

# STAGE

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# O'CASEY

LABORER—PLAYWRIGHT—POET



In 1929, the year *The Silver Tassie* was produced in London, James Agate wrote, "I shall take what racing parlance calls a long chance and name O'Casey as the biggest playwright in the making for the last three hundred years." Back in 1889 when old Michael O'Casey, Sean's father, lay dying he had muttered, "It's hard, after all, to be leaving one dunce in the world." Between those two comments lies one of the bravest legends of our time.

O'Casey senior was a scholar and a disciple of Bishop Berkeley. But his conviction about the non-existence of matter did not sustain his faith in the bright destiny of this sickly small boy, already afflicted with serious eye trouble. He had been able to give his other sons good educations, but there was nothing left for the John he had been so doggedly determined to have. That was before the days of the Gaelic League, and John was John in the leisurely, sprawling tenement districts of Dublin. Twice Mrs. O'Casey had gone to the hospital carrying a five-year-old John, blue and gasping, in the last agonies of diphtheria (they called it black croup then) and twice she had come home, before she could get help, with a dead son in her arms. When her last boy was born, with a cawl over his face, by the way, she did not want to affront a sinister providence. But Mr. O'Casey was always one to flout superstition. He wanted a John, and the name was given for the third time.

Things had never been too easy with the O'Caseys. During Mr. O'Casey's last, long illness they grew very hard. After his death they became what would have been considered desperate by any family but an Irish one. There was a meal of bread and strong tea in the morning, and another of bread and strong tea at night. Malnutrition had brought on an obscure disease of the eyes in young John, an inflammation of the optic nerve. "The child does not eat enough," they would tell Mrs. O'Casey, at the hospital, "Give him this tonic to help his appetite." And Mrs. O'Casey, a proud woman, would answer, "He does not ever seem to be hungry." Young O'Casey could not go to school, of course. For months at a time he would be shut up in the house. Occasionally he would get out for a few weeks, and learn to read lists of words, "cat, bat, mat, rat; more, floor, door, sore," which he forgot as soon as he could. Mrs. O'Casey, a handsome, laughing woman with a gift for talk and song, worried about her son's intellect. His hair grew low on his forehead and she knew that was

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a bad sign. Frantically, she brushed it back, tied a tight band around it at night, did all she could to give at least the outward seeming of a keen mind.

When he was twelve John had to go to work; for four bob a week, and, after a year, sixpence more. Up to that time knowing nothing had not bothered him at all. Then one night some people came in and a glorious Irish argument started over some minor point of history. Having to keep out of it nearly drove John crazy. "I ought to be able to settle that for them," he said to himself. Most of his father's books had been sold for food, but there were a few left which nobody would buy; some old spellers, grammars, geographies, which he went to at first. Then he learned Walker's dictionary by heart. And after that he wore out *Comprehensive Summary*, an abridged book of knowledge (history, biography, mythology, science, a little of everything) printed in New York back in the 'eighties. Presently he discovered Shakespeare, and the glory of that moment is alive and keen with him still.

When he was seventeen he knew *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth* by heart. Thin, half starved, always tired, he worked for a newspaper agency, from a quarter of four in the morning to seven at night for nine shillings a week. Out of this he managed to save a few pennies each week for books: Shelley, Keats, Herrick, Burns, Euripides; or for a ticket to see the famous Benson company play one of Shakespeare's plays. It was then that he began to resent social injustice. Every Saturday the boys were paid off. They filed by the cashier's cage and had to take off their hats when they asked for their pay. One Saturday he decided that he couldn't put up with it any longer. "Take off your hat," said the cashier, holding back his envelope. "That money is mine, I worked for it. Give it to me," snarled John. The cashier called the manager. There was a fine rumpus. O'Casey got his nine shillings and kept his hat on, but he lost his job. After that he worked on the railroad, as a dock hand, a smith's helper, a stone cutter, a hod carrier. Of all his jobs he liked hod carrying best. You could easily keep three bricklayers supplied, and get time for a pipe and a rest now and then. When you got to the top of the building you had to hustle, but then the climbs up and down the scaffolding added a bit of spirit to the day.

O'Casey joined the Gaelic League, that great popular university of Ireland, when he was twenty; and his years of lonely study began to bear fruit. The members were not usually men of the pure working class, but, even then, O'Casey was exceptional. He dove headlong into the movement; learned Gaelic, changed his name to Sean O'Cathasaigh, studied international labor conditions, political theory, Socialism, literature, art. His first impulse toward writing sprang, as most things do in Ireland, from his interest in politics. He began writing for the manuscript journal of his club. Articles were handed in anonymously, read in open meeting, and discussed. The first thing he did which caught the attention of the crowd was *Sound the Loud Trumpet*, a rousing treatise called forth by the arrival of Augustus Birrell to administer education in Ireland.

At that point O'Casey's life divided into three pathways, which merged again into one main road only when he became an established playwright of the Abbey Theatre in 1923. There was the laborer, who worked on the docks and around the streets of the town; more often hungry than not, often ill and in hospital, a citizen of the folkways of the Dublin slums, friend of all the people who

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later lived in his plays; active in the life of his club; a member of the hurling team, wielding his caman, for all his frail build, with vigor and skill; always in the thick of an argument, his muffler, the badge of the worker, pulled up around his ears.

**T**here was the Parish patriot; disciple of James Connell, member of the Irish Socialist Republican Party, who entered the first phase of his public life under the leadership of James Larkin in the labor disturbance of 1913. This man (never well enough to go to war) walked with clear eyes through those dusty Calvaries which are only legends now: Easter Week, 1916; The Terror; Sinn Fein; The Republic; the Civil War. He who had, at first, seen the need of a social and economic revolution, soon discovered that the people who were ready to die for a free Ireland would gain nothing if their dream came true. He found that it was the people "who were dying for the gunman;" that instead of a millennium there was left only the desolation which later he articulated in Juno's prayer: "Sacred Heart o' Jesus, take away our hearts o' stone, and give us hearts o' flesh! Take away this murdherin' hate, an' give us Thine own eternal love!"

There was the dreamer and scholar, who went on reading and writing at night, in a dim, cold room, after the long hours of a laborer's day, through the long years. He began contributing to *The Nation*. Finally one of his pieces, *Three Shouts From a Hill*, a violent halloo for nationalism, made its healthy clamor heard above the routine din of Irish political utterance. O'Casey, eager to get it a larger hearing, asked Bernard Shaw to write a preface for it. He liked, and has remembered, Shaw's reply: "Some of this is good. But what use would a crutch be to you? Keep on writing until you have done something people will read without a Shaw preface." That was the first hand he ever reached for and, incidentally, it was the last.

Finally he found a publisher, who agreed to pay him fifteen pounds for his manuscript. It was the first money his writing had brought him, but he couldn't collect it. Things were harder than usual with the O'Caseys. Sean was out of work; Mrs. O'Casey, who was by that time eighty, was taking in more than her usual stint of washing. When at last he got his check, at the edge of a clenched fist, she was down with bronchitis. It was a holiday, and O'Casey was writing. Mrs. O'Casey was in bed, but roaring with amusement at something he had just said. Then it suddenly was still in the next room. That moment is held forever in one of the shortest and most revealing dedications in the language. It stands on the first page of the published version of *The Plough and the Stars*, and reads, "To the gay laugh of my mother at the gate of the grave." The undertaker was annoyed because there was only a check in the house, which could not be cashed on a holiday. After that O'Casey lived alone, writing and slowly building up a library. After 1916 he became a regular contributor to *The Worker's Republic*. Always chafing under the heavy censorship, he took up pastoral poetry as a relaxation. Then in 1918 he began to write plays.

The Irish must always explain everything. These explanations quickly grow into a legend, which soon becomes a dogma. So the dogma has flourished in Ireland that the Abbey Theatre was responsible for developing the genius of Sean O'Casey. The fact is that he had been to the Abbey perhaps only three times in all the eighteen years of its existence before his own plays were produced

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there. The two came together at a time of mutual need, and served each other well. The Abbey, at that time, was searching for new plays. Yeats wrote O'Casey later, at the time of *The Silver Tassie* controversy. "I bore in mind that the Abbey owed its recent prosperity to you. If you had not brought us your plays just at that moment I doubt if it would now exist."

The actual circumstance of his first impulse toward playwriting was casual enough, and had nothing to do with the Abbey at all. When they are not talking, the Irish must be acting. The island is running over with little amateur groups, acting little one-act plays. *The Coiner* was then the favorite. O'Casey, who was a member of the dramatic department of his club, finally got sick of the thing. "Why can't you do something beside *The Coiner*?" he complained. "Have you no initiative at all?" So they suggested that he write a play if he didn't like the one they had. That first play was *The Frost and the Flower* and, although it was a good one, it was never produced. For O'Casey had written the story of a prominent Dublin family, several members of which belonged to the club; and nobody dared do anything but roar in private over the script. On an off chance O'Casey sent the play on to the Abbey. Lady Gregory and Yeats hesitated for a while; then sent it back; not with rejection number one, a printed slip; or rejection number two, an agreeable but vague letter; but rejection number three, a long analysis and critique of the play, with suggestions and prods for another try. Thus heartened, O'Casey wrote *The Harvest Festival*, and *The Crimson and Tri-Color*. The latter almost got on. Lennox Robinson lost the script, and O'Casey had no copy. At last it was found. Then they were afraid of it because it gashed into the National movement. Finally O'Casey, who, with naiveté at odd variance with his searing insight into men and their institutions, had thought that having his plays staged would banish want from his door forever, became so disgusted that, if he had not almost finished another play, he would have quit playwriting forever. That third play was *The Shadow of the Gunman*, and it was an immediate and complete success. The first night there was a twelve-pound house; the second, it jumped to thirty-eight pounds; and the third, it reached sixty, which is about top at the Abbey. "Oh, Mr. O'Casey, Mr. O'Casey, come out and look at the queue," lisped Lady Gregory (she never got over lisping). "The only time I really love my fellow beings is when I see them pouring into the Abbey." A year later came *Juno and the Paycock*, first at the Abbey, then in London. And the O'Casey legend began ringing around the world.

It is a lonely legend, full of invincible laughter, singularly free from echoes. Shakespeare was his master, but O'Casey followed him only as far as all dramatic poets must. He was influenced by the Greeks only to the extent that a knowledge of the harmonies of form and structure must attend all important playwriting. He has hardly heard those nearer voices of his own city. George Moore's immaculate, hushed style; Joyce's people, cerebral, introspective, debased; James Stephens' idyllic Dublin; George Russell's mystic, Celtic twilights; these have not touched O'Casey. They meet only in their common preoccupation with politics; and that preoccupation is common only in its least significant denominator. Shaw has given him only admiration and friendship. Even the personalities of the Abbey, Yeats, Lady Gregory, Robinson, have

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contributed merely the temporary and pleasant stimulation of casual companionship. His friends were the originals of Captain Boyle, and Fluther Good, and Joxer, and Juno Boyle, and Maisie Madigan. His schools were the Dublin slums, the Gaelic League, the dark dawn of Irish liberty.

From the London production of *Juno and the Paycock* O'Casey got money enough to go to England. But that was after *The Plough and the Stars*, his next play, was on at the Abbey; and Dublin raging healthily because he had insulted the Irish, and simultaneously going to see it in droves. He crossed more than the Irish Sea on that trip. It proved to be an artistic Rubicon, and the beginning of a new personal life. In England he met Eileen Carey, a beautiful, rich-voiced Irishwoman, playing in *Juno and the Paycock*, and presently they were married. He discovered that, with *The Plough and the Stars*, he had gone as far as he could go with realism; that he must strike out into some new dramatic form which seemed to him more significant, more universal, or the rest of his writing life would be just a commonplace repetition of guaranteed formulas. Already a play on the Great War was beginning to take shape in his mind.

But the actual birth of *The Silver Tassie* was as casual as the impulse which started him on his first play. He was calling at the office of one of his good friends, a Scotchman, who was working away at his desk and roaring in a pleasant, burring baritone:

"Gae bring to me a pint of wine,  
And fill it in a silver tassie;  
That I may drink before I go,  
A service to my bonnie lassie."

O'Casey liked the lilt and he walked up and down, humming along. Presently it started rhythms in his head, and to the beat a young athlete, a football hero, was marching off to the War. Almost as if it were being blocked in in charcoal on a clean canvas, the play began to take shape; the going out, the War, the return. And the name—of course—*The Silver Tassie*; that shining symbol of the young athlete's short day.

This play, which London still considers his greatest, was an artistic sensation; but it brought about his break with the Abbey. When the play was finished, he had submitted it, of course, to them; and after some correspondence, which has become historic, and is part of O'Casey's story, it was rejected. Lennox Robinson wrote Lady Gregory: "The first act is typical O'Casey and very good, I think. The second act in the modern Russo-German manner is very fine, I think. . . . I like the third and fourth acts much less. . . . I am glad he is groping toward a new manner." W. B. Yeats wrote O'Casey: "I am sad and discouraged. You have no subject. You were interested in the Irish Civil War. . . . But you are not interested in the Great War. . . . You never stood on its battlefields or walked its hospitals, and so write out of your opinions. . . . I see nothing for it but a new theme, something you have found and no newspaper ever found." O'Casey wrote Yeats: "Was Shakespeare at Actium or Philippi? Was G. B. Shaw in the boats with the French, or in the forts with the British when St. Joan and Dunois made the attack that relieved Orleans?" Shaw said: "Yeats made a great mistake in rejecting *The Tassie*. Perhaps the most extraordinary thing in his letter is the implication that a dramatist cannot deal with something he has not experienced."

In the midst of the shouts of friends and the drum beats of the press, C. B. Cochran decided to put *The Tassie* on in London. Augustus John did the set for the second act. The critics went wild. For once Shaw con-

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curred. "A hell of a play! The work of a genius!" he shouted. Later he wrote to Mr. Cochran: "I really must congratulate you on *The Tassie* before it passes into the classical repertory. It is a magnificent play; and it was a magnificent gesture of yours to produce it. The highbrows *should* have produced it; and you, the unpretentious showman, *did*, as you have done so many other noble and rash things on your Sundays. . . . There is a new drama rising from unplumbed depths to sweep the nice little bourgeois efforts of myself and my contemporaries into the dust bin; and your name will live as the man who didn't run away. If only someone would build you as huge Woolworth Theatre (all seats sixpence) to start with O'Casey and O'Neill and no plays by men who had ever seen a five-pound note before they were thirty or been inside a school after they were thirteen, you would be buried in Westminster Abbey.

Bravo! G.B.S.