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Book Review: "The Irish dramatic revival 1899–1939."

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The Irish dramatic revival 1899-1939, by Anthony Roche, London, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015, 272 pp., £16.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781408175286

W. B. Yeats described the Irish National Theatre as ‘the creation of seven people’ (xi): Yeats, J. M. Synge, Lady Augusta Gregory, Sara Allgood, Molly Allgood, Frank Fay and Willie Fay. From this proud list, Anthony Roche wryly notes, Yeats managed to somehow omit the names of Edward Martyn and George Moore. With *The Irish Dramatic Revival 1889-1939*, Roche not only shares his thoughtful insights into the key historical and theatrical moments of early modern Irish drama, as well as a contemplation of their continuing influence on contemporary productions and artists; he also conscientiously reconsiders the received narrative of the foundational years of the Irish Dramatic Revival to ensure that new light is shed upon those who contributed to (and those who were omitted from) the Irish National Theatre. Structurally, the overarching formation of this book follows a more or less diachronic framework, beginning with the staging of *The Countess Cathleen* in 1899 and ending with Yeats’ death at Roquebrune in France in January 1939.

Roche begins with an overview of the state of play(s) in the late nineteenth century and how this affected the Irish Dramatic Revival as either influence or irritant. This introductory chapter also considers the omissions from the official record: Roche nods to the history of the working class theatre outlined by Ben Levitas, the Ulster theatre movement in Belfast, and the substantial contribution by female theatre-makers (particularly women playwrights). Roche then further subdivides this historical arc into thematic sections, focusing on five key personalities and artists: Yeats, Synge, George Bernard Shaw, Gregory, and Seán O’Casey. This analysis of the key works and figures of the Irish Dramatic Revival manages to synthesize the biographical

with the dramaturgical; a potted history of each playwright's journey into and through the Irish Dramatic Revival is used to illuminate their artistic impulses.

Section seven is more motley in its offerings, stepping back a little to consider events beyond the traditional narrative of the genesis of the Abbey. In this section, Roche ranges from a glance uptown at the influence of the Gate Theatre during this period, a well-deserved reclamation of the work of playwright Teresa Deevy, and an analysis of Yeats' *Purgatory* as ancestor of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Finally, in section eight, Roche invites three other voices to bring their critical and artistic perspectives to bear on the discussion. Paige Reynolds considers how a history of Irish theatre might be viewed if divorced from the bricks and mortar of the famous buildings; her article focuses on the subject of spectacle and how performativity on a grand scale was employed to further the nationalist cause. In particular, Reynolds studies 'the power of sports to perform Irish identity' (166). P.J. Matthews provides an overview of the cultural debates surrounding Synge's era, particularly in the ecclesiastical arena. And finally, Roche sits down to discuss the pervasive and perpetual role of ghosts and the supernatural in Irish drama with playwright Conor McPherson, which reads less like an interview and more as an enjoyably genial conversation between two seasoned aficionados of Irish theatre.

Yeats is most certainly 'the spine' of the book (3), but Roche avoids the hagiographic tendencies that often creep into histories of the foundation of the Irish Literary Theatre (ILT) and its subsequent incarnation as the Abbey. Indeed, the focus is on theatre as a collaborative act, and how the particular politics and personalities of the key players had a significant influence upon what would coalesce to become, arguably, the Abbey 'style' of artistic programming and linger in the dramaturgical urges and impulses that fuel Irish theatre even today. One of the most refreshing contributions Roche makes to this history is to train a feminist lens on some of the

crucial debates and texts of the early years of ILT. For example, Roche scrupulously and meticulously assigns credit where credit is due for the co-creation of several of Yeats's plays with Gregory. This takes the form not only of asserting the dual authorship of iconic works like *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, but also delving into the DNA of the play to offer an illuminating perspective on the identifying markers of each author's inimitable style and how they cohere to form a whole. *The Irish Dramatic Revival 1889-1939* manages to revivify Irish theatre history and to connect it to the present moment via contemporary productions and artists. Roche's consideration of the Irish Dramatic Revival is not just a historical analysis, but also a respectful acknowledgement of its ongoing powerful influence into the twenty-first century.

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