “Juno” and “The Plough and the Stars,” inasmuch as it gives us the reaction of our political storms upon the mansion instead of the tenement. Apart from this, however, nothing could be more sharply contrasted than the outlook, temperament, and treatment of both dramatists.

Nor is “The Big House” merely a

Irish Independent, September 1926

in disaster when the IRA burns the house to the ground. Having premiered at the Abbey in 1926, the play toured to Cork a year later. One commentator did wonder if it had been too soon after the Civil War for the Cork production to be interpreted objectively and without “bias or prejudice”.



R.J. Ray, *Irish Independent*, March 1939

The Athlone native, Robert Brophy, who wrote under the pseudonym R.J. Ray, was a journalist with the *Cork Constitution*. His first play *The Casting Out of Martin Whelan* was produced by the Abbey Theatre in 1909. Curiously, he never submitted plays to the CDS. In 1922, the Abbey Theatre premiered his one-act tragedy *The Moral Law*. Set during the War of Independence, it dramatises the dilemma facing an ex-RIC Head Constable, John Shannon, when his son, a republican, is implicated in an RIC inspector's murder.



T.C. Murray, *Irish Independent*, April 1926

In 1909, when the CDS produced his first play, the Macroom native T.C. Murray was overjoyed. Murray went on to enjoy a prestigious professional career. A number of his plays written during the 1920s interpret the social and cultural ills of the new Free State. For example, his play *Aftermath* was produced by the Abbey in January 1922, just days after the ratification of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Its

OPERA HOUSE, CORK
Telegrams—“Opera, Cork” Telephone 22 Manager—FRANK J PITT

Monday, February 14th, for Six Nights, at 7.45 o'clock.
Matinee Saturday at 2.15.

THE ABBEY THEATRE COMPANY
Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday Nights, at 7.45 p.m.

AUTUMN FIRE
A Play in Three Acts, by T. C. Murray.

Characters:—

Owen Keegan (a farmer)	Michael J. Dolan
Ellen (his daughter)	May Craig
Michael (his son)	Arthur Shields
Morgan (his brother)	P. J. Carolan
Mrs. Desmond (a cottager)	Maureen Delany
Nance (her daughter)	Eileen Crowe
Tom Furlong	F. J. McCormick
Molly Hurley	Shelah Richards

(Courtesy of the Abbey Theatre Archives)

themes of submission, resentment, and cold expectations regarding an arranged marriage, captured the country's mood at the time. Similarly, his masterpiece, *Autumn Fire*, produced in 1924, is a brooding drama of deep frustration and despair. It met with acclaim when later premiered in Cork in 1927.

WHERE IRELAND LEADS.

His many friends in Cork and Dublin must be delighted to learn of the success of Mr. T. C. Murray's play “Autumn Fire,” at the “Q” Theatre, London. The Cork dramatist is now sharing with the Dublin dramatist, Sean O’Casey, London's extraordinarily warm acknowledgement of the rare quality of Abbey Theatre work. The fact that, at the same time, two plays by Irish writers should be educing the highest praise of the most critical while attracting the multitude—for the two circumstances are not always combined—is worthy of red letter record

Cork Examiner, November 1926

OPERA HOUSE, CORK
Telegrams—“Opera, Cork” Telephone 22 Manager—FRANK J PITT

Monday, February 14th, for Six Nights, at 7.45 o'clock.
Matinee Saturday at 2.15.

THE ABBEY THEATRE COMPANY
Thursday, Friday & Saturday Nights at 7.45 p.m. Matinee Saturday, 2.15 p.m.

THE BIG HOUSE
Four Scenes in its life, by Lennox Robinson.

Characters in the order of their appearance

Atkins	P. J. Carolan
Rev. Henry Brown	Michael J. Dolan
Captain Montgomery Despard	F. J. McCormick
Kate Alcock	Shelah Richards
St. Leger Alcock	Barry Fitzgerald
Vandaleur O'Neill	Tony Quinn
Mrs. Alcock	Eileen Crowe
Annie Daly	May Craig
Three Young Men	Arthur Shields, J. Stevenson, Walter Dillon

(Courtesy of the Abbey Theatre Archives)

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The founding of the Cork Shakespearean Company:

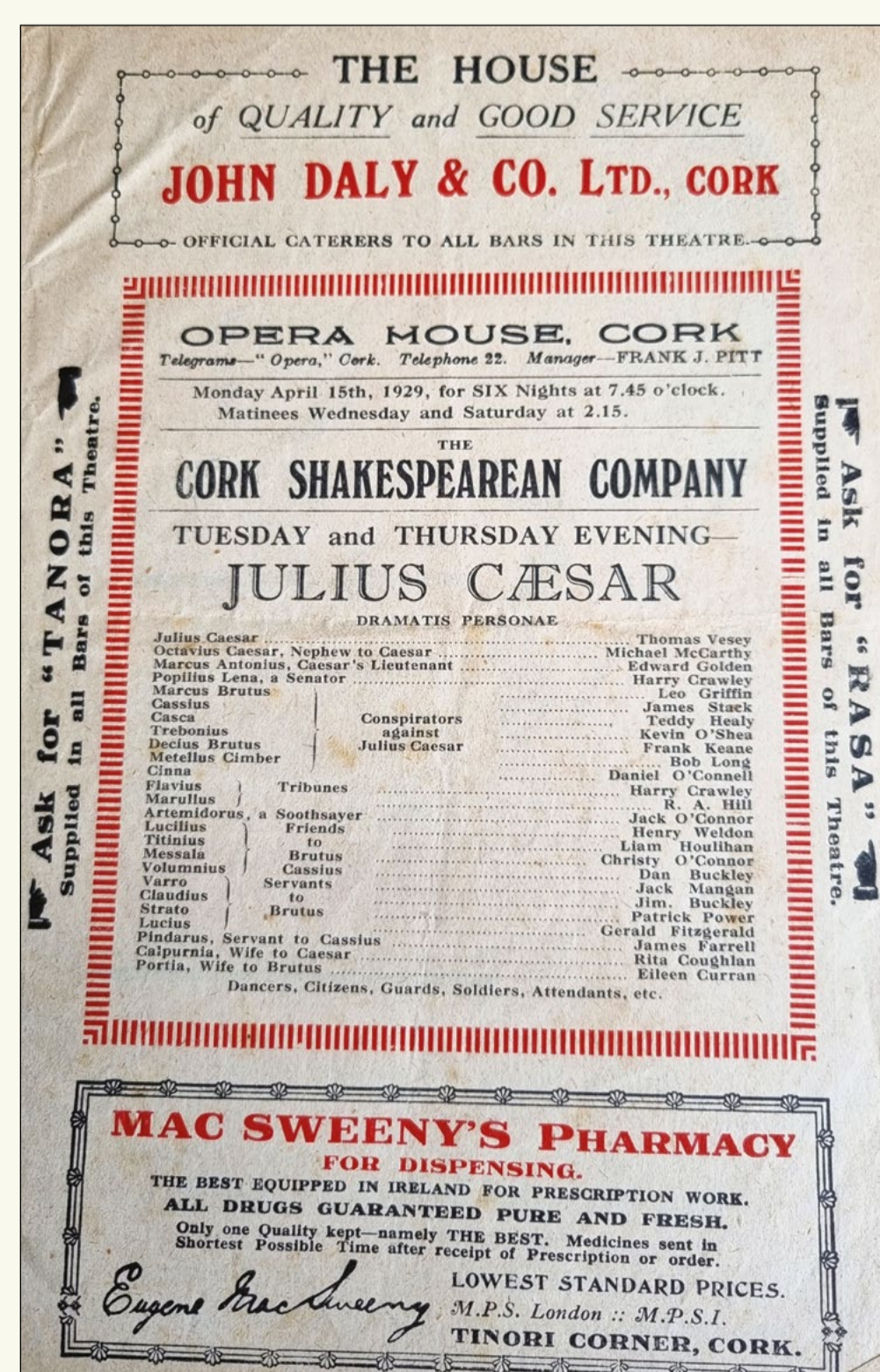
“... the Cork Shakespearean Society have [sic] done something to make Cork proud of them, and they head the list for distinguished service.”
(*Cork Examiner*, November 1928)

Suffice it to say that Fr. Peter O’Flynn, the founder of the Cork Shakespearean Company, was a man ahead of his time. On his ordination in 1909 he was appointed to St. Finbarr’s College, Farranferris, as an elocution teacher, where he developed an innovative approach to education through the medium of the arts. By integrating dramatic performance as part of his teaching technique, he had an indefatigable effect on the lives of countless individuals.

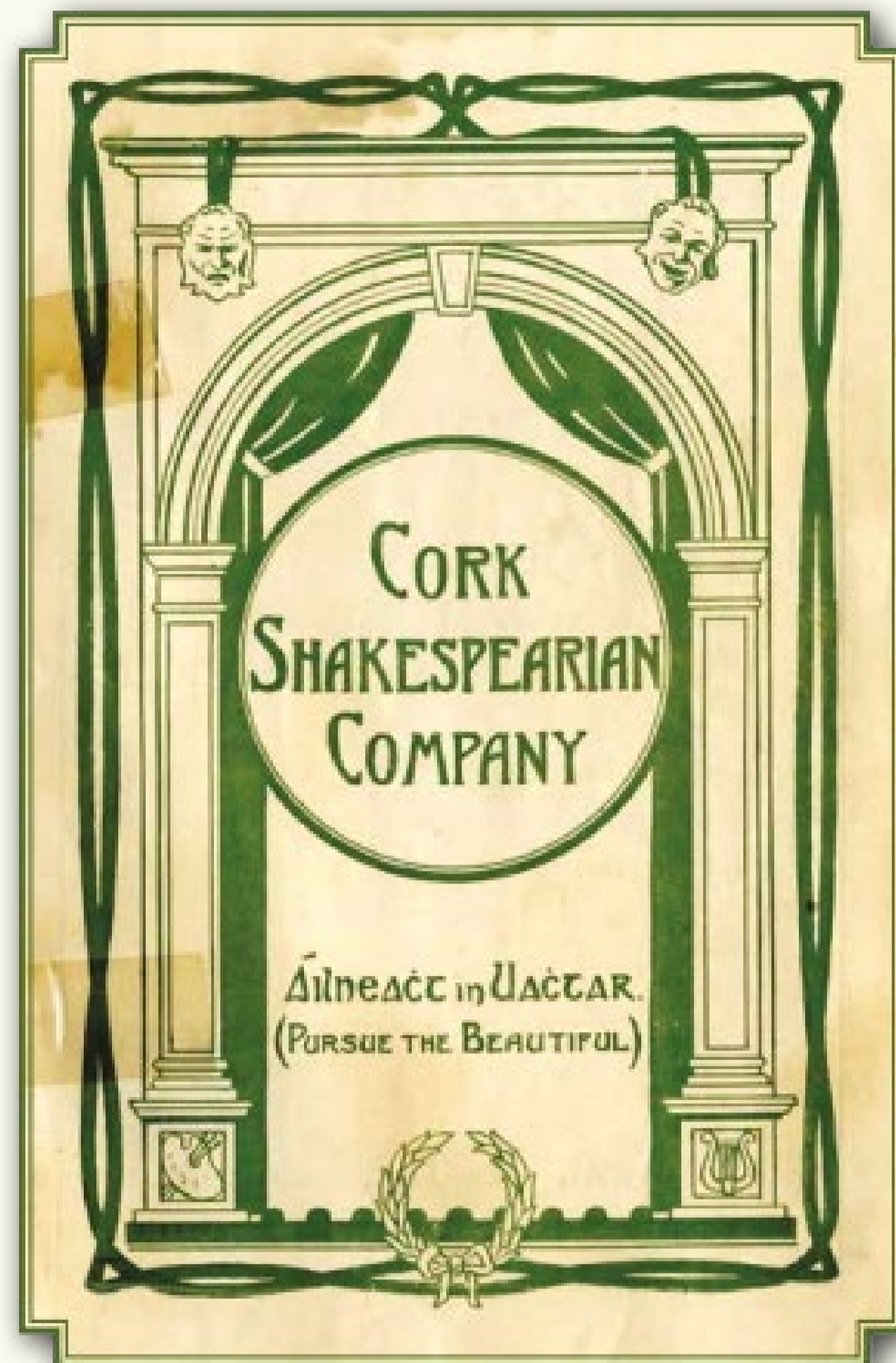


Fr. O’Flynn

O’Flynn was passionate about Shakespearean drama and wished to share classical literature with the masses. Therefore, he began to direct secondary school pupils in the art of Shakespeare’s drama. This led to the eventual establishment of the Cork Shakespearean Company in 1924. Some months later it took up residency in two upstairs’ rooms over a sweet factory, close by the Butter Market in Shandon. To this day the company is known as “The Loft”.



Programme, 1927 production



CSC Programme cover

In May 1927, O’Flynn produced six Shakespearean plays during a weeklong engagement at the Opera House; a feat that firmly established the company’s prowess. He had managed to secure a bank loan of £300 – his family provided the guarantee – to buy exquisite costumes and other props. Community outreach was integral to the company’s mission and it toured countywide and performed on the UCC campus during summertime. The group also performed live on “6CK”; the Cork-based studios of the national broadcasting company, 2RN. In fact, its performance of Hamlet at the Opera House in 1927 was broadcast live from the stage.



Jack O’Connor in Hamlet, 1927



Gus Healy in *The Tempest*, c.1927

The company continued its weeklong engagement at the Opera House on an annual basis, until 1932. Throughout the following years it provided significant opportunities for artists to hone their craft. In fact, a number of its members became prominent figures in both the local and national theatre scenes, including Eddie Golden, Eileen Curran, Michael Twomey, James N. Healy, and James Stack. The company continues to operate today.



The Comedy of Errors, 1930 production

THEATRICALS AT KNOCKADOON



WHEN SHYLOCK LOSES ALL



Cork Examiner, August 1926

All original images are courtesy of the Cork Shakespearean Company.

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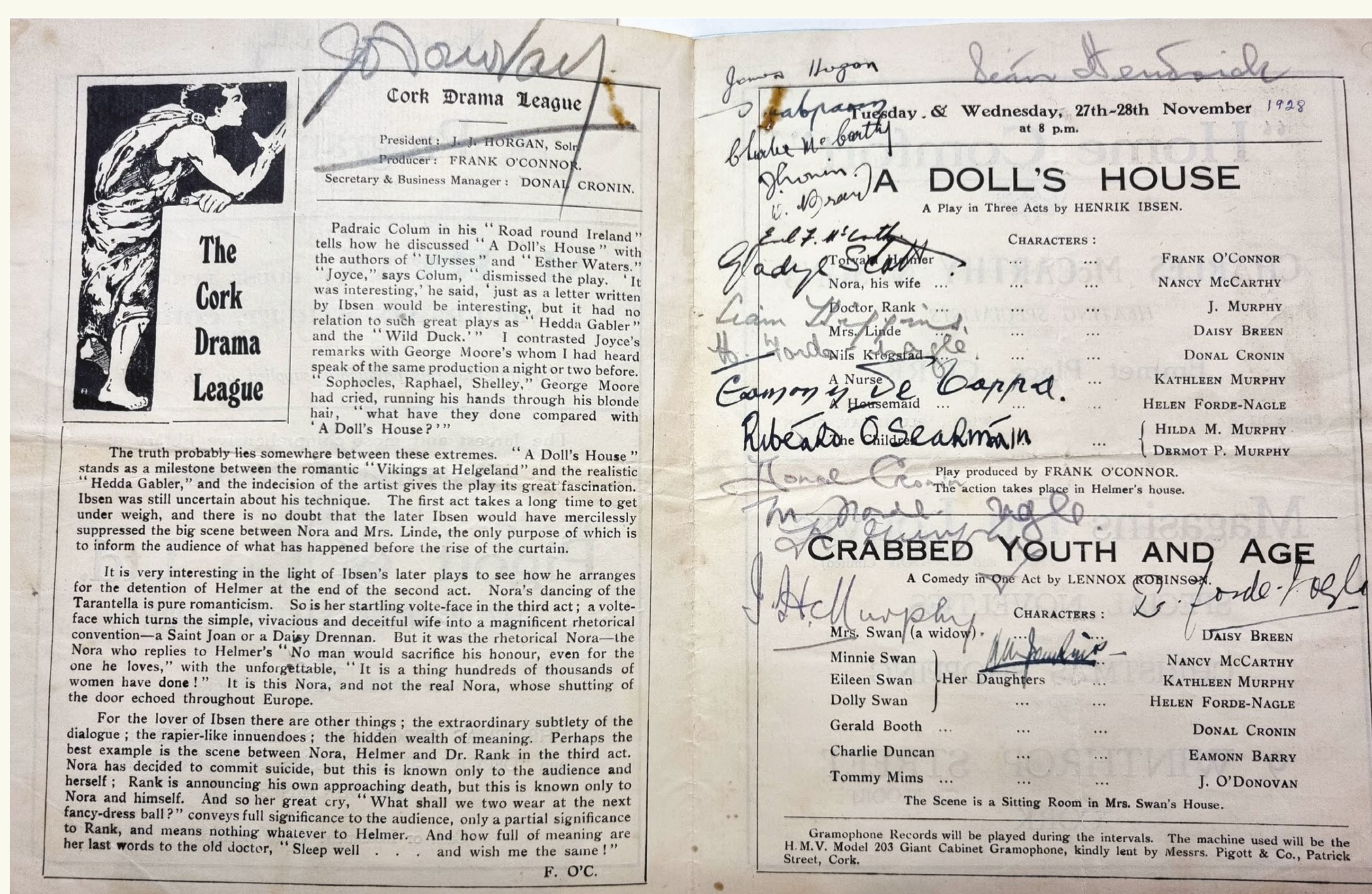
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The Cork Drama League: imagining a permanent amateur theatre:

“...the Cork Drama League have [sic] established ... themselves as a company of unusual talent ...” (*Cork Examiner*, March 1931)

In January 1928, Geraldine and Sean Neeson, John J. Horgan, and the author Frank O'Connor, were among the founders of the Cork Drama League (CDL). They had been inspired by the success of the Dublin Drama League, founded a decade previously. The CDL aimed to stage European and continental drama as well as new Irish writing, and to eventually establish itself as a permanent amateur company.



A Doll's House Programme, 1928 production



Moira O'Sullivan in The Master Builder (1930)

As a result, the CDL sought to create a cooperative of drama groups to pool resources and share artistic expertise. This move was inspired by the American-based international theatre movement, which advocated for the support of indigenous theatrical life in communities. It led to the formation of the Cork Little Theatre Society during the mid-1930s, which proved invaluable to the continuing expansion of the city's vibrant amateur movement.

From the outset, the CDL succeeded in producing memorable interpretations of English translations of plays by Ibsen, Molière, and Chekov, and others. It also performed plays by Lennox Robinson and Daniel Corkery. The company's prowess was acclaimed by commentators in local and national newspapers. The directors Micheál Mac Liammóir and Hilton Edwards – who co-founded Dublin's Gate Theatre Company in 1928 – as well as the playwright Mary Manning, also commended its success.

When Sean Neeson became Director of "6CK" in 1927 he introduced live

music and dramatic performances to the programming schedule. Alongside the Cork Shakespearean Company and Leaside Players, the CDL performed an eclectic mix of plays live on air.

During the early 1930s, the CDL welcomed an influx of new members which enabled it to continue producing excellent work. Although it was, for the most part, well-supported by the public, its limited financial resources were a constant source of concern. The lack of a permanent premises eventually mired any hopes of the company's longer-term expansion.



Geraldine Neeson in The Cherry Orchard (1928)



Nancy McCarthy in The Cherry Orchard (1928)



The Three Cornered Moon (1936)



The Yellow Bittern (1931)

All images are from the Nancy McCarthy Collection, courtesy of Special Archives and Collections, University College Cork.

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Cuimhneachán
Commemoration
1920-1923
Corcaigh | Cork

1. The amateur dramatic movement:

“Tis like a mission.” (from *Drama at Inish* by Lennox Robinson)

In 1930, Lennox Robinson tried unsuccessfully to convince Cork City's business community to support the creation of a theatre company to rival that of the Abbey Theatre. He understood the theatre's potential role in terms of cultural tourism. Simultaneously, the prolific increase of amateur dramatic activities in Ireland continued at a phenomenal rate.

In 1932, a preliminary meeting was held in Dublin to form the Irish Dramatic Association. In attendance were some Cork representatives who supported the association's proposed objective to formalise the national dramatic movement. Although the association was short-lived, nonetheless, communities across the country were determined to establish competitive festivals.



Ashton Productions (Cork Examiner, February 1961)

At that time, a number of groups including the Presentation Theatre Guild, Ashton Productions, the Good Companions, and the Fr. Mathew Players, among others, were resolute in their aim to develop artistically and participated at festivals throughout Munster. They welcomed the eventual establishment of the Cork Drama Festival in 1946, which continued to be held annually until 1971.

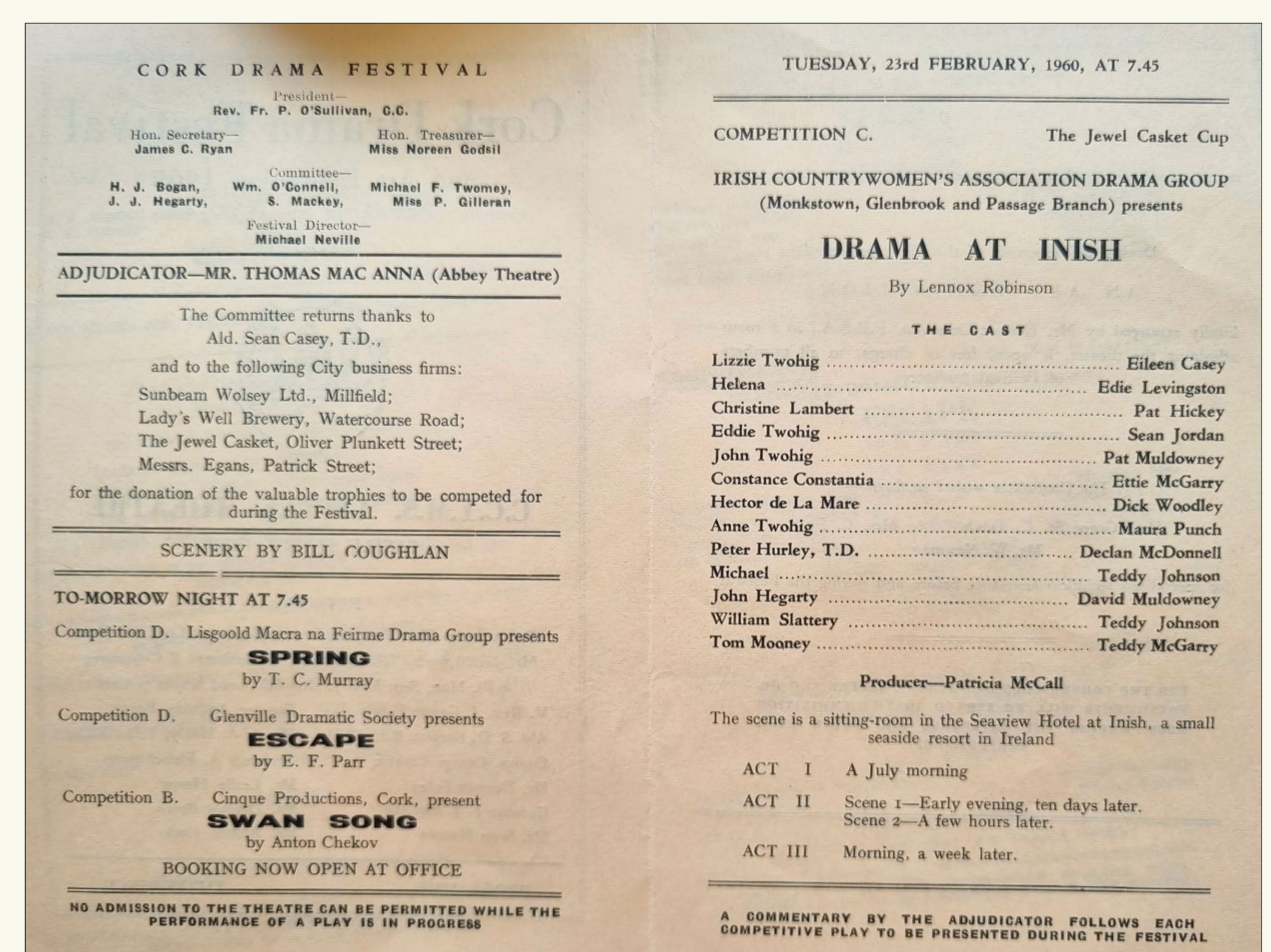


At the opening of the Cork Drama Festival—Left to right, front row: Messrs. H. Brogan, M. H. Goldblatt, Very Rev. J. Canon Fehilly, P.P., Most Rev. Dr. Lucey, Bishop of Cork, who performed the opening ceremony; Rev. P. O'Sullivan, C.C., President, Cork C.Y.M.S.; M. Neville and Diarmuid O'Donnobhain, F.R.S.A. Back row, left to right: Messrs. S. F. O'Foghlu, T. O'Quillinn, J. J. Fennessy, Misses Noreen Godsil and Paula Gilloran, Messrs. J. J. Hegarty, J. C. Ryan and M. Twomey.

Cork Drama Festival Opening (Cork Examiner, February 1959)

The Little Theatre Society ran a playwriting competition during the 1940s and the winning play was performed at the Opera House; for example, Sheila May's play, *Let Erin Forget*, was staged in 1942. It starred Eddie Golden who was just one of a considerable number of Cork actors to transition to the professional stage.

In the mid-1940s, Jim Stack Productions performed a series of Abbey Theatre plays at the Everyman Theatre. Stack, alongside Rachel Burrows, Geraldine Neeson, Michael Twomey, Dan Donovan, Noreen Godsill, Frank Sanquest, and James N. Healy, played a pivotal role in developing theatre in the city.



Cork Drama Festival programme, 1960

In the 1950s, the dramatic fraternity's dynamism led to the formation of the Irish-language Compántas Chorcaí – which performed new work by the UCC lecturer, Sean Ó Tuama – and the Theatre of the South.

“EVERYMAN THEATRE” OFF TO A FINE BEGINNING

Cork Examiner, October 1964

Individuals including Emelie and Ger FitzGibbon, John O'Shea, and so many others, became synonymous with drama in the city. According to John O'Shea, Cork theatre was “well-served by amateur companies” a number of which came together in 1962 to produce a season of international plays at the Cork Catholic Young Men's Society building on Castle Street. Subsequently, when the Everyman Theatre Company was established a year later, the unrelenting ambition to secure a fully amateur company in the city had finally been attained.

This exhibition was researched and created by Dr. Fiona Brennan, Theatre Historian, Independent Researcher and Archivist. She is a co-editor of *The Art and Ideology of Terence MacSwiney Caught in the living flame* (Cork University Press 2022), amongst other publications. She was recently successful in having Ireland's amateur dramatic tradition added to National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which gives it formal State recognition for the first time. She serves in an advisory capacity to the Technological University of the Shannon, Midlands Campus, Co. Westmeath on its Amateur Drama Collection.

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