

**Mary Manning**  
**– a life in stages.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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This thesis is an examination of the life and work of the playwright and novelist Mary Manning from when she first became active in 1924 until her death in 1999. I will examine her early plays at the Gate Theatre and her editorship of that theatre's literary periodical, *Motley*. This thesis will also assess Manning's involvement with the pioneering wave of Irish film enthusiasts who created the first exclusively Irish independent films. I will also consider Manning's American work with her novel *Mount Venus* and the work she did with the experimental theatre company Poets' Theatre. I will also examine the third and final phase of Manning's career when she returned to Dublin to create work for the Abbey, Gate and Project stages. The thesis is capped by a report of a practical project I undertook to assess Manning's significance with audiences today. Through the course of this thesis, I will attempt to assess Manning's position in the Irish literary movement.

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I am also indebted to Mary Manning's daughters Susan and Fanny Howe for being so generous with their time, making themselves available for interview and entrusting me with their mother's play *Go, Lovely Rose* for production.

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During my research in Ireland I would like to thank Mary B. Broderick, Berni Metcalfe and Dolores Grant at the National Library of Ireland for their help and support. I would also like to thank Aisling Lockhart at the Manuscripts & Archives Research Library, Trinity College, Dublin for her assistance with the Denis Johnston archive. I am indebted to Philip Quinn at the Irish Film Archive for locating, digitising and providing me with viewing copies of *By Accident* and *Screening in the Rain*.

With the production of *Go, Lovely Rose* I would like to thank Dorothy Lynch and Viola Segeroth for their kindness and support. William Foote, Gerry Logue, Sam De Santi and the late David O'Keefe at the London Irish Cultural Centre were a great help. And from London Irish Rep, Siobhan Gallagher, Paul Donnellon, James Jones, Calum Excell, Viktorija Raščiauskaitė and Michael Brosnan for their kind help and support with this project. I would also like to thank Emma Smith who curated IN: Visible Women at the Tate Modern, Liverpool which subsequently hosted the production.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family for their unwavering support, in particular my brother Conor and my aunt Patricia Smyth, a life-long educator in her own right who encouraged me throughout the journey. I would like to dedicate this thesis to my sons Shay and Christopher and to the memory of my parents.

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## Introduction: Leavening the bitter realism

I first came across the name Mary Manning in 2010 when I was researching female Irish playwrights of the 1930s and 1940s with a view to producing neglected Irish work in London theatres.<sup>1</sup> This project resulted in productions of Theresa Deevy's 1942 play *Wife to James Whelan* at The New Diorama in 2011 and *An Apple A Day* (1941) by Elizabeth Connor as part of a mini-festival at Kingsgate Theatre to mark the centenary of the 1916 rising in 2016.<sup>2</sup> I first stumbled upon Manning's 1931 play *Youth's the Season-?* during this process and I was immediately struck by the originality of its subject matter, its wry comedy and the expressionistic quality of its second act. I was equally taken by the fact that there was so little scholarly work about this playwright, although that situation has improved over the last decade. I initially conceived this thesis as an examination of Manning along with Deevy and O'Connor, but as I delved deeper into the research, it became clear that it would be prudent to concentrate on one writer for the purposes of a cogent doctoral dissertation.

My core research question with this thesis is: who was Mary Manning and what is her place in the Irish literary and artistic movement from 1924, when she first

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<sup>1</sup> My professional background is as a theatre practitioner, film maker and acting coach. Previous Irish work includes the British Premiere of Frank McGuinness' *Gates of Gold* (Finborough Theatre/Trafalgar Studios, West End), Tom Murphy's *The Gigi Concert* (Finborough Theatre/Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh) and *The Playboy of the Western World* (Kingsgate Theatre).

<sup>2</sup> The production of *Wife to James Whelan* was critics' choice in *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian* and *The Independent on Sunday*. For a sample review see: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/8466458/Wife-to-James-Whelan-New-Diorama-theatre-review.html>

The production of *An Apple A Day* received a very favourable critical response. For a review sample see: <https://www.londontheatre1.com/reviews/5-star-an-apple-a-day-london-irish-rep/>

became active, to her death in 1999? The central methodology I used when researching this thesis was a mixture of library work, archival visits and personal interviews with individuals either directly connected to Manning or who were involved in her productions. In July and August 2018 I visited the Manning archive at the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University and the Poets' Theatre Archive in the Houghton Library at Harvard. At the same time, I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to interview two of Manning's children, Fanny Howe in Cambridge Massachusetts and Susan Howe at New Haven, Connecticut. Two weeks later I extensively examined the Gate Theatre archive at The Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections at Northwestern University in Evanston, Chicago. This American research trip proved a vital part of my work and is the mainstay of much this thesis. The Boston and Harvard archives offered fascinating insights into Manning's career in America, while the Gate archive gave first hand production detail that theatre's debut staging of *Youth's the Season-?* and offered a clearer idea of the look and feel of what Hilton Edwards staged in 1931.

In addition to the American archival work, I explored the O'Leary archive at the National Library of Ireland which is an invaluable source of materials and ephemera of Irish film making in the 1930s. To accompany the chapter dealing with Irish film I studied the very rare print of the 1934 film *Guests of the Nation* several times at London's British Film Institute by utilizing a Steenbeck film editing table. I am also very grateful to the Irish Film Institute who digitised copies for me of two equally rare

early Irish films, *By Accident* (1930) and *Screening in the Rain* (1930), both titles directed by Norris Davidson.

My main place of research was in London at the British library, but I also had occasion to visit various libraries and institutions in Dublin to assist in my research. The National Library of Ireland is home to the Gate Theatre magazine *Motley* which I examined in 2019 and then again in 2022. While in Dublin I visited Denis Johnston's extensive archive at Trinity College, University of Dublin, which proved an invaluable resource for pinpointing the critical role Manning played in the production of his film *Guests of the Nation*. When dealing with Manning's later work I was fortunate to interview actor Frank Grimes, who played the lead role in Manning's 1968 adaptation of *The Saint and Mary Kate*. Mr Grimes was in a unique position to offer first hand evidence as to the production and rehearsal process of this production and he was able to offer his thoughts on the mood at the Abbey theatre at that time, the relationships between key players and how it impacted on the processes of that particular production. We enjoyed a particularly pleasant afternoon on what was the hottest day of the year in a beer garden near his home in Barnes, Surrey in July 2021.

I was unable to locate any archival materials or ephemera on Manning's original play *Ah Well It Won't Be Long Now*, as the Olympia theatre was not in possession of a single piece of material about that play. However, many of my questions were answered by its director, Roland Jaquarello. I conducted a lengthy interview with him via Zoom and he shared with me many insights having worked



closely with Manning on that play. Regarding the final production Manning wrote for the theatre in the 1970s, *Outlook Unsettled*, I was lucky enough to interview that play's director, Seamus Newman, who also agreed to an interview via Zoom. He shared with me a copy of the original program and some personal correspondence between himself and Manning. All of these first-hand sources were absolutely invaluable in providing me with a clearer picture of not only the look and feel of the actual production aesthetic but the internal machinations of what went on behind the scenes. During the various pandemic lockdowns, I conducted research online using portals such as Jstor. Manning wrote two novels *Mount Venus* (1938) and *Lovely People* (1953) of which I will only consider the former title as I was unable to obtain a copy of the latter as both works are incredibly rare.

It is widely noted that the vast majority of the critical work concerning twentieth and twenty-first century Irish theatre has been focused on the Abbey Theatre.<sup>3</sup> Thankfully that balance began to be redressed in the 1980s with new evaluations being offered of the Gate Theatre's place in literary scholarship. Consequently, there is very little critical material available addressing Manning's stage work in the 1930s. Regarding Manning's film work at that time, there is even less scholarly material available, therefore my research was a process of evaluating

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<sup>3</sup> For further discussion on the twentieth century critical material on the Gate, see Ruud Van Den Beuken, *Avant Garde Nationalism at the Dublin Gate Theatre, 1928-40* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2021).

the materials that are available at the O'Leary Archive and Denis Johnston's notebooks from that period.

In critical terms it was Curtis Cranfield who was first to recognise the originality and freshness in subject matter and characterisation in Manning's debut play *Youth's the Season - ?*. In his 1936 book *Plays of Changing Ireland* he championed eight plays written in the previous seven years – four titles from the Abbey and four from the Gate. He based his selection criteria on “the extent to which each was an expression of new forces and conditions in the modern state...and second, the skill and originality with which their raw materials were shaped into dramatic form.”<sup>4</sup>

Cranfield considered Manning's play:

Unique in being the only Irish play concerned with Dublin high life. Its cynicism and tone of disillusionment support the view that the “post-war generation” was not a phenomenon confined to America alone. The play is harsh and strident, partaking itself in some of the excesses of its young characters, none of whom has heard “the merry call of incense-breathing morn.” But it is an outspoken and daring play, and symptomatic of the modern feeling that the boundaries of theatrical subject matter are being extended in every direction. Miss Manning has leavened the bitter realism of her play with some cracking lines and a note of eerie fantasy in the person of Egosmith, Terrence Killigrew's enigmatic other self, who never utters a single word throughout the course of the action. *Youth's the Season...?* because of its sophisticated treatment of metropolitan life, stands further away than any other realistic play in this book from traditional Irish drama.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Curtis Cranfield, *Plays of Changing Ireland* (London: Macmillan, 1936), viii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

During the following thirty years Manning is occasionally referenced by name in publications as an important playwright at the Gate in the 1930s. For example, writing in 1947, former Abbey theatre actor turned critic Gabriel Fallon, reflected on the first two decades of the Gate and recognised its ascendancy over his former employers: “The Abbey, fallen into the last rut of naturalism, seemed likely to remain there, and the only heart-lifting theatrical experience to be found in Dublin was to be found in the work of the Gate pioneers.”<sup>6</sup> Lavish in his praise of Hilton Edwards and Micheál MacLiammóir, he was complimentary on their ability to nurture new writing talent and referenced Manning as a leading playwright of her generation: “Finding new Irish writers in Denis Johnston, David Sears, Lord Longford, Lady Longford, Mary Manning.”<sup>7</sup> Micheál Mac Liammóir’s autobiography *All For Hecuba* (1946) offers not only an insightful analysis of *Youth’s the Season-?* – “brilliant in promise in spite of a curious mixture of [Noel] Cowardly influences and unfinished Joycean symphonies” – but also provides an interesting account of the social milieu in and around the Gate at that time, and a first-hand account of Manning’s personality:

Mary Manning whose brain, nimble and observant as it was, could not yet keep pace with a tongue so caustic that even her native city (unchanged and unchanging since Sheridan brought its greatest social activity to light in his most famous comedy and laid the blame on London), was a little in awe of her, and one all but looked for the feathered heel under the crisp and spirited skirts. ‘Did you hear what Mary Manning said about so-and-so’ was a favourite

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<sup>6</sup> Gabriel Fallon, “Some Aspects of Irish Theatre” (*Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 36, no. 143, 1947), 304.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

phrase; and her handsome, rather prominent eyes, deeply blue and dangerously smiling, danced all over the room in search of prey.<sup>8</sup>

It was not until 1967 that Robert Hogan presented the first attempt at a dissection of Manning's play *Youth's the Season-?* with any measure of detail. He acknowledged the originality of the piece, "Dublin had never seen a play quite like *Youth's the Season-?* and perhaps it has not seen one since", however with a chauvinistic air he observes, "such a strong and smoothly written play would have been remarkable no matter who had written it, but it was even more remarkable for a girl barely out of teens."<sup>9</sup> Hogan was mistaken as Manning was in fact twenty-seven when she composed the play. Although he does recognise the sense of the existential angst in the world of the play and at the core of the characters: "Her group of young, Anglo-Irish, middle-class Dubliners is at that crucial moment just before their lives are set in permanent patterns – before they decide finally what they want to do or who they want to marry. Her point really is that youth is really not the season of thoughtless joy, but of exasperating indecision and lacerating self-scrutiny."<sup>10</sup> Hogan is complimentary about Manning's pointed wit which is intertwined in the personalities her characters: "What makes the play so funny, moving and convincing is a persuasive sense of style. And the style is

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<sup>8</sup> Micheál Mac Liammóir, *All for Hecuba* (New and revised edition with extra material.) [With plates, including portraits.] (London: Methuen & Co, 1946). 146-147.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Hogan, *After the Irish Renaissance: a critical history of the Irish drama since 'The plough and the stars'* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 120.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

all the more convincing for being not an artificial collection of Wildean epigrams, but the fluent brittle, and imitative cleverness that is about as close to real life as conversation usually comes.”<sup>11</sup>

Over a decade later, Samuel Beckett’s biographer, Deirdre Bair, offered some interesting insights into Manning, the creative process for *Youth’s the Season-?*, and her relationship with Beckett. Manning was a key source for supplying Bair with early biographical detail about her childhood friend. Bair attributes Beckett as having a significant role to play in the creation of Manning’s script:

She [Manning] asked Beckett to help her, and he was responsible for several major changes. He created a character named Ego Smith, a bar tender and foil for all the other characters who tell him all their troubles. Ego Smith is on stage throughout the play but says nothing in the final version of the script. Originally, Beckett wrote a script for Ego Smith, which was to be the focal point of the play, allowing him to give his vision of the world: ‘My conception of the universe is a huge head with pus-exuding scabs – entirely revolting.’ Edwards and Mac Liammóir thought the speech accurate but disgusting and refused to keep it. Beckett also suggested the hero should kill himself before the end of the play, but again the producers rejected his idea. Finally, Beckett suggested it would not be successful unless there was a character off-stage who could be heard steadily flushing a toilet. Mrs Howe and her producers were puzzled with Beckett’s fixation with suicide, bartenders and flushing toilets, but he assured them their usefulness in furthering action would be readily apparent when they read his own novel, *Murphy*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>12</sup> Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: a Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 249-250. Bair attributes her sources for Beckett and his relationship with Dublin and its theatre as Mary Manning Howe, Dr Andrew Ganley, Mervyn Wall, Dr A. J. Leventhal, and anonymous sources.

Bair also claimed this experience fuelled Beckett's interest in theatre: "This brief experience in theatre fascinated Beckett, and he began to hang around on the fringes of various dramatic groups in Dublin."<sup>13</sup> Bair also goes into some detail about Beckett's infatuation with Manning's friend, the American debutante Betty Stockton, and the subsequent affair he conducted with Manning.

Later commentators would speculate on the extent to which Manning's play influenced Beckett's dramatic writing. Christopher Murray highlighted some parallels between *Youth's the Season-?* and Beckett's first dramatic effort, *Eleutheria* (1947): "It may well be that the key to *Eleutheria* is a forgotten play entitled *Youth's the Season-?*"<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note Murray's use of the adjective 'forgotten' when describing Manning's play. He continued: "Unlike Manning's Killigrew also, Victor Krap refuses the love of the woman who dotes on him, Mille Skunk. No doubt, the very name is enough to dispel all thoughts of romantic developments. Yet Victor's rejection of Millie Skunk, while reversing Connie Middleton's rejection of Terrence Killigrew, is not what one would call comic. The anti-hero asserts his freedom not to be free: "I shall never be free. (pause) But I shall always feel that I am becoming free." Here we have the true, the real Beckettian hero, first glimpsed in *Murphy*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Murray, 'Taking a Position: Mary Manning and *Eleutheria*, *Ireland on stage: Beckett and After*, edited by Hiroko Mikami, Minako Okamuro, Naoko Yagi (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2007), 59.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

Manning's work with the Poets' Theatre has similarly received limited attention from literary critics. Peter Davison's seminal study of the American poetry movement of the 1950s, *The Fading Smile* (1994), acknowledged her position as the leading force at the Poets' Theatre: "Mary Manning Howe, playwright, director, novelist, close friend of Samuel Beckett, alumna of Dublin's Abbey Theatre, and the *madre buffa* of the Poets' Theatre."<sup>16</sup>

Christopher Fitz-Simon in his double biography of Hilton Edwards and Michael Mac Liammóir entitled *The Boys* (1994) largely ignores the plays of Manning but he does supply some detail about the Gate's periodical *Motley*. Running for nineteen issues between 1932-1934, this 'little magazine' featured contributions from many of the leading writers of the day along with new submissions and social commentary which I will discuss further in chapter three. Fitz-Simon offers some interesting anecdotal detail such as an account of Manning reading Orson Welles' cards at an after show party and telling the future director of *Citizen Kane* that his future lay in stockbroking.

There was a ground breaking development in November 2015 with the initiation of the #wakingthefeminists movement, which sought not only to redraw the boundaries of gender imbalance in Irish theatre but also to reassess critical theory with regard to the position of women playwrights and practitioners in the earlier part of the century. The first serious scholarly and in-depth analysis of Manning soon

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Davison, *The Fading Smile*. 25.

followed in 2016 with Cathy Leeney's *Irish Women Playwrights, 1900-1939: Gender and Violence on Stage*. This book examined the work of five women writers: Augusta Gregory, Eva Gore-Booth, Dorothy Macardle, Mary Manning, and Teresa Deevy and considered how these writers dramatized violence in a wider context of its personal and political impact but also the perceptions of gender roles from the Irish theatrical perspective. Leeney considered Manning's contribution to Irish theatre:

wide ranging and significant, most especially in the 1930s, when she wrote about the new Ireland, its reality, its fears and its failures. *Youths the Season-?* alone is an important contribution to the Irish theatrical canon both for its formal skill and innovation, and for the representation of gender and violence which these innovations signal. Her energy and ambition, her wit and clear sightedness all contributed to this, Manning's remarkable playwrighting debut.<sup>17</sup>

In *Youth's the season-?* Leeny regards the decadence of the main characters and the confused nature of gender expectations as a by-word for the inertia and apathy of that generation in the post-colonial state: "Throughout the play gender roles are tested. The idea that clear definitions of masculinity and femininity are mutually reliant is explored through a number of relationships, sometimes with comic results. Order and conformity are rooted in clear gender distinctions, and in a differentiated binary structure of supposedly complimentary opposites."<sup>18</sup> She suggests the dramatic suicide of Terrence at the end of the play is a harbinger of doom for that generation in

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<sup>17</sup> Cathy Leeney, *Irish Women Playwrights, 1900-1939: Gender and Violence on Stage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 130-131.

<sup>18</sup> Cathy Leeney, 145.



any meaningful contribution to the new state: "But the play shows that Terrence's self-sacrifice leads instead to the imposition of a coercive system of control, to sham catharsis, oppression and despair. Thus the myth-makers of masculinity in Ireland of the 1930s are exposed in a destructive shadow as it falls over the generation of promise, the season of youth."<sup>19</sup> This identification of the unique post-colonial perspective Manning depicted in this work which will be explored in the following chapter.

Leeney's book was followed later that year by another important contribution to Manning scholarship with an article by Paige Reynolds published in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 'The Avant-Garde Doyenne: Mary Manning, the Poets' Theatre, and the Staging of *Finnegans Wake*'. The most significant feature of this article is its examination of Manning's career in America with the Poets' Theatre and specifically her adaptation of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, entitled *The Voice of Shem*, which she hailed "the most renowned of the productions staged by the Poets' Theatre."<sup>20</sup> Reynolds describes how Manning in her adaptation attempted to offer a new version of a revered and complex classic, and greater accessibility through the experimental forum of the Poets' Theatre method of performance: "Manning's *Finnegans Wake* cannily repudiated the conservative cultural mores pervading America in the 1950s,

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<sup>19</sup> Cathy Leeney, 150.

<sup>20</sup> Paige Reynolds, 'The Avant-Garde Doyenne: Mary Manning, the Poets' Theatre, and the Staging of *Finnegans Wake*', *Éire-Ireland: a Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 44; no. 3/4 (2009), 99.

suggesting that even hidebound Bostonians were game for outrageous cultural critique. An aggressively experimental work adapted for the stage, the play undermines long-standing misconceptions about the relationship between high modernism to its audiences."<sup>21</sup> Manning's adaptation would see further productions in Paris and Dublin to critical acclaim.

More insights were offered about Manning two years later by José Laners in her essay 'Desperations and Ineffectuals: Mary Manning's Gate Plays of the 1930s.'<sup>22</sup> Laners' piece describes Manning's plays of the 1930s very well but she offers an unusual supposition when she states: "Deirdre Bair suggests that Manning had an 'infatuation' with Beckett. Connie Milgrew, whom Desmond notes is 'infatuated with [...] Terrence Killigrew', can be seen as Manning's self-portrait...Like Connie, Manning struggled to reconcile her feelings for a man who was economically and psychologically in no position to marry anyone with her need for financial and personal security."<sup>23</sup> I disagree with Laners with this assertion, as Manning at that point was very heavily involved in the Gate social scene and, in the words of Mac Liammóir, "worshipped success", so it was unlikely she would be besotted with her

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<sup>21</sup> Paige Reynolds, 101.

<sup>22</sup> In David Clare, Des Lally, and Patrick Lonergan (eds), *The Gate Theatre, Dublin: inspiration and craft* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> José Laners, 105.

penniless childhood friend.<sup>24</sup> The pair would have a brief affair in 1936, but Manning at that time was heart-broken after a failed romance with novelist Anthony Powell.<sup>25</sup>

The most comprehensive and thorough scholarly work to date on the Gate Theatre has come in the form of The Gate Theatre Research Network – an international group of scholars and academics led by Ondřej Pilný, Ruud van den Beuken and Ian R. Walsh. The aim of the group is “to study the Dublin Gate Theatre in various international contexts by analysing its engagement with cosmopolitanism, cultural exchange and identity formation.”<sup>26</sup> This group has conducted several conferences and symposiums and, in the last two years, published two notable works on the Gate: *Cultural Convergence: The Dublin Gate Theatre, 1928–1960* by Ondřej Pilný, Ruud van den Beuken and Ian R. Walsh, and *Avant-garde nationalism at the Dublin Gate Theatre, 1928-1940* by Ruud van den Beuken. In his Introduction to his book Van Den Beuken outlined his concept of avant garde nationalism in respect of the early history of the Gate Theatre: "The Gate Theatre's approach should therefore be interpreted as a mode of avant-garde nationalism: an attempt to provide an indirect catalyst to national identity formation through a form of self-reflexive 'othering' juxtaposing international

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<sup>24</sup> Micheál Mac Liammóir, 162.

<sup>25</sup> I failed to locate the reference cited by Laniers in Bair's biography of Beckett, although I have the original version and it may be included in revised editions.

<sup>26</sup> See GTRN website <https://www.ru.nl/rich/networks/gate-theatre-research-network/>

drama with its own native cultural products to highlight Irish unicity."<sup>27</sup> He lists Manning in tandem with Denis Johnston when he describes the debt the theatre's young writers owed to the Dublin Drama League in exposing these writers to the European avant garde that helped shape their respective aesthetic: "Denis Johnston expressed his artistic indebtedness to the Dublin Drama League's (DDL) introduction of avant-garde drama to Dublin, while Mary Manning, another young Gate playwright starred in DDL productions."<sup>28</sup>

In the book, Van Den Beuken also assesses Manning and her role with *Motley*, noting Manning's support for new playwrights: "Manning elaborated on the promotion of new playwrights in various editorials: in April/May 1933 issue she expressed the 'continued devotion of the theatre to all that is best in national drama' and averred that it 'fostered the cause of drama in general and of Irish drama in particular.' Manning felt that the Gate could pride itself on its many early discoveries."<sup>29</sup> He also considered Manning's post-colonial sensibilities via her editorship: "Manning employed her editorials to reflect on Ireland's post-colonialist condition with a remarkably multifaceted perspective, observing that 'Ireland is in transition; the nation is finding its soul. New forces are at work; new ideas are

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<sup>27</sup> Ruud Van Den Beuken, *Avant Garde Nationalism at the Dublin Gate Theatre, 1928-40* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2021), 23.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>29</sup> Van Den Beuken, 63-64.

crowding in upon us. At the same time many ancient things that are a vital part of our nationality are coming once again to be honoured.' Manning not only believed that this confluence of past and present was highly productive, but also that the Gate was to be a conduit for its progress".<sup>30</sup> Van Den Beuken also presents an assessment of *Youth's the Season-?* which he believes "Depicts the decline of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy and their attempts to craft an alternative teleology in the face of their looming obsolescence in the new societal order."<sup>31</sup> He also considers the ending of the play as a harbinger of demise for the post-colonial Irish protestant middle-class: "[The play] features an equally comical representation of the youngest generation of the bourgeois, whose nihilistic bohemianism proves to be readily complicit with neo imperialism, the final scene of *Youth's the Season-?* ends on a much darker note as it violently renounces the notion that the ascendancy had any meaningful legacy in an independent Ireland".<sup>32</sup>

Manning consistently re-invented herself artistically through her lifetime. In a career that spanned over fifty years she was active in both Ireland and America and had direct involvement with three generations of leading artistic talent from W.B. Yeats through to Jim Sheridan. Her life represents a constant quest for aesthetic excellence and new forms of expression. She began her career as an actress with the

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

Abbey Theatre, she was a key player in the burgeoning avant garde Irish film movement in the early 1930s. At the same time, she composed the unlikeliest hit play for the Gate Theatre offering a voice as new and fresh to the Dublin theatre scene as the voices Synge had brought from Connemara thirty years previously. She proved herself a shrewd and competent editor of an important literary periodical. After her marriage to Mark DeWolfe Howe she moved to America and wrote a critically acclaimed novel that was an elaborate critique of the rising pro-fascist movement in Ireland. In the 1950s Manning co-founded and was the central motivating energy behind the influential Poets' Theatre – which proved to be a stepping stone in the careers of many American poets and artists. Following the death of her husband she returned to the Dublin theatre with a literary adaptation of the Frank O'Connor novel *The Saint and Mary Kate*, that was staged by the Abbey in 1968. Three years later her play *Ah Well, It Won't Be Long Now* was the biggest commercial success of the 1971 Dublin Theatre Festival. Manning then and then collaborating with the agit-prop avant garde hipsters at the Project Arts Centre. In her eighty-first year she penned a one-woman show that was staged at Harvard and at the Dublin Writers' Centre and the Galway International Women's Festival. All throughout this time she provided criticism and journalism for publications in America, the magazine *Hibernia* and *The Irish Times*.

This thesis will be structured chronologically: Chapter One will examine Mary Manning's early life and the influences that led her to become a playwright. It will

deal with the inception of Dublin's Gate Theatre, and its activities in the years between 1928-1931. Within this context the chapter will feature an analysis of Manning's first play for the Gate, *Youth's the Season-?*, and consider its uniqueness both as an original voice and within the matrix of Manning's post-colonial perspective.

The second chapter will examine the Gate Theatre's literary periodical, *Motley*, which ran for two years between 1932 and 1934. This 'little magazines' was an important organ in the development of Irish literature in that period as it not only reflected the artistic and literary zeitgeist, but it was a vehicle through which writers, and in particular young writers, could find a means for artistic expression. Along with providing the oxygen of exposure, it served as a mouthpiece, offering important social commentary in the nascent Irish state. Growing in confidence with successive numbers, *Motley* addressed important issues not only in the artistic realm but addressed key questions of the day including the impact of the Censorship of Publications Act (1929).

Chapter Three will examine how the German Expressionist movement and contemporary European cinema, in particular the work of Sergei Eisenstein, had a profound influence on Manning and her contemporaries, and how she incorporated Expressionistic ideas and stylistic conventions into her first play *Youths The Season-?*. This chapter will also consider a new, independent group of film enthusiasts who created the first truly independent Irish film productions utilising exclusively Irish cast and crew.

Manning emigrated from Ireland to America in 1935 and this period saw a completely new shift in direction with the publication of the novel *Mount Venus* in 1938. Chapter Four will extensively examine this rare text, which is influenced by two of her contemporaries Elizabeth Bowen and Kate O'Brien, and more transnational in theme than her earlier work as it deals with the Spanish Civil War and the burgeoning pro-fascist movement in Ireland in the 1930s. I will argue that Manning, growing more aesthetically robust and ambitious with this work, transcends any notion of provincialism by embracing the Spanish situation. Within this context we can see that Manning engages with the international pro-democracy and anti-fascist movement prevalent among many distinguished writers of that period.

Chapter Five focuses on Manning's work with the American experimental theatre company Poets' Theatre which she co-founded and of which she was a leading member for over a decade in the 1950s. This chapter will assess the crucial role she had in an organisation which was to have a significant influence on post World War Two American letters. The group, which was a hive of ideas and avant-garde expression, nurtured creativity and provided a platform for many artists who would continue to distinguished careers. I will also assess how Manning successfully introduced an Irish perspective into its creative and intellectual agenda culminating in her own successful stage adaptation of Joyces' *Finnegans Wake*.

Chapter six will consider Manning's development as a writer through her second novel *Lovely People* published in 1953. I will consider the post World War II



social and political context emerging at that time and the difficulties it presented writers and artists, especially in light of the House Committee of Un-American Activities. I will consider how Manning successfully produced a meaningful and incisive evaluation of the position of women in societal terms in conjunction with a sophisticated critique of consumerism and the anti-Communist hysteria that gripped America in those years.

The final chapter is concerned with Manning's ten-year return to Dublin from 1967, and the final phase in her artistic development. This period saw Manning break with her avant-garde practice with more mainstream and commercial ventures. These experiments proved to be less than fulfilling, and it was only with returning to edgier and younger collaborators that Manning achieved a personal and professional success with her final Dublin theatre venture.

The thesis is capped by a short epilogue where I will explain a practical project I undertook with a production of Manning's final original work which she wrote in her eighty-first year – a one-woman piece dealing with the early life of Rose Fitzgerald-Kennedy entitled *Go, Lovely Rose*. I will outline the processes and creative thinking behind the production explaining the dramaturgical and scenography of the piece. Using the reviews that followed the production of that play as evidence, I will argue that Manning still holds a relevance today to our contemporary audience and she remains an important voice which warrants further exploration both practically, in terms of dramaturgy, and academically via research and publication.

## **Bright young things – Manning, the Gate Theatre and *Youth's the Season-?* as a postcolonial text.**

“We all revile it and run it down and run away from it – but we always drift back sometime. Dublin never lets a Dubliner go.” *Youth's the Season-?*, 398.

On 7<sup>th</sup> December 1931, the Gate Theatre premiered *Youth's the Season-?*, a play that dealt with subject matter that had been largely ignored by writers and playwrights up to that point, that being the decline of the Ascendancy class within the newly established Irish Free State. The play was the first serious attempt to investigate and present the psyche of the former ruling elite within the postcolonial context and an assessment of their position within the new state. This chapter will examine Manning's Anglo-Irish background and how these influences helped shape her aesthetic, how the play arrived at an opportune moment for the venue and complimented its adventurous programming, and how, through the play, Manning created a sophisticated critique of colonialism and presented an incisive portent for the future of the Anglo-Irish.

Many playwrights attest that one of the first things they look for in creating a drama is the inciting incident.<sup>1</sup> This is the event which generates the narrative action of a play or inspires an element of characterisation. The inciting incident in *Mary*

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<sup>1</sup> I first came across the idea of the inciting incident from playwright Stephen Jeffreys at a series of playwrighting workshops I was involved with at London's Royal Court Theatre in October 2003. For more detailed discussion of the inciting incident in dramatic structure see: Kenneth Thorpe Rowe, *Write that play* (Chicago: Funk and W, 1968).

Manning's dramatic and highly eventful three-year sojourn with the Gate theatre was the moment in May 1930 when she sat down to write a review of Hilton Edwards's production of *The Witch* by Wiers Jansen. The best way to get the attention of a theatre director is to give him or her a bad review – or perhaps it may have been a stratagem on her behalf. By her own account Manning's review was "quite brash", mentioning "two drunken seagulls".<sup>2</sup> Duly summoned to the Gate by Edwards and Mac Liammóir to explain her impudence, she was threatened with physical torment by Edwards who told her he would: "Like to take a whip and lash you across the shoulders!"<sup>3</sup> Regardless, the trio found they hit it off, and Manning was duly dispatched with a you-can-do-better challenge. She accepted that gauntlet and a year later, with a little help from her childhood friend Samuel Beckett, she submitted the first draft of her dazzling first play *Youth's the Season-?*

Mary Manning was born in 1906 in Dublin to a middle-class Protestant family. Her childhood was unconventional but nevertheless a happy one, and she had a strongly feminine influenced upbringing: her father and uncle, the two main male role models, were absent for large periods of time though they left a strong impression on the young girl. In later life Manning described learning to swim on a summer family holiday in August 1914, at Caragh Lake in County Kerry when she was eight years old: "Uncle Louis, who was a captain in the British Navy, had a grey pointed beard

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Manning, 'Mary Manning', *Enter Certain Players: Edwards-MacLiammoir and the Gate, 1928-1978*, ed. Peter Luke (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1978), 33.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Boys: A Double Biography* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1994), 63.

and a very stern expression which totally belied him. He was a most satirical character, always cracking jokes and making everyone else smile but never smiling himself. I adored him. My father, also a joker, was, like Uncle Louis, on leave. He was in the colonial service and only came home every two years. He was stationed in Nigeria, then known as 'the white man's grave'"<sup>4</sup> With close family members engaged as senior figures in the British colonial service the young lady was raised in a household with strong Anglo-Irish Unionist values. Manning recalled in the same article that the family idyll that year was interrupted by the arrival of telegrams which summoned both men to return to their respective posts: "It was the 4<sup>th</sup> August and war had been declared between Germany and England. A delirium of packing, tears and farewells followed and they left to catch the earliest possible train to Killarney."<sup>5</sup> This story was to have a tragic conclusion for the young girl: "My father was wounded in the Cameroons in West Africa during the war and he died of wounds in 1918. We didn't see much of my father. I was only eleven when he died."<sup>6</sup>

The Anglo-Irish Protestant influence was to remain a prominent feature in Manning's early life and social development, she was acutely aware of the significance of the Irish literary revival and Cultural Nationalism. Benedict Anderson offers a

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Manning, 'I remember it Well - Some Bits of Autobiography', *The Journal of Irish Literature*, Vol. XV, No.1, ed. Robert Hogan, Gordon Henderson & Kathleen Danaher, 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Manning, 'Let's be Dublin. A Conversation between Mary Manning and Mary Rose Callaghan', *The Journal of Irish Literature*, Vol XV, No.1, ed. Robert Hogan, Gordon Henderson & Kathleen Danaher, 3.

broad definition of Nationalism as “the spontaneous distillation of a complex ‘crossing’ of discreet historical forces; but that, once created, they become ‘modular,’ capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations.”<sup>7</sup> The political vacuum that existed in Ireland following the fall of Charles Stewart Parnell in 1891 compelled people to look for new means of expression.<sup>8</sup> Underground movements concerned with political revolution co-existed, complimented and frequently clashed with movements concerned with cultural revolution. A leading figure in the Irish cultural revival was the Anglo-Irish landowner Lady Augusta Gregory. Widowed in 1892 at the age of 40, Gregory was very much in demand in the London social scene and had many influential literary friends, including Henry James. Nevertheless, Gregory decided to devote herself almost entirely to the matter of Irish culture specifically about ancient Ireland and ancient Irish writing. She soon found allies in the form of poet William Butler Yeats and playwright John Millington Synge, both from Anglo-Irish stock. Together, they sought to reconnect with a sense of the nobility of ancient Ireland, believing it an essential ingredient not only for the building of a contemporary Irish culture but also of a new political awareness of the separateness of the nation. As

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<sup>7</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities – Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York: Verso, 2016), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Stewart Parnell (1846 –1891) was an Irish nationalist leader who served as a Member of Parliament from 1875 to 1891. He was disgraced in a divorce scandal, when it was revealed he was having a long-term affair with a married woman.

Richard Kearney notes, "the ideals of both the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and the Gaelic peasantry could find common cause in a shared reliving of their ancient Celtic heritage."<sup>9</sup> They looked to folk tales and the oral tradition for their nourishment and inspiration and believed in the nobility of the ordinary people, the guardians of that tradition. Declan Kiberd recognises a certain irony: "Protestants like Hyde, Lady Gregory and Yeats went about collecting legends of healing wells and peasant miracles the Catholic clergy was resolutely attempting to extirpate these beliefs."<sup>10</sup> They founded the Irish Literary Society and later the Abbey Theatre, creating what Seamus Deane considers "one of the last flowerings of European romanticism and one of the first essays on what has been called international modernism."<sup>11</sup> Synge expressed their thinking in his introduction to *The Playboy of the Western World*: "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, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned into bricks."<sup>12</sup> Manning overlapped with the revivalist tradition and encountered many of the personalities of the movement in her formative years.

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Kearney, *Transitions: narratives in modern Irish culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 11.

<sup>10</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 25.

<sup>11</sup> Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), 166.

<sup>12</sup> JM Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World* (Dublin: Maunsell, 1911), v.

Molesworth Hall, the Anglo-Irish cultural hub and the venue which saw the premieres of Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen* and *Riders to the Sea*, was described by Manning as having a profound influence on her early aesthetic development: "During my childhood and throughout my teenage years a great deal of my social life was centred in the austere godliness of the Molesworth Hall. I never ran up those twisty stone steps without feelings of the most pleasant anticipation. Whether it was to be sales of work, bazaars, wolf cub concerts, amateur dramatics, the opening of the Water Colour Society, or, dancing classes, something interesting is bound to happen."<sup>13</sup> Manning was not only very proud of her Anglo-Irish identity and religion but she used it as a launch pad for the development of her artistic sensibilities; she confidently recognised her place amid that social class and tradition, and it makes sense that a decade or so later she would attempt to give that social class expression through her theatrical work: "The people that thronged the sales, the concerts and drama groups were from a class which produced persons like George Bernard Shaw, the talented Yeats family, the Synges, Sarah Purser and the Orpens, all of whom contributed in no small way to the arts and to the intellectual life of this city."<sup>14</sup>

Another major influence on young Manning was her maternal grandmother who lived in a large Victorian house in Killiney: "I don't know why I loved my grandmother so much. I used to stay with her so much. On winter evenings, I'd love

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Manning, 'Then is now', *The Christian Science Monitor* (November 24<sup>th</sup> 1982), 21.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

to go down and spend a weekend in Killiney with Granny. And if you can remember what Killiney was like then. Nothing was happening! Nothing! There wasn't a thing to do. So we used to sit in the evenings, reading. I would be reading Dickens and she would be reading Trollope. Each on either side of the fireplace. Quietly. There was gaslight downstairs, but candles upstairs."<sup>15</sup> The late summer ritual was what the Manning siblings called 'Picking for the Poor', where the family gathered the end of season berries which they "made into pots of jam and brought to the nearest outpost of the Salvation Army."<sup>16</sup> Although amidst this rural idyll and Christian toil the political crisis was never far away: "This, mind you, was long ago before Ireland became a nation once again, and even in this pastoral neighbourhood we heard too often the sound of distant firing which meant an ambush, or a muffled explosion, reminding us that Ireland was in the process of becoming Eire."<sup>17</sup> Throughout Manning's childhood the family were comfortable, having within their means the employment of a governess, Ms Luggett, who they nicknamed 'Luggie', for young Mary and her two siblings John and Christabel respectively two and four years her junior. Luggie seems to have been a formidable influence for Manning growing up and she frequently took her to Galleries when she was young. Although the family

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Manning, 'Let's Be Dublin', 14.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Manning, 'The Hand of Love', *The Christian Science Monitor* (September 5<sup>th</sup> 1979), 20.

<sup>17</sup> Manning, 'The Hand of Love', 20.



were not wealthy they were comfortable, occasionally taking in lodgers for extra income.

Following the death of her husband, Susan Manning was left with a meagre army pension and took employment running a tea and cake shop in Dawson Street called *The Sod of Turf*. Although the shop was well known as a literary haunt whose regular customers included George Russell, it was very much on the authorities' radar as: "well-known to be a haunt of 'Shinners' at night and was constantly being raided by British troops. My mother used to leave food out for 'the poor boys on the run', it was always eaten."<sup>18</sup> It is touching to note a sympathetic and humanitarian sentiment from Susan Manning offering tacit support for the rebels made more praiseworthy given the fact that she had an early brush with sectarianism in her early twenties when her engagement to James Murphy, son of William Martin Murphy was broken off at the insistence of his parents since she was a protestant.<sup>19</sup> Although religion seems to be of central importance to Susan Manning's life there did however feature much indecision and experimentation: "during her early forties, having tried a great many forms of religion (mostly nonconformist), eventually discovered the Quakers. She remained a devoted member of the Society of Friends in Dublin until her death."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Manning, 'Some bits of Autobiography', 33.

<sup>19</sup> William Martin Murphy (1845 – 1919) was an Irish businessman, newspaper publisher and politician. A member of parliament representing Dublin from 1885 to 1892, he became an anti-Parnellite. He was Ireland's first press baron and the leading promoter of tram development. For more detail on the engagement – see Mary Manning, 'Let's be Dublin'.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Manning, *I'll see you later*, Manning Collection, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, 9.

Manning's feminist and Anglo-Irish influenced childhood was further reinforced upon her enrolment to the prestigious Alexandra College with her fees paid by a wealthy Aunt. One of Manning's teachers at Alexandra was the writer and historian Dorothy Macardle, who she recalled, "taught English like an Angel".<sup>21</sup> Manning later described the predominant atmosphere around the college and the sense of political malaise that existed amidst the carnage of the various conflicts at that time: "Politically the college was British – well, Anglo-Irish to the core although there were pockets of rebellion, mostly around Macardle. The world outside consisted of ghastly people called 'Shinners' but the truth is we were innocently non-political. We went on through those troubled years as if history were centred around the Tudors and Stuarts. We rode our bicycles through ambushes and got pushed into shelters when the British were flying and heard the British tanks patrolling the streets at night and paid no heed."<sup>22</sup> Macardle exerted a significant theatrical influence on Manning as she regularly took her young charges to see performances at the Gaiety Theatre and other venues in Dublin. As a teenager, Macardle directed Manning in a school

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Dorothy Macardle (1889-1958) was an Irish writer, novelist, playwright and historian. Her book, *The Irish Republic*, is one of the more frequently cited narrative accounts of the Irish War of Independence and its aftermath, particularly for its exposition of the anti-treaty viewpoint.

<sup>21</sup> Manning, 'Some bits of Autobiography', 31.

<sup>22</sup> Manning, 'Some bits of Autobiography', 33.

production of *The Countess Cathleen*, the young company benefitting from a rehearsal at Macardle's home presided over by Yeats himself:

The epic triumph came when Mr Yeats himself came to give us hints on our acting. For this occasion Madame MacBride [Macardle's Landlady] brought up a large plum cake and tea was brewed in Macardles's little kitchenette, while Madame poured tea with an enigmatic smile. Meanwhile the poet himself concentrated on the girl who was playing the Angel...It was the wings, it seemed, that worried Mr Yeats, "Just a gentle flapping should do it," he suggested. He then demonstrated and knocked two flowerpots off the windowsill. "Oh, Willie, Willie," sighed Madame. Then we all sat around on the floor in a semi-circle, munching cake and staring bemused at the poet who was generous enough to read some of the more difficult passages and interpret them for us.<sup>23</sup>

Despite this staunchly Anglo-Irish environment, young Manning's curious mind was nevertheless reflecting on Home Rule, the political situation in her native country and the relationship with England. The teenager felt particularly drawn to the figure of Parnell, albeit in a less than appropriate manner: "When I was at Alexandra College my friend Julia and I used to frequent the Gallery, both being artistically inclined. At that time I was writing an essay on Parnell and wished to gaze upon the great man's portrait. I was infatuated with the uncrowned king and read everything about him I could lay my hands on. How I wished I could have laid hands on him, in every sense! If only I'd been born sooner; I would have tended him in his hour of need, I would have shared his prison cell."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>24</sup> Manning, 'Some bits of Autobiography', 29.

After Alexandra College, Manning went to train briefly at Art College in London, and then at the Abbey School of Acting under Sarah Allgood's tutelage. In her one act play *Drama Class* she provides a wry observation of the Allgood methodology of acting training, far removed from the Stanislavski model, requiring the student to perfect the art of Keening, and with delightful cameos from Yeats and O'Casey. She went on to perform in productions at the Abbey, cast mainly in small roles, and then she served as Ria Mooney's understudy on an English tour. In her early twenties she began experimenting with writing, and a job in a Dublin library followed. In 1928 she was appointed Theatre Critic for the *Irish Independent*, which, in turn, led her to the Gate Theatre which was founded that same year. The following year Manning no doubt took advantage of her connections with *The Sod of Turf* and began to write film reviews for George Russell's *The Irish Statesman* whose editorial policy was sympathetic to the Anglo-Irish and frequently reached out to Unionists in the north to allay their fears of the Free State.



Mary Manning at twenty-three. Image copyright Howard Gotlieb Center, Boston University.

The Gate Theatre was founded in 1928 by Hilton Edwards and Micheál Mac Liammóir and it played its first two seasons at the recently established 102-seat Peacock Theatre. The pair envisaged a theatre “for the production of plays of unusual interest, and for the purpose of experimenting in methods of presentation free from the conventionalities of commercial theatre.”<sup>25</sup> They were particularly interested in what they regarded as the best in new and experimental European and American work along with home-grown new Irish plays. They modelled the new venue on the London theatre of the same name established by Peter Godfrey. The daring and range of both the production quality and programming of Edwards and Mac Liammóir was evident from the outset, with the debut production of *Peer Gynt* a bold statement of intent. The production featured a cast of twenty-eight actors in speaking roles squeezed onto a stage that was 21 feet (6.3 metres) in length and 16 feet (4.8 metres) in diameter.<sup>26</sup> Christopher Morash considers this opening production as reflective of the audacity and confidence that would soon become the venue’s trademark: “With its huge cast and multiple set changes, [*Peer Gynt*] was typical of the bravado Edwards and Mac Liammóir would bring to Irish theatre.”<sup>27</sup> This production was Edwards’

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<sup>25</sup> Gate Theatre Manifesto, Gate Collection. Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections at Northwestern University Libraries, Chicago.

<sup>26</sup> Details of cast obtained from *Peer Gynt*, Gate theatre original playbill, Gate Theatre Collection, Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections at Northwestern University Libraries, Chicago. Details of stage size from Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre 1601-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 178.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre 1601-2000*, 179.

debut as a director and the achievement of his imagination and craftsmanship was made even more astonishing given the fact that he played the title role. Seeking to use the intimate nature of the space to their advantage he attempted to use design elements to envelope the audience in the theatrical experience. Bulmer Hobson explained: "The first thing we did was to "remove" our back wall and give ourselves apparently unlimited space. This we did by painting it a neutral blue-grey and flooding it with light from eight 500-watt lanterns, thus achieving an illusion of shadowless and infinite sky."<sup>28</sup> This would have given the audience a visual panoramic impression creating a sensation that the playing space was larger and grander with the audience remaining in immediate proximity to the action.

The result was a critical success with the production receiving a clutch of very positive reviews. *The New Statesman* commented: "The Dublin Gate Theatre was bold, and was justified of its boldness in opening its first season with *Peer Gynt* working in the narrow limits of the peacock stage mastered its difficulties triumphantly and, all things considered, gave us a performance, better than anything seen in Dublin for many a long day"<sup>29</sup> Whereas *The Evening Mail* recognised the originality of Edward's lighting and stagecraft: "The lighting effects were really skilfully produced, and, with

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<sup>28</sup> Bulmer Hobson, *The Gate Theatre, Dublin. Edited by Bulmer Hobson. [With illustrations, including portraits.]* (Dublin: Gate Theatre 1934), 24.

John Bulmer Hobson (1883 – 1969) was a leading member of the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) before the Easter Rising in 1916. In later life he was a civil servant and author of books on economics and the arts.

<sup>29</sup> C.P.C, *The Irish Statesman*. October 20<sup>th</sup> 1928. From the Gate Theatre collection.

just the barest minimum of scenery, stage impression of a very high order was achieved.”<sup>30</sup> This debut production was not only a statement of intent from the duo but it also formed a blueprint for the modernist, avant garde dramaturgy and scenography that would be a feature of the Gate’s productions for years to come, along with a hard-nosed theatrical nous developed from years of practical experience, as Morash explains:

Three elements of this original production – simple, flexible geometric sets, strong colours in the lighting and lavish costumes – were to establish a template for future productions. From the very outset, the Gate had a modernist appreciation of design, which the Abbey clearly lacked. At the same time Edwards and Mac Liammóir never lost a more traditional sense of what it meant to work in the theatre, learned in the West End and on tour with Mac [Master]; they respected craftsmanship, showmanship, and business acumen as much as artistry.<sup>31</sup>

*Peer Gynt* was soon followed by another bold statement with the staging of Wilde’s *Salome*, which had been proscribed by the British Lord Chamberlain’s office, the very year the Censorship of Publications Bill was passing through the Dáil. Not wishing to shirk any publicity angle, the production’s playbill front page proudly announced: “This is the first public production in these Islands.”<sup>32</sup> The early success of the Gate Theatre was largely due to a combination of a strong definitive aesthetic and production style and centralised, focused and determined leadership, a fact

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<sup>30</sup> T.G.K. *The Evening Mail*, 15<sup>th</sup> October 1928. From the Gate Theatre collection.

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre*, 179.

<sup>32</sup> *Salome* original playbill, Gate Theatre Collection, Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections at Northwestern University Libraries, Chicago.

noticed by Denis Johnston: "The explanation of this success in Dublin lies in the fact that the work of Edwards and Mac Liammóir extended far beyond any expert handling of an interminable play by Ibsen, but provided our stage with certain elements our stage had lacked since 1908: namely stylish professional direction of works of international interest rather than folksey, poetical and political appeal, together with pictorial design in scenery, costumes and lighting, and – perhaps most significant of all – the personal continuity and supervision of a small resident full-time management."<sup>33</sup>

In the late 1920s the time was ripe for something new and fresh in Irish theatre. The Abbey, enjoying financial stability through the government state subsidy, was becoming increasingly creatively inert and steadily more conventional in its values, as Peter Kavanagh explains: "The government subsidy was having a subtle effect on the Abbey Theatre's policy. It was turning it into an institution as conservative as the National Gallery or the National Museum. The Abbey was now secure against failure and was gradually becoming conscious of its national importance in a bourgeois sense."<sup>34</sup> This new self-opinion may have been figurative in the decision of the Abbey's management to reject two important plays within a matter of weeks which

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<sup>33</sup> Denis Johnston, *Orders and desecrations: the life of the playwright Denis Johnston edited by Rory Johnston; with a foreword by Hugh Leonard* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1992), 52.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Kavanagh, *Story of the Abbey*, (New York: Devin-Adair Co, 1950), 148-9.



would have profound consequences not only on the Abbey but also the Gate: Sean O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie* and Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says No!*

Originally entitled *Shadowdance* and initially intended for the Abbey, the rejection of Denis Johnston's first play was accompanied with a somewhat fortuitous cover note, as he recalled in his memoir:

'The Old Lady Says "No!"' was written by somebody on a sheet of paper attached to the front of the first version when it came back to me from the Abbey. Whether it was intended to inform me that the play had been rejected or whether it was being offered as an alternative to my own coy little name for the play is a question that I never liked to ask. So it remained thereafter as the title of the work – a definite improvement for which I have always been grateful.<sup>35</sup>

Yeats offered some constructive feedback to the young playwright: "'I liked your play very much, but it has one or two flaws. The scenes are too long.' Then he thought for a bit, and finally he said, 'There are too many scenes.'"<sup>36</sup> The play was immediately accepted by Edwards and Mac Liammóir and the Abbey offered Johnston some consolation by supplying a £50 donation towards a production with the Gate. *The Old Lady Says "No!"* begins as a parody of Dion Boucicault's play *Robert Emmet* (1884): a character playing Emmet comes onstage in melodramatic fashion to woo his true love Sarah Curran. The Emmet character is subsequently arrested by British Redcoats who over zealously beat him over the head with a rifle butt and knock him unconscious. The actors feign surprise, the houselights come up and an actor appeals for a doctor

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<sup>35</sup> Denis Johnston, *Orders and Desecrations: the life of the playwright Denis Johnston edited by Rory Johnston; with a foreword by Hugh Leonard* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1992), 61.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

in the house. One duly emerges from the auditorium to treat the actor, informs the audience that the production cannot continue, then disappears backstage to locate a rug to cover the actor. The seemingly concussed actor/Emmet then wanders through the streets of 1920s Dublin to locate his love. During his odyssey he encounters latter-day rebels, frivolous youth, petty bourgeois conservatives, Henry Gratton and Cathleen ni Houlihan transformed into a foul-mouthed hag of a flower seller.

As a sophisticated parody of Irish martyrdom, Emmet finds himself in conflict with the very people he would liberate. The play is an elaborate examination of the contrast between myth and reality and the hypocrisy of contemporary politics and societal materialism. At the close of the play the doctor returns to the stage and as the curtain closes he motions the auditorium with a finger to pursed lips in a gesture communing the audience in a bond of mutual secrecy. The production was a triumph with the *Irish Times* considering it “a fantastic review” and concentrating on the satirical humour of the piece: “Men, women, manners, politics, art, work, drawing rooms, pubs, streets, strumpets, policemen, patriots, all these are touched with a satirical lash.”<sup>37</sup> But the real victory for the Gate was the international acclaim the play received with the *New York Times* declaring:

Expressionism has at last found its way into Irish drama and the responsible author is a young Irish barrister who, for ethical reasons, conceals his identity under the pseudonym of ‘E. W. Tocher.’ The play, which has the elusive title ‘The Old Lady Says No!’, is Mr Tocher’s first effort, and it has fallen to the good fortune of the Gate theatre to stage it and to achieve thereby another triumph of production. To do justice to this play would require more space than is at my

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<sup>37</sup> The Irish Revue, *The Irish Times*, July 5<sup>th</sup> 1929.

disposal. It is such a complete study of conditions as they exist in Dublin today, presented in expressionistic form, that it is difficult to dwell on any particular phase of the author's work.<sup>38</sup>

Edwards and Mac Liammóir immediately recognised that they had hit the jackpot with the play: "Hilton and I were happy as we sat among the strawberries and champagne in the house of Denis's parents after the first night, for this was the end of our shop window days – and we knew it. We went home from the party on foot, refusing lifts from a dozen people – what need to hurry to bed on a night that ought to have gone on for ever?"<sup>39</sup> It was exactly the platform the pair needed to build the theatre and proceed with increased verve and assurance.

The success of *The Old Lady Says "No!"*, saw the theatre ride a wave of energy, swagger and confidence and the first season in the new Rotunda building witnessed the production of no fewer than twenty plays. As Christopher Fitz-Simon notes, the shrewdness of the programming and the quality of the productions were of top rank: "the performances and the production were seen to be more polished than what the Dublin public were accustomed to in similar plays on tour from the West End."<sup>40</sup> Despite the artistic success, by the end of the first season in the new building the company had run into a financial impasse and was rescued by the intervention of the

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<sup>38</sup> J.J. Hayes, 'Expressionistic Dublin', *The New York Times*, August 11<sup>th</sup> 1929.

<sup>39</sup> Micheál Mac Liammóir, *All for Hecuba (New and revised edition with extra material.) [With plates, including portraits.]* (London: Methuen & Co, 1946), 81.

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Boys* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1994), 64.

wealthy Earl of Longford in December 1930; Longford was elected chairman of the board of governors the following year. The intervention of the Longfords – while lending the theatre respectability and providing much needed capital - was also very much a double-edged sword for Edwards and Mac Liammóir. The directors became increasingly frustrated with what they perceived as interference and amateurism from Longford and his wife Christine, as Fitz-Simmons notes, “The presence of the civilised, well intentioned and industrious Longfords created the first real tensions in the life of the Gate - tensions which were to explode within five years, with lasting consequences for everybody.”<sup>41</sup> Matters would come to a head in due course, but, in the meantime, an entente-cordial developed between the directors and their patrons. The sheer volume of the output of production in its fledgling six years is astonishing, Bulmer Hobson noted the production tally and variety of work offered by the theatre:

Between October, 1928, and June, 1934, the Dublin Gate Theatre presented eighty-nine productions, as follows:

Irish -	38
English -	15
American -	8
Russian -	7
French -	5
German -	4
Norwegian -	2

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

Spanish - 2

Hungarian, Czecho-Slovakian, Swedish, Danish, Italian, Greek, Chinese and international - 1 each.<sup>42</sup>

The atmosphere in and around the Gate was overtly chic and bohemian, with carefree energy and freethinking style being the order of the day. One senses a genuine well-intentioned buzz in the media of the time towards the theatre and its commotions. Manning was as enthusiastic about the Gate's social scene as she was about its creative output, frequently attending the parties, writing for the sketch evenings and, of course, enjoying the romance and intrigues. Manning conducted an affair in August 1934 with the ambitious young Anthony Powell, who broke Manning's heart, shunning her for the titled and eligible Violet Longford, sister of the Earl of Longford: "I went down to stay the weekend with the Longfords They were awfully nice to ask us down for the weekends, Edward and Christine, and there was Anthony Powell.<sup>43</sup> He fell in love with me. And followed me down to Dublin. And we had a very passionate love affair! The purest version! But still he was very much in love! And then the Longfords called me up and told me he was engaged to their sister Violet! And had been all along. I had a letter from him trying to explain things, the

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<sup>42</sup> Bulmer Hobson, *The Gate Theatre, Dublin*, 79.

<sup>43</sup> Anthony Powell (1905 – 2000) was an English novelist best known for his 12-volume work *A Dance to the Music of Time*, published between 1951 and 1975. In 1933 he had published three novels, *Afternoon Men* (1931), *Venusberg* (1932) and *From a View to a Death* (1933). He married Longford's sister Lady Violet Packenham in 1934.

usual! So that cut me up a lot.”<sup>44</sup> The affair was acknowledged by Powell’s biographer Hilary Spurling who described Manning as, “exuberantly charming, highly competitive and fiercely determined, she was the same age as Tony and a great deal more famous than he was in Dublin.”<sup>45</sup> Spurling assumed Manning was stoic following the break-up: “Mary Manning took the news of Tony’s defection in her stride. She sent a photo of herself with him (‘where you can behold what never was to be’), and some bracing advice: ‘Get down to it now and write something terrific, staggering, a knockout, anything you like, but disclose the bleeding heart shamelessly’”<sup>46</sup> Manning’s daughter Susan believes the affair had a major impact on her mother and considers the break-up with Powell a catalyst in her mother’s decision to emigrate to America.<sup>47</sup> Another curious affair Manning had at this time was with a writer tantalisingly named in interview only as P – O’D who “made violent love” to her but alas was too wild and too married for Manning.<sup>48</sup> It is all a very far cry from the censorious ‘de Valera’s Ireland’ we have become accustomed to associating with Ireland of the 1930s.

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<sup>44</sup> Mary Manning, ‘Let’s Be Dublin. A Conversation between Mary Manning and Mary Rose Callaghan’, 10-11.

<sup>45</sup> Hilary Spurling, *Anthony Powell: Dancing to the Music of Time* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017), 155.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>47</sup> Interview Susan Howe, New Haven, 22<sup>nd</sup> July, 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Mary Manning, ‘Let’s be Dublin’, 9. The writer in question is likely to be Peadar O’Donnell, who married Cumann na mBan officer Lile O’Donel on 25 June 1924.

The carefree atmosphere of the Gate was in sharp contrast to the more solemn atmosphere at the Abbey and may have seemed odd to the public given the direction in which the new state was leaning at that time. As Fitz-Simon notes: “the wider public, during that reactionary period of intensely inward-looking nationalism and puritanical Catholicism, may well have felt the ‘Bohemian’ atmosphere of the Gate was out of line with proper moral thinking.”<sup>49</sup> Yet Fitz-Simon rightly asserts the difficulty the public would have in any wider criticism of MacLiammóir and Edwards with the favoured trap of being ‘anti-national’, as the former was a self-taught Gaelic speaker who wrote plays in the native language and Edwards was a professed Catholic. In fact, a rather benevolent, almost affectionate attitude developed in the wider consciousness for the Gate and its founders. Edwards and MacLiammóir personal relationship as lovers, while conducted with utmost discretion, was tolerated and almost parodied by Dubliners, who referred to them as ‘the boys’ and dubbed the two leading Dublin theatres ‘Sodom and Beggorrhah’.<sup>50</sup>

*Youth's the Season-?* was a startling breath of fresh air when it was first produced in December 1931. In the play Manning saw the Ireland of the 1930s as stifling the promise of the younger generation. In his introduction to *Plays of Changing Ireland*, Curtis Canfield described *Youth's the Season-?* as being:

unique in being the only Irish play concerned with Dublin high life. Its cynicism and tone of disillusionment support the view that the ‘post-war

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<sup>49</sup> Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Boys*, 69.

<sup>50</sup> For further discussion on the Gate see Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Boys: A Double Biography*.

generation' was not a phenomenon confined to Ireland alone. The play is harsh and strident, partaking itself in some of the excesses of its young characters, none of whom has heard 'the merry call of the incense-breathing morn.' But it is an outspoken and daring play, and symptomatic of the modern feeling that the boundaries of theatrical subject matter are being extended in every direction.<sup>51</sup>

While plays of that time were mainly concerned with the Big Houses, Tenements or the Shebeens of the West of Ireland, here was a play about the young Dublin Protestant bright young things, displaced and disillusioned in a country trying to make sense of itself. Ian D'Alton believes a head-in-the-sand attitude towards national identity was commonplace among the post-revolutionary ascendancy class: "If political and cultural engagement, and the shape shifting that necessarily went with it, constituted one mode in which southern protestants dealt with the other Ireland, another was to ignore it and retreat into social exclusivity. Here identity did not really have to be addressed."<sup>52</sup> There had been an earlier attempt to deal with the Anglo-Irish Psyche in the 1920s with Lennox Robinson's *The Big House* (1926) which was performed at the Abbey. In this satire, Robinson contrasted the differences in attitude between Anglo-Irish gentry and the ordinary Irish in three acts and their different reactions to big events of 1918, 1921 and 1923. Following the burning of the big house

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<sup>51</sup> Curtis Cranfield (ed.), *Plays of Changing Ireland*, int. and notes Cranfield (London: The Macmillan Company, 1936), 198.

<sup>52</sup> Ian D'Alton, "'A Vestigial Population'" Perspectives on Southern Irish Protestants in the Twentieth Century', *Eire-Ireland, An Interdisciplinary Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol 44: 3 & 4 (2009), 19.



by rebels in the final act, daughter Kate Aycock tried to vocalise the Anglo-Irish defiance to the prevailing political mores:

Now I don't want to give up the "they" and "us," I glory in it. I was wrong, we were all wrong, in trying to find a common platform, in pretending we weren't different from every Pat and Mick in the village. We were ashamed of everything, ashamed of our birth, ashamed of our good education, ashamed of our religion, ashamed that we dined in the evenings and that we dressed for dinner, and after all, our shame didn't save us or we wouldn't be sitting here on the remnants of our furniture.<sup>53</sup>

The play was met with controversy in some quarters but *The Irish Statesman's* editor, George Russell, greeted it with enthusiasm, recognising it as an important contribution to the battle he had been fighting on behalf of the Anglo-Irish in his journal for several years:

We do not want uniformity in our culture or ideals, but the balancing of our diversities in a wide tolerance. The moment we had complete uniformity, our national life would be stagnant. We are glad to think we will never achieve that uniformity which is the dream of commonplace minds and we imagine many who saw *The Big House* felt a liberating thrill at the last outburst of Kate Alcock.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Lennox Robinson, *The Big House: Four Scenes in Its Life* (London: Methuen, 1928), 108-109.

<sup>54</sup> *The Irish Statesman*, 18 September 1926, 29.



Original programme for *Youth's the Season-?*. Original held in the Gate Collection, Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

Manning's play is an intriguing examination of the loves, lies and decadence of a generation disabled by apathy and inertia, with youthful energy and opportunity choked by blandness and conservatism. Influenced by the wit and craft of Wilde and Coward, Manning throws down a statement of stylistic intent in the opening of the play when Desmond (played by MacLiammóir) states:

DESMOND. Now let's gossip. Let's be vilely libellous. Let's be salacious and treacherous. Let's stab our best friends in the back. Let's betray our relations; let's wash our dirty linen in the drawing-room. In other words – let's be Dublin.<sup>55</sup>

The play draws out over three acts, and three consecutive days which sees the Milligan family and their friends in their "beautiful, if faded, Eighteenth Century" house, the

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<sup>55</sup> Mary Manning, *YTS*, Act 1, 234.

setting symptomatic of the decaying social position and insecurity of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy ruling class in the rapidly changing Ireland.<sup>56</sup>

Much is made of the “mirror above the mantelpiece”, a recurring motif within the first act as the characters search for something meaningful within themselves or each other.<sup>57</sup> With a comfortable urbane exposition, one might expect a comedy of manners, however a sense of discomfort is planted early with the audience as Desmond toys with his friend and neighbour Toots:

DESMOND. I woke up this morning with the most awful feeling of apprehension...something is going to happen in this house, something evil and overwhelming.

TOOTS. Don't Desmond! My nerves!

DESMOND. (Going over to the mirror). Don't take me seriously, darling. (He combs his hair carefully). What are the wild waves saying? My hair is quite nice I think – don't you Toots? I'll shoot myself when I go bald.<sup>58</sup>

Desmond, the youngest Millington boy, yearns to go to London to take up the offer of a designer job but knows his father will prevent him – preferring him to work in the unnamed family office. On the eve of his twenty-first birthday, Desmond is riddled with cynicism and insecurity; unsure of his position in the family home, he has a

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<sup>56</sup> Mary Manning, *YTS*, Act 1, Stage directions, 223.

<sup>57</sup> Mary Manning, *YTS*, Act 1, Stage directions, 233.

<sup>58</sup> Mary Manning, *YTS*, Act 1, 326.

fractious relationship with his siblings, and we soon get a broad hint of his homosexuality:

DESMOND. My dear!

GERALD. [irritably]. Can't you drop that effeminate cliché!

DESMOND. [unperturbed] my deah fellow! Afterall I am effeminate. It's my temperament. I was born that way.<sup>59</sup>

The key protagonist is the 'shambling literary loafer'<sup>60</sup> Terrence Killigrew (played in the first production by Hilton Edwards and then Denis Johnson in the 1933 revival), consistently expounding literary references and modelled on "a creep around Trinity at the time. Jasper somebody."<sup>61</sup> Killigrew is shadowed throughout the play by the enigmatic Horace Egosmith, who never speaks and constantly surveys the action of the play, allowing other characters to open up and share details. The character was suggested and modelled, as Manning recalls, on Samuel Beckett: "it was Sam who suggested that part. And the name – Egosmith."<sup>62</sup>

As the various characters are revealed, each one displays an element of alienation and various stereotypes are explored. Themes of nationality, post-colonialism, homosexuality, competitive masculinity, gender roles, social conformity,

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<sup>59</sup> Mary Manning, *YTS*, Act 1, 347.

<sup>60</sup> Mary Manning, *YTS*, Act 1, 330.

<sup>61</sup> Mary Manning, 'Let's Be Dublin. A Conversation between Mary Manning and Mary Rose Callaghan', 7.

<sup>62</sup> Mary Manning, *Let's Be Dublin*, 7.

marriage and feminine sexuality are all explored and usually satirised. Desmond's two siblings both seem to be seeking a surer sense of themselves through marriage: the detached science student Deirdre with the industrious Doctor Gerald Parr – and her sister Connie, whose love for Killigrew is unrequited and coveted by the colonial bureaucrat Harry Middleton. All three male characters provide a macho, competitive, alpha-male contest. Middleton, a ready motif for post-colonial Ireland, forcefully grabs and imposes his sexual will on the protesting Connie. Parr, manipulated by Desmond into flirting with other guests at the party and increasingly frustrated with Deirdre's lack of sexual accessibility, explodes in a shocking act of domestic violence. Killigrew's antagonistic behaviour and goading of the other party-goers culminates in the inevitable confrontation and subjugation from his rival, Middleton.

The second Act has a complete shift in form and sees Manning experimenting with a German expressionistic and European Avant-Garde style she so greatly admired and referenced in her film criticism. The influence of Johnson's *The Old Lady Says "No!"* can equally be sensed – as Manning outlines in her Act II stage directions:

The decoration is modern and flavours of the macabre. The gramophone is to the extreme left of the stage. A cocktail bar has been constructed on stage left. There are no chairs. A seat cut from the wall encircles the room. There is one light over the centre of the room, and another over the cocktail bar; the rest of the room is in shadow. The dancers keep within the circle of light in the centre. All through this act nobody appears to be listening to anyone else, except when there is actual friction between two people.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Mary Manning, YTS, Act 2 stage directions, 350.

A sense of claustrophobia and menace is enhanced by this staging. Act II is a party scene to celebrate Desmond's twenty-first birthday and sees the introduction of additional friends of the Milligans. We meet the hapless Willie Sullivan (played by Cyril Cusack) "one of those people who not only repeat the last word you say, but stare at you as if their life depended on it"<sup>64</sup> The guests are completed by the Celtic-chic Europa Wrench, the childish Pearl Harrison, the Bostonian debutante Prescilla Converse and the dry Philip Pryce. There are conflicting ideas of masculinity in the male characters, while the female characters are modelled on the flapper-vogue of 1920s Hollywood cinema: flirtatious, attention-seeking, drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes. The darkness of the staging co-exists with the darkness of the action, and an increasing sense of menace develops through this act, with characters revealing their true motivations, and Killigrew's increasing nihilism. Act III shifts back to the Millington's drawing room but now there is a dark cloud of inevitable catastrophe developing.

In an attempt to categorise the play, and if one were to accept Richard Kearney's definition, then *Youth's the Season-?* is a wholly modernist work: "[Modernism] offers a radical break with tradition and endorses a practice of cultural self-reflection where inherited concepts of identity are subjected to question."<sup>65</sup> Kearney agrees with the viewpoint that the Gate project was a wholly internationalist

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<sup>64</sup> Mary Manning, *YTS*, Act 2, 355.

<sup>65</sup> Richard Kearney, *Transitions: narratives in modern Irish culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 84.

modernist endeavour and a reaction to cultural nationalism: "We might say that the modernist tendency of certain writers, artists and intellectuals generally represents a shift away from the cultural nationalism of the Revival to a cultural internationalism committed to formal and critical experimentation."<sup>66</sup> However Seamus Deane believes the motivating factors of the Gate were less radical: "Nor indeed does one gain a sense that the theatre was directed by individuals truly aware of Modernism's crusading aspirations. For all its brilliance, its bravura cosmopolitanism, one detects in the Gate theatre of the 1930s the subversive edges of both the Decadence and the modern becoming somehow unthreatening in the provincial Irish air."<sup>67</sup> However, what makes Manning's play interesting is the fact that it is a uniquely original portrayal, and sophisticated critique, of the postcolonial Ascendency class and a pessimistic prophecy for their future within the new state.

The First World War and the Irish Revolution initiated a profound shift in the demographic of Ireland which was catastrophic for the Southern Irish protestants who largely felt politically and socially ostracised within the new state. As Terence Brown explains:

The period 1911-26 saw indeed a striking decline of about one-third in the protestant population in the South of Ireland as a whole (in the same period the Catholic population declined by about 2.2%), which must be accounted for not only by the lamentable losses in the Great War but by the large numbers of landed families, protestant professional men, former members of the Royal Irish Constabulary, civil servants, and Protestant small farmers, who felt that

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>67</sup> Terence Brown, *The Literature of Ireland: Criticism and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 91.

the new Ireland was unlikely to provide a satisfactory home for themselves or their offspring.<sup>68</sup>

This decimation of the traditional ruling elite coupled with their failure to absorb adequately into the new societal frameworks had obvious political ramifications in Ireland. While this enabled the rise of what J.J. Lee considered “a more talented cadre” among Catholics hitherto starved of opportunity he also acknowledged the ramifications the disintegration of the Anglo-Irish as a viable and robust political entity would have for Ireland: “On balance, it seems likely that they must have constituted some loss to Ireland, if only they could have been adequately integrated into public life.”<sup>69</sup> Considering the broader impact, Brown laments the departure of the Anglo-Irish and its cultural implications: “their departure meant that many of the fine furniture and many books and paintings that had escaped the fires of the Civil War went for sale and were bought by dealers from abroad.”<sup>70</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter believes the devastation of successive conflicts and the deep divisions they left within society impacted the Irish political psyche, ensuring the mechanisms of power that followed independence and platformed the reconstruction of the country were strongly conservative: “Cumann na nGaedheal’s commitment to strong state centralisation was an inevitable reaction to the civil war, and presaged an approach to the distribution of power in Ireland which was to become the hallmark of successive

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<sup>68</sup> Terence Brown, *Ireland: a social and cultural history 1922-79* (London: Fontana, 1988), 105.

<sup>69</sup> J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: politics and society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 74.

<sup>70</sup> Brown, *Ireland a Social and Cultural History*, 104-105.



administrations."<sup>71</sup> The factionalism in the republican movement and with violence a recent, unhappy memory constituted a social malaise and disinclination to participate politically within the Anglo-Irish and led to an atmosphere of social inertia. As Brown observes, "The remnants of the former Protestant Anglo-Irish Ascendancy could muster any effective political or indeed ideological opposition to the social and political orthodoxies of the period, could neither disturb the economic conservatism nor counter the cultural protectionism and Catholic nationalism that characterised a cautious decade of recovery and reconstruction."<sup>72</sup> This situation was not helped by the mushrooming of small but venomous Catholic groups preaching anti-protestant hate throughout the decade, with the minority, according to Lee, depicted as a "cancer gnawing at the undefiled body of holy Catholic Ireland."<sup>73</sup> This sense of failure to integrate into the new state is prevalent throughout Manning's play.

Postcolonial literary criticism challenges the ideology associated with Commonwealth literature's claim that the cultural role of anglophone writers is to enrich English literature. A central work in postcolonial theory is Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* (1978) in which he argues that "Ideas, culture and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied."<sup>74</sup> He believes that if a certain group

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<sup>71</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2010), 306.

<sup>72</sup> Terence Brown, 122.

<sup>73</sup> J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: politics and society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 77.

<sup>74</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 12.

within a society has more political or economic power, they will likely also have power in framing what the culture of that society looks like. Said contends that as a consequence of many years of colonial rule the coloniser exercises significantly more power in dictating terms of culture. In particular the coloniser removes the colonised's ability to represent or define itself. He observes: "The imaginative examination of this Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged."<sup>75</sup> The centrepiece of Said's thesis is that in a culture dominated by the coloniser, the colonised is usually represented as being illogical, mysterious or driven by base passions whereas the coloniser is portrayed as logical, cultured and the norm. Much of the best work in this field of study has followed the original thesis put forward by Said on how colonial conquest results in attempts to know and administer colonial subjects which inaugurated the "othering" of the colonised, thereby generating the pervasive images of effeminate Indians, savage Africans and inscrutably sinister Orientals that are so common in the literature of Empire. In her influential 1988 essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that "The result of [the coloniser] representing and defining [the colonised] on its behalf was to constitute the colonial subject as other."<sup>76</sup> Therefore if we were to examine *Youth's the Season* through a postcolonial prism and consider representations of the otherness of the native Irish in

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>76</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In other worlds: essays in cultural politics* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 76.

the play, one could argue that Manning is contesting colonial legitimacy. Furthermore, the characters are in a consistent state of flux and the idea of identity as being hybrid and unstable is central to the conversations and arguments within the play. In this respect *Youth's the Season-?* is a postcolonial text, an allegory for the diminishing Anglo-Irish ruling elite, a reflective discourse on the past and a projection of the listlessness of the future.

A prevailing mood of angst and cynicism permeates the play and the final act of catastrophic violence is symbolic of the demise of the ruling class. There are several representations of the native population as 'other' within the play delivered mainly through the grotesque Europa Wench. She is initially presented as highbrow fusion of Anglo-Irish and native cultures, Desmond describes her as "very clever and awfully national."<sup>77</sup> When she enters in the second act party scene she is described in the stage directions as "a living breathing mass of Celtic embroideries and hand woven tweeds" and we learn that, "she speaks with an extreme cultured Anglo-Irish accent."<sup>78</sup> Initially the audience would expect this character to be rational and but we soon discover her patronising attitude to the native population. When bragging about her family's hand-weaving business we are offered an insight into her condescending views, "The workers are peasant girls from all over Ireland – some of them from the Gaeltacht. We're teaching them hand-weaving, Irish dancing, embroidery and harp.

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<sup>77</sup> Mary Manning, YTS, 354.

<sup>78</sup> Mary Manning, YTS, 356.

It is so vitally necessary to improve the peasant *culturally*, I think.”<sup>79</sup> Manning expresses the political naivety and the alienation of the Anglo-Irish through this character, “I’m only interested in the international situation, but I must say I think De Valera is very sincere – I don’t know what he means – but I think he’s very sincere.”<sup>80</sup> We see the socio-economic polarisation of the Anglo-Irish, and a grotesque ambivalence towards the plight of the working class is reminiscent of the Victorian Bedlam. Europa suggests to visiting American debutante Priscilla, “If you like, I’ll take you round the slums tomorrow”, to which Priscilla replies, “that would be divine.”<sup>81</sup> The contradictions in this character represent the hybridity of the Anglo-Irish, trapped within a country and exhibiting some of the trappings and influences yet completely disjointed without a clear comprehension of the nature of the native population.

The strongest expression of colonialism is delivered through the most unsympathetic character in the play, Harry Middleton. Initially described as ‘awful’ by his suitor Connie, we learn he has a government post in Kenya to which he is soon to return. Consistently referred to as the ‘empire builder’, he serves as an example of toxic masculinity, arrogant and boorish he exhibits few redeeming qualities and there are hints of coercion in his relationship with Connie:

Harry [urgently]. Couldn’t you ever bring yourself to care for me? [He takes her hand again.] I’m mad about you. I can’t stop thinking about you. [He pulls her roughly to him and kisses her passionately.]  
Connie [faintly.] Leave me, Harry – please.

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<sup>79</sup> Mary Manning, YTS, 365.

<sup>80</sup> Mary Manning, YTS, 366.

<sup>81</sup> Mary Manning, YTS, 363.

Harry [releasing her.] Forgive me, Connie. I'm an awful swine. Say you'll forgive me.

Connie. No, it was my fault. Please go.<sup>82</sup>

He is symbolic of the repressive coloniser, prone to making threats and with a propensity for physical violence, he attacks Killigrew in the party scene, striking him and knocking him down. It is through Middleton that Manning offers her clearest analysis of the social circumstances and post-independence psyche of the Anglo-Irish: "I'd never have left Dublin, but the Governor's only got his pension, you know, and when I left Trinity there didn't seem to be much of an opening here for my type. Practically all the chaps I knew were going abroad, so I just drifted out."<sup>83</sup> Here we see a clear illustration of how they perceived the relegation of their social class to a 'type'. Manning, who we know had close family members in colonial service, is expressing a strong critique of colonialism through her construction of this character.

The characters in *Youth's the Season-?* are a colourful tapestry, each offering a different perspective of the Anglo-Irish disposition and reflecting a flawed element within that class. Most at some point reflect on their displacement – if not social and political, then moral – a crisis of identity exists at the very heart of the piece. The effete and homosexual Desmond yearns for freedom with a design job in London and to escape the yolk of his domineering father and his threats to integrate him into the family business. Vain and posturing he speaks of suicide at several points in the play,

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<sup>82</sup> Mary Manning, YTS, 338.

<sup>83</sup> Mary Manning, YTS, 397.

his crisis of identity is not just a sexual one, he represents Anglo-Irish dissent stifled by Catholic Ireland and yearning for liberation: "Twenty one years I have looked out on this square, and I see us all here, struggling to escape from our environment, fighting against it, refusing to conform."<sup>84</sup>

The most cynical character, Killigrew, signifies the Anglo-Irish Trinity intellectual, the "literary loafer", qualified but with no relevant place offered within the new state. He is constantly aware of the violent conception of his generation and is pessimistic about their prospects: "look at us! Take a look at us! Raised in gunfire". He preaches about what he calls the "doctrine of despair" and the "philosophy of hopelessness."<sup>85</sup> His identity and sense of self is so shattered that Manning creates the unspeaking doppelganger character Egosmith, whose inescapable shadowing presence is the catalyst for his dramatic suicide at the end of the play. Even the choice of location for this act is symbolic and calculated: "I'm bumping myself off here, because I think this house needs to be shaken to its bourgeois foundations."<sup>86</sup> Killigrew's fate is a strong statement from Manning about the placement of the Anglo-Irish and its inevitable implosion.

Connie, who is the most sympathetic and progressive of all the characters, "dark and beautiful" and "with leanings towards Bohemianism", is a representation

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<sup>84</sup> Mary Manning, YTS, 395.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

of the antiquated debutante Anglo-Irish belle seeking definition through marriage.<sup>87</sup> Although clearly in love with Killigrew she nevertheless permits a suitor, “that awful Harry [Middleton]”, to visit in an attempt to incentivise a marriage proposal.<sup>88</sup> She believes she can reform Terrence, “I can pull him together – I can do it. I’ll marry him.”<sup>89</sup> Although she too is a mass of contradiction unwisely accepting Middleton’s marriage proposal in revenge for a slight from Killigrew.

Youngest sister Deirdre, though bookish and intellectual, is portrayed as hard and unromantic: “If only we could make up our minds to eliminate romanticism and idealism and recognise that love is only a figment of the imagination; it simply doesn’t exist. So called love is nothing more or less than chemical reaction.”<sup>90</sup> Her suitor, Dr Gerald Parr, is described as “clean, hard and ambitious”, Deirdre is concerned he might “suffer from sentimentality.”<sup>91</sup> They are symbolic of the Anglo-Irish professional class attempting to cope with the pressures of the new state. Nevertheless, there is a toxicity to their relationship, a curious reconciliation scene is bookended by a spontaneous violent outburst from Gerald which reduces the initially feisty Deirdre to placid submissiveness for the remainder of the play:

Gerald [fiercely]. But I’m very violent when aroused, Deirdre, and if you behave like that again I won’t answer for the consequences-

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* 334.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 345-6.

Deirdre [shrinking]. Oh Gerald, you wouldn't hurt me-  
Gerald [Demonically] I would! I'd thrash you to within an inch of your life. [He sees Mrs. Millington's horrified face.] Of course not, darling. [He releases her.]<sup>92</sup>

The Millington's naive neighbour Toots, with her family's involvement with the Royal Dublin Society, represents the Anglo-Irish struggling to maintain a flicker of their identity through cultural institutions. Brown considers these institutions to have an anesthetising effect on the Anglo-Irish, "Sailing, dancing, hunting, and the club remained to distract Anglo-Ireland and those who felt themselves associated with it from uncomfortable developments, while the thriving condition of the Royal Dublin Society, with its lectures, concerts, and library suggested that the cultural influence of the distinctly Anglo-Irish or Protestant institutions was still strong."<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless by the end of the play her pleas for release are representative of the downfall of her social class, "I can't unlock the door! Help me Desmond! Somebody! Let me out!"<sup>94</sup> Desperate for escape, she is literally and metaphorically trapped in the world of the play.

Even the unseen characters are portrayed as flawed. The Millington patriarch is a constant tyrannical presence throughout the play. Desmond's petitions for his Father's patronage to go to London to study design are dismissed as a waste of time. He dreads the idea of going to work in the family business. The morning after the party we learn his Father is angrily stomping around the house and he violently

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 388.

<sup>93</sup> Terence Brown, 103.

<sup>94</sup> Mary Manning, YTS, 404.



ejected party guest Willie Sullivan, who had fallen asleep in one of the bathrooms. Killigrew describes his brother as a “pimply little bastard. Spends most of his time wallowing in Rugby”, depicted as patronising and upstanding, he mocks him as “the very spirit of the English public school.”<sup>95</sup>

The play concludes with Desmond, so louche and carefree when we meet him, who is resigned to middle class integration and boredom with the final words of the play instituting the very bourgeois symbols he had mocked throughout the play: “tomorrow I’m going to buy a bowler hat, and an umbrella.”<sup>96</sup> Through these words, the playwright is expressing the need for conformity as a necessity for survival within the new state. *Youth’s the Season-?* is a fascinating piece of work, and one gets a sense that Manning truly understood the world of the play. It’s little wonder that the contemporary audience was so taken with the play; its world of disaffected protestant bohemian Vieux-Riche, assessing and at odds with the new, developing state.

When the play was premiered the result was a sensation that no doubt pleased the playwright’s patrons at the theatre, with the *Irish Times* praising Mac Liammóir: “The excellent reception which ‘Youth’s the Season-?’ had from its first night audience is largely due to the acting of Mr Mac Liammóir, whose Desmond Millington is the finest thing he has yet done. In a sense he carried the whole play...his acting was a

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<sup>95</sup> Mary Manning, YTS, 331.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 404.

delight.”<sup>97</sup> Whereas the *Irish Independent* recognised the originality and celebrated the promise of the young playwright:

The production of “Youths the Season-?” at the Gate Theatre proves that in Miss Mary Manning Dublin has a clever young dramatist possessing keen wit, good dramatic sense, and magnificent courage. In her first play she attempts the task of beginning a play as bright, sparkling comedy, and ending it as sheer melodrama. Had she succeeded fully she would have made dramatic history, as it is she has written an exceedingly clever and very entertaining play. Her comedy is splendid; it is years since I heard an audience laugh so heartily or so often as during the first Act last night.<sup>98</sup>

Similarly, *The Irish Press* recognised the originality of the material and vitality of the writing: “Miss Manning can do difficult things; her dialogue is alive and very amusing; her characters clear cut; her construction clever, and she has a point of view. The Gate company proved their prowess once again in parts unlike any we have hitherto seen them play. They were excellent.”<sup>99</sup> The play received widespread audience and critical acclaim, and a revised version was presented the following December directed by Denis Johnson. It received a third and final recast production in the Longford Gate company’s 1937 UK season at The Westminster Theatre.

Following the success of *Youth’s the Season-?*, Manning received further commissions from the theatre, and on March 14<sup>th</sup> 1933 the Gate presented her next play *Storm Over Wicklow*. This one act comedy is set in “The Lounge Hall of Boylan’s -

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<sup>97</sup> Review, *Irish Times* (9 December 1931).

<sup>98</sup> Review, Dublin Lady’s Play – “Youth’s The Season?” At The Gate, *Irish Independent* (9<sup>th</sup> December 1931).

<sup>99</sup> Review, New Play At “Gate” A Tragi-Comedy Of Youth, *Irish Press* (9<sup>th</sup> December 1931).

a small hotel in Co. Wicklow. About 4 o'clock on Sunday afternoon of the Whitsuntide weekend, 1931."<sup>100</sup> The play was presented within quite an eclectic triple bill of one acts along with *Princely Fortune*, "A Chinese play of a thousand years ago, translated from the Chinese of Su Ting Po by Kwei Chen."<sup>101</sup> The bill was completed by Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *St Patrick's Day* (1775). The action in *Storm Over Wicklow* centres around a group of English tourists who "having taken to heart AE and Lennox Robinson's advice to 'seek some place in the mountains - as far away from Dublin as possible', travel to the wilds of Wicklow and come upon a small isolated hotel. Bad weather descends and the guests of the hotel are forced into a certain intimacy."<sup>102</sup> Manning, who played the dotty elderly spinster Miss Isabella Lilliwhite, was inspired to write the play by the Northern Irish artist Paul Henry who would take paying guests into his Wicklow cottage to supplement his income.<sup>103</sup> Manning had stayed in Henry's cottage on several occasions and they had become friends, the artist attended the press night of the play and during the performance she recognised "his evil chuckles in the front row."<sup>104</sup> Once again the critics were convinced by Manning's wry humour and biting satire: "Then we laughed: no smile would suffice for the sparkling,

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<sup>100</sup> *Storm Over Wicklow*, Playbill, Gate Theatre Collection, Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections at Northwestern University Libraries, Chicago.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Paul Henry (1876-1958) was an Irish artist from Belfast noted for depicting the West of Ireland landscape in a spare post-impressionist style.

<sup>104</sup> S.B. Kennedy, *Paul Henry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 112.

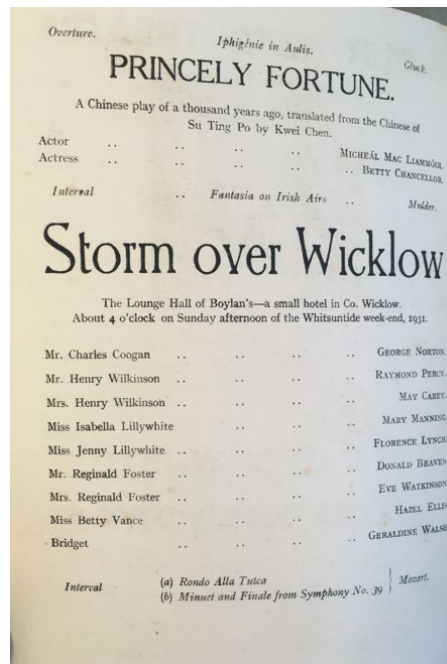
impish humour of Mary Manning's new farce 'Storm Over Wicklow.' She swung her satirical whip right and left, on Oxford and Rathgar; Gaels and Sassenachs, bourgeoisie and literati, artists, poets, lovers. She flailed them all mercilessly."<sup>105</sup> *The Irish Press* enjoyed the play's "lively humour" and appreciated the playwright's "gift of inventing entertaining situations and of writing witty dialogue. There is very good fun and a great deal of promise in this little play."<sup>106</sup> However Manning in later years became disillusioned about the play. In a letter to Robert Hogan she remarked: "I was only 22 when it was produced at the Gate, and it seems very immature now. I think its success was due to the fact that people in Dublin were fed up with the going native British and American – so anything that satirised them was all right."<sup>107</sup> There were no further revivals of *Storm Over Wicklow*, however in October 1938 Denis Johnston directed a live production of the play that was broadcast by the BBC, the text of the play now sadly seems to have been lost.

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<sup>105</sup> Review, 'Satire Set In Wicklow', *The Irish Independent*, 15<sup>th</sup> March 1933.

<sup>106</sup> Review, 'Witty Dialogue Of "Storm Over Wicklow"', *The Irish Press*. 15<sup>th</sup> March 1933.

<sup>107</sup> Robert Hogan, *After the Irish Renaissance* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1967), 121.



Original programme for Storm over Wicklow. Gate Theatre Collection, Charles Deering  
McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

Manning's final play for the Gate, *Happy Family*, subtitled, "A Farce In Three Acts" was a three act Chekhov-inspired work described as: "An amusing character comedy which gathers a family of eccentrics together in the same setting so that they can yabber on about their individual obsessions of communism, adventuring, mysticism, automobiles and etiquette."<sup>108</sup> Manning in the play returned to a theme of the Anglo Irish Ascendancy in decline; the action is set in a bedroom of the Blakes' large eighteenth century house, once proud 'country' people, the family through economic necessity are forced to take paying guests. As usual, Manning peopled the play with an unusual bunch of characters and eccentrics, but there is a keen satirical edge and a sharp eye on the current political pulse in Ireland at that time. The head of

<sup>108</sup> *Happy Family* play bill, Gate Theatre Collection.

the family Charles Blake is so distracted by politics and the world's economy that he is blind to the family's impending financial catastrophe. His wife Margaret spends her time hatching plans for economic salvation that inevitably never see the light of day. Their eldest son Ted is obsessed with romantic ideas of adventure while sister Rachel dreams of becoming a fashion designer:

RACHEL: You should have lived in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Ted, like me. I would have been a King's mistress, and you would have run away to sea and been a pirate. Ah well, you can always join the Blueshirts or something like that.

TED: Thanks. I don't want to get knocked on the head yet.

RACHEL: But it's an attractive costume, don't you think, and that's always such fun.

TED: Not my idea of fun.<sup>109</sup>

There are several references to the growing pro-fascist movement in Ireland at that time, a theme she would explore in greater depth with her novel *Mount Venus* (1938) and which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Four.

The family is completed by aspiring actress Juliet who dreams of continental travel and the youngest child Dick who is obsessed by automobiles. The 'paying guests' in the house are no less eccentric: communist Rory Forbes, Miss Caroline While, an elderly spiritualist, and Donald Geddis a grim physician in love with Juliet. Drifting in and out of the action are Conor Knox the eccentric perfect gentleman who is in love with Rachel, the absent-minded Major Gordon and the local maid Maisie. Within the text Manning attempts to give equal weight to most of the characters while

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<sup>109</sup> Mary Manning, *Happy Family*, unpublished playscript.

at the same time exploring themes of the Irish left, the de Valera government and the Anglo-Irish trade war, there is also a reference to the violent attacks on left-wing gatherings that had occurred the previous year:

RORY: Well the lecture was half over when a crowd surrounded the building singing hymns and psalms and all the rest of it. They broke into the hall and all I can remember is a fellow coming at me with a crowbar. I got in first with my stick and knocked him out. At the same time another fellow rushed at me roaring "Do you believe in Jesus Christ?" and before I could even answer the blighter, he cut my head open with a hammer. And I woke up in the police station and found myself charged with rioting and conduct subversive to the peace.

JULIET: What happened to the man who knocked you out?

RORY: He was a Christian so they didn't charge him.<sup>110</sup>

Although Manning employed her usual caustic wit and balanced aphorisms in *Happy Family*, the play seems static and uneven and ends with a less than satisfactory denouement when Conor inherits a fortune and redeems the family's future. The critics were less than enthusiastic about the piece: though the *Irish Times* recognised "The satire of the authoress is as pointed as ever" they felt the play was "one of the most formless dramas that theatre has presented."<sup>111</sup> The *Irish Press* questioned the core influences of the play – "Chekhov is a dangerous master" – but nevertheless praised the humour and offered some tacit commendation of the work: "her wit is sometimes crude and farcical, her story lacks overtones. But neither is this play a

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<sup>110</sup> *Happy Family*, unpublished play script, Gate Theatre Collection.

<sup>111</sup> Review, *Irish Times*, 24<sup>th</sup> April 1934.

failure. It is good in parts and very promising as a whole."<sup>112</sup> However the *Times* was somewhat less charitable to the piece: "The play is as inconsequential as the family. Ruin faces them steadily through three acts, but they neither will nor can do anything to avert it. On the whole the characters are uniformly well studied and amusing, but as there seems to be no good reason why the Blakes should live, the play remains unsatisfying."<sup>113</sup>

In summary, *Youth's the Season-?* is a play that inhabits an important place within the post-independence literature of Ireland. Through this work Manning gave a theatrical voice to a hitherto largely ignored section of the society, a voice as valid and important as the Hiberno-English Synge created thirty years previously. She was in a unique position to present a criticism of a decadent and effete postcolonial Anglo-Irish class as she was deeply embedded within that community. Therefore, the play should be regarded as an important post-colonial text, an elaborate and incisive analysis of a significant segment of a society, newly marginalised, disenfranchised and disengaged. In addition, the success of this piece enabled the aesthetic nourishment of the playwright and an enhanced boldness with her later work. Irrespective of the comparative failure of *Happy Family*, Manning should not be wholly condemned for experimenting with form and attempting new methods of expression. There is, however, one quite significant feature in this play; namely it marks a distinct

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<sup>112</sup> Review, *Irish Press*, 24<sup>th</sup> April 1934.

<sup>113</sup> Review, *The Times*, 27<sup>th</sup> April 1934



politicization in her work and a steady attempt to express her views and ideas through her characters and narrative. Manning, twenty-nine when *Happy Family* was produced, was maturing into a distinctive artist with a singular outlook seeking to actively express her views and opinions through her work. The young girl who emerged lily-white from the politically insulated cloisters of Alexandra College was becoming steadily politicised with a voice that was increasingly exasperated with the political situation in Ireland at that time. This growing frustration can be gauged in a different form which she used at the time for her writing: the Gate theatre's literary periodical *Motley* which she edited.

## Motley Crew: Manning and the Gate's Literary Periodical 1932-1934

“Let them be well used, for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time. After your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live.”

Hamlet, Act 2 Scene 2.

It was obvious that Hilton Edwards and Mícheál Mac Liammóir recognised the potential and valued the energy and industriousness of Manning as very soon after the final curtain of *Youth's The Season-?*, they offered her the opportunity to edit a new magazine operating under the auspices of the Gate theatre entitled *Motley*. Manning had some previous experience with little magazines as for a time she had contributed film criticism to AE's *The Irish Statesman*, a publication that Terence Brown considers, “one of the most remarkable cultural organs Ireland has known – humane, politically engaged and broadly literate”, and whose closure in 1930 left an opening for a little magazine in Dublin.<sup>1</sup> These publications were crucial in the development of Irish literature in that period as they not only dealt with artistic and literary zeitgeist, offering important social commentary, but they were a vehicle through which writers, and in particular young writers, could find a means for expression.

Fredrick J. Hoffman, Charles Allen and Carolyn F. Ulrich's seminal 1947 work *The Little Magazine* established the first comprehensive definition of the format and is still referenced by scholars today. Their description might accurately be applied to

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<sup>1</sup> Terence Brown, *Ireland A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002*, (London: Fontana, 1981), 109.

Motley: "These magazines have usually been the sponsors of innovation, the gathering places for the 'irreconcilables' of our literary tradition. They have been broadly and amply tolerant of literary experiment; in many cases, they have raised defiantly the red flag of protest and rebellion against tradition and convention."<sup>2</sup> They considered the magazines as "non-commercial by intent, for their altruistic ideal usually rules out the hope of making any profit" and targeted at "a limited group, generally not more than a thousand persons."<sup>3</sup> Although the editorial group, contributors and readership were relatively small in numbers, there existed within their numbers a sustaining belief in the crucial value of their pursuits. Michael Levenson describes them as "small social cells, nourished on the pleasures and powers of comradeship", he continues "we can speak of the micro-society of Modernist innovation, within which small groups of artists were able to sustain their resolve – or more than sustain, able to create small flourishing communities based on the powers of reciprocal acknowledgement."<sup>4</sup>

Later scholars have concentrated on the innovative qualities of little magazines and their thirst for pioneering and original artistic practice regardless of mainstream opinion. Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker believe little magazines: "are devoted to a conception of the new, even when a valued art and literature belongs to the past and is thought due for renewal; they struggle financially, and are, at the most successful,

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<sup>2</sup> Fredrick J. Hoffman, Charles Allen and Carolyn F. Ulrich, *The Little Magazine: A History and a Bibliography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), v.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Levenson, 'Introduction', to Levenson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 6.

advocates of an adversarial minority cultural position who find a supportive, independently minded readership.”<sup>5</sup>

The theatre based little magazine was not a new phenomenon in Irish literary circles. Between 1889 and 1909 W.B. Yeats edited three periodicals: *Bealtaine* (1899-1900) which ran for three issues, *Samhain* (1901-8) which ran for seven and *The Arrow* (1906-9) which ran for five. Brooker and Thacker consider these titles to be highly significant and, along with their ensuing periodicals, “have not been sufficiently studied as part of the story of modernism in Britain and Ireland.”<sup>6</sup> Sharing many features with *Motley* these publications engaged with the work of the Irish Literary Theatre and later the Abbey as well as publishing editorials, play texts, poems and critical essays. Most importantly, however, their manifestation was Yeats’ attempt to engage the periodical form to advocate for the national identity of the nascent theatre and critically justify the modern dramatic literature of Ireland, while defending their work from ultra-nationalist criticism. With its promotion of radical and experimental aesthetic values and relatively small target audience, Alex Davis believes *Bealtaine* “can lay claim to being the first instance in Ireland of that quintessential modernist publishing venture the ‘little magazine.’”<sup>7</sup> In its early years the Abbey faced fierce criticism from many quarters including Arthur Griffith and William Rooney’s *The*

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, (ed.), *The Oxford critical and cultural history of modernist magazines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Alex Davis, ‘Yeats and the Celtic Revival,’ in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, 153.

*United Irishman* and the Gaelic League's *An Claidheamh Soluis*. Yeats would consistently defend the importance of the theatre and its cultural significance through the pages of these publications.

There had been earlier attempts at similar publications in the 1920s, mainly flatly functional or very brief in their lifespan. *The Klaxon* was founded by Con Leventhal in 1923 and although it requested "Contributions in verse and prose from persons in sympathy with the ideals of this journal" it ran for a single issue, essentially to publish Leventhal's essay on *Ulysses* which had earlier been rejected by *The Dublin Magazine*.<sup>8</sup> The publication of *The Klaxon* however did have the effect of inspiring a further literary periodical, *To-morrow*, which survived two issues in August and September 1924. Edited by Francis Stuart and Cecil Salkeld the magazine featured work by Iseult Gonne, Liam O' Flaherty, Lennox Robinson and W.B. Yeats amongst others. This publication was experimental and controversial from the outset, its initial issue featured a grandiose call to arms entitled 'To All Artists and Writers', which, although published under the names of the editors, is sometimes attributed to Yeats, a feature which would be mimicked in the early issues of *Motley* and which will be discussed later in this chapter:

We condemn, though not without sympathy, those who would buy escape from banal mechanism through technical investigation and experiment. We proclaim that these bring no escape, for new form comes from new subject matter, and new subject matter must flow from the human soul restored to all

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<sup>8</sup> 'LKE', 'Confessional', *Klaxon* (Winter 1923-4), 1.

its courage, to all its audacity. We dismiss all demagogues and call back the soul to its ancient sovereignty, from the impermissible substance of the stars.<sup>9</sup>

The 'new form' ascribed in the article arrived with material that almost inevitably sparked an irked response from the establishment. The first issue featured work that explored such taboo materials as rape, virginal birth and interracial sexual desire. Yeats's poem 'Leda and the Swan' deals with the classical story of Zeus who, in the form of a swan, rapes the virgin Leda whose offspring from the assault, Clytemnestra and Helen, ultimately cause the Trojan war:

How can those terrified vague fingers push  
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?  
And how can body, laid in that white rush,  
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?  
A shudder in the loins engenders there  
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
And Agamemnon dead.<sup>10</sup>

Lennox Robinson's short story 'The Madonna of Slieve Dun' tells the story of a young country virgin girl, Mary Creedon. Raped and impregnated by a vagrant, she reimagines herself as a reincarnated Madonna, the story culminating in birth: "Mary lay back on the pillow. She opened her eyes, she saw all the people kneeling, she stretched out her arms to them, she laid her hand on the child. 'Behold' - she

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<sup>9</sup> Attributed to H. Stuart and C. Salkeld, 'To All Artists and Writers', *To-morrow*, 1:1 (August 1924), 4.

<sup>10</sup> W.B. Yeats (ed. A. N. Jeffares), 'Leda and the Swan', *Yeats's Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 587.

whispered and she died. But the child was a girl.”<sup>11</sup> Margaret Barrington’s short story ‘Colour’ was a completely new departure for Irish fiction dealing with inter-racial desire and sexuality. The story, set in Paris, features four characters, an American Sally Winter, an English woman Alice Greensdale, an Englishman named Barrett and an unnamed African character. The story deals with endemic racist attitudes, with the Barrett character incensed at the prevalence of inter-racial relationships in France, and pejorative racial terms employed throughout by the characters. The story concludes with an inevitable sexual act when the unnamed African character comes to Winters’ hotel room: “She opened her bedroom door. There he stood not two yards away. She noticed his black hands against the white paint of the corridor, and her nostrils dilating caught the heavy negroid smell. Her knees shook as she went back into her room. The heat overwhelmed her, and it was the colours of Africa. “And that fool that said women could not understand these things.””<sup>12</sup> The inevitable backlash against the sheer audacity of *To-morrow* saw Yeats’ poem condemned as a stinking sonnet by the *Catholic Bulletin*; Robinson was dismissed from his post of Librarian to the Plunkett Foundation libraries, and Barrington, who had just begun an extra marital affair with Liam O’Flaherty, left Ireland to live with him in England and was shunned by her former friends when she returned the following year.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Lennox Robinson, ‘The Madonna of Slieve Dun’, *To-morrow*, 1:1 (August 1924), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Barrington, ‘Colour’, *To-morrow*, 1:1 (August 1924), 8.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion on *To-morrow* see Nicholas Allen, *Wherever Motley Is Worn in Modernism, Ireland and civil war* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 92-95.

Although *To-morrow* had two directors of the Abbey Theatre as contributors and several individuals connected to the theatre in that circle – it was never conceived to be a theatre magazine. *Motley*, by contrast, was initially primarily a mouthpiece for the Gate Theatre and only later moved more firmly into literary territory, producing short stories and organising literary competitions. The Gate magazine would also have taken note of the experience of *To-morrow* and been acutely aware of the effects of controversial subject matter.

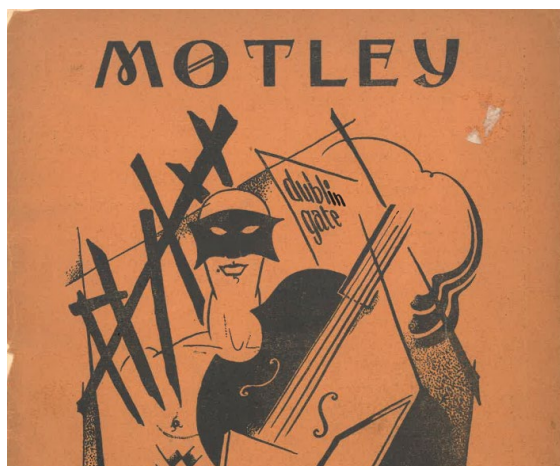
The content of *Motley* reflected the nature of the theatre's programming: avant garde and international in outlook and concerned with social commentary and new forms of artistic expression with an acute focus on the encouragement of young emerging aesthetic talent. The magazine circulated from January 1932 until April 1934, publishing eighteen issues. Internationalism was at the very core of *Motley*, offering insights into the theatre scene in other European countries including France, Spain, Germany, Greece and Turkey. It also featured a regular column offering London theatre reviews and reports and what was happening in the West End, translations of poetry by Pushkin and other Russian greats, in addition to features on European art and architecture. The third issue even featured an extensive description of a Flamenco performance by Michael Mac Liammóir in what was his first written contribution to the magazine.<sup>14</sup> The magazine investigated other artistic territory with several articles on European architecture and a very interesting contribution from Irish abstract

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<sup>14</sup> 'Dancers In Seville', *Motley*, Vol 1, No. 3 (August 1933), 6-9.



painter Mainie Jellett discussing the development of artistic forms through pre-history to the present day.<sup>15</sup> *Motley* was careful to cement its aesthetic credentials and to associate the theatre and its directors with leading figures in the European Avant Garde: "In passing through Paris both Hilton Edwards and Michael Mac Liammóir were interviewed by several of the Paris newspapers as the leaders of the Avant Garde in Ireland. Here they met Giraudoux, the author of *Siegfried*.<sup>16</sup> His is the most prominent dramatist creating in France at the present moment."<sup>17</sup>



*Motley* front cover – Gavin McAlinden's private collection.

The first issue of *Motley* was primarily concerned with the definition and concept of what it means to be a national theatre in an international avant-garde

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Harriet "Mainie" Jellett (1897-1944) was an Irish abstract painter. Her 1923 piece 'Decoration' was among the first abstract paintings shown in Ireland when it was exhibited at the Society of Dublin Painters Group Show that year. She was a strong promoter and defender of modern art movements. Her work was also part of the painting event in the art competition at the 1928 Summer Olympics.

<sup>16</sup> Hippolyte Jean Giraudoux (1882-1944) was a French novelist, essayist, diplomat and playwright. He is considered among the most important French dramatists of the interwar period. *Siegfried* was the 1928 stage adaptation of his most famous novel *Siegfried et le Limousin* (1922).

<sup>17</sup> 'Dancers In Seville', *Motley*, Vol 1, No. 3 (August 1933), 9.

context and featured submissions from all parties credited as directors on the magazine's title page, with artwork by Michael Mac Liammóir. Like *To-morrow* and with characteristic bombast the primary issue featured a gauntlet thrown with a manifesto outlined by Lord Longford:

No person or institution can justifiably claim to be international unless it is profoundly national, or to be national while repudiating the best that the world has to offer for the nation's good. Firm in purpose, unencumbered in action, the "Gate" declares war upon the ghosts and demons that have haunted the Irish drama and sets out confidently to conquer the future.<sup>18</sup>

Whereas Yeats issued a plea for liberty for these ideas to be explored, Longford sought to establish firm credentials of the Gate's international perspective while justifying it as a wholly national institution. A magazine to publish the theatre's manifesto was the next logical thing for the Gate to accomplish. As Brooker and Thacker observe: "A manifesto is one way for a movement to shift from youthful grumblings to adulthood: starting a magazine in which to one's manifesto enables those mature reflections to reach, hopefully a wider audience."<sup>19</sup> Therefore this manifesto, coupled with the Gate's experimental programming of the international avant-garde along with the best in home-grown new writing talent, established what Rudd van den Beuken considers an Avant-Garde Nationalism: "From its inception, the Gate served as a cultural counterweight to the Abbey's ostensible hegemony as Ireland's national

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<sup>18</sup> Lord Longford, *Motley*, Vol 1 No.1 (January 1932), 1.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, *The Oxford Critical And Cultural History Of Modernist Magazines Oxford*, 3.

theatre – a role for which the Gate received due praise in its heyday, if less so from the 1960s onwards.”<sup>20</sup>

He considers this to be a deliberate and focused attempt by Edwards and Mac Liammóir to assert a post-revolutionary and post-colonial agenda, and a grappling with the emergence of the new Ireland at the very heart of the ethos of the organisation: “they articulated their own views on a colonial past that had to be reassessed, on the one hand, and a post-colonial future that still had to be molded [sic], on the other.”<sup>21</sup> This is clearly evident in the success and subsequent revivals of two of the Gate’s most important works of that period which addressed these issues, Denis Johnston’s *The Old Lady Says No!* and Manning’s *Youths The Season-?*. The former play deals with how rebellion of the previous century was perceived in 1920’s Dublin and the latter, as we have seen, addresses the vital presence of a post-colonial and disaffected protestant ascendancy youth in the Free State.

Hilton Edwards continued this theme of Avant Garde nationalism with his contribution ‘Why the Dublin Gate Theatre’, in which he outlined the group’s inspiration from the London Gate theatre which, under the director Peter Godfrey, had established itself as the leading international and avant-garde theatre in Britain. Edwards cemented their association by explaining that the company’s initial intention

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<sup>20</sup> Ruud van den Beuken, *Avant-garde nationalism at the Dublin Gate Theatre, 1928-1940* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2021), 3.

<sup>21</sup> Lord Longford, ‘A National Asset’, *Motley*, vol. 1, no. 1 (January 1932), 3.

was to collaborate as sister venues, and why they decided to establish the theatre in Dublin, but budgetary and logistical issues prevented this from becoming a reality.<sup>22</sup>

Denis Johnston, writing under his pseudonym of E. W. Tocher, merged the idea of a national theatre with an international folk theatre convention and once again evoked the recent pre-revolutionary consciousness by calling for 'A National Morality Play'. In this piece Johnston suggested an annual street pageant performance in O'Connell Street, with the entire area to be converted into a venue for a street scene style re-enactment of the events of 1916 along the lines of the Jedermann performance in Saltzberg.<sup>23</sup> He also proposed the government could provide, 'some blank cartridges, an armoured car or two', something he would successfully negotiate from the Minister of Defence the following year when he filmed *Guests of the Nation*. G Norman Reddin, the Gate's solicitor, continues with his article 'A National Theatre'.<sup>24</sup> Manning herself contributed the editorial under the title 'Processional',

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<sup>22</sup> Hilton Edwards, 'Why The Dublin Gate Theatre', *Motley* (January 1932), 3. Peter Godfrey (1899-1970) was an English actor and film director. Founder of the experimental Gate Theatre Salon in 1925, with his first wife Molly Veness, he staged London's first expressionistic production in the following year. He went into partnership with Velona Pilcher in 1927 and together they opened the Gate Theatre Studio in Villiers Street Charing Cross. Eventually moving to Hollywood, he established a career as a film actor and director.

<sup>23</sup> Denis Johnston, 'A National Morality Play', *Motley*, vol. 1, no. 1 (January 1932), 4. Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "Jedermann" is based on the tradition of medieval mystery plays, especially that of "Everyman", an English mystery play dating back to the 16th century. The stage play "Jedermann" was first performed on 1 December 1911 at Berlin's Schuhmann Circus, under the direction of Max Reinhardt. It was also he who produced its premiere at the Salzburg Festival on 22 August 1920 – marking the birth of the Festival itself. Except for a few years' hiatus, "Jedermann" has been performed annually at the Salzburg Festival ever since.

<sup>24</sup> Van Den Beuken, *Avant-garde nationalism at the Dublin Gate Theatre, 1928-1940*, 65.

whereby she offered a brief history of the theatre and reminded the reader that the Gate had up to that point produced sixty-six productions of which thirteen were by unknown Irish playwrights.<sup>25</sup>

The editorial featured news of impending productions of various 'Little Theatres and Dramatic Societies' and encouraged submission of future production details for publication. Manning, however, could not resist a little swipe at Trinity College while praising the Drama Society at University College Dublin: "Meanwhile, the lack of a dramatic society in the University shows a wasteland of vitality and intelligence. Harvard and Yale are suppling New York with young dramatists and actors, and their theatres are the nursing ground of the American Drama. Oxford and Cambridge have supplied the West End stage with most of the talent of recent years, while Trinity College, Dublin produces "Uncle Ned." Dear! Dear! What a generation!"<sup>26</sup>

An element of internationalism was offered with W.J.K. Mandy's somewhat dismal impressions of some current productions in London in his article 'The London Scene'. The issue concluded with a piece by Christine Longford which comprised of a section of excerpts of supposed audience comic high-brow banter entitled 'Plays

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<sup>25</sup> Mary Manning, 'Processional', *Motley*, vol. 1, no. 1 (January 1932), 9. It is interesting to note that the editorial column of *Klaxon* was entitled 'Confessional'.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

Acted By The Audience: Extracts.’<sup>27</sup> A notice of a production of Pearse’s play *The Singer* to play alongside a new offering from Mac Liammóir *Easter Week 1916* would form the theatre’s contribution to the Easter celebrations. To ensure that their credentials as a literary magazine were not neglected and as an acknowledgement to its predecessor *To-morrow*, the first issue was completed by poems from Francis Stuart and Padraic Colum.<sup>28</sup>

Since its inception the Gate had an anti-censorship agenda at its very core, this is clearly reflected in the programming of its first season in 1928. The decision to stage Wilde’s *Salomé*, which had been banned by the British Lord Chamberlain’s Office, in itself can be seen as defiant statement against censorship.<sup>29</sup> While the actual production was in rehearsal, the Censorship of Publications Bill was passing through the Dail. The Bill provided for the banning of literature both foreign and home grown that a government-sponsored committee deemed unsuitable. *The Irish Statesman*

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<sup>27</sup> Christine Longford, ‘Plays Acted By The Audience’, *Motley*, vol 1, no.1 (January 1932), 13.

<sup>28</sup> Henry Francis Montgomery Stuart (1902-2000) was an Irish writer who published prolifically throughout his life. He married Iseult Gonne in 1920 soon after Yeats had proposed to her. He joined the IRA and fought on the anti-treaty side during the Civil War. During the 1930s he became sympathetic with the Nazi regime and became involved with German Intelligence (the Abwehr) and later moved to Berlin to broadcast Nazi propaganda in a radio program entitled *Redaktion-Irland*. He returned to Ireland in 1958 was controversially awarded one of the country’s highest artistic accolades, being elected a Saoi of Aosdána, before his death in 2000. Padraic Colum (1881-1972) was an Irish poet, novelist, dramatist, biographer, playwright, children’s author and collector of folklore. He was a leading figure of the Irish Literary Revival.

<sup>29</sup> *Salomé* is a one-act tragedy by Oscar Wilde. It was first performed in Paris in 1891. An English translation was published in 1894 and subsequently banned by the Lord Chamberlain under laws prohibiting the depiction of Biblical characters on stage. The play depicts the attempted seduction of John the Baptist by Salome, step-daughter of King Herod. The first production was in Paris in 1896 – in Britain it was not performed publicly until 1931.

published a series of editorials by AE condemning the bill, supported by articles by Seán Ó Faoláin, W. B. Yeats and George Bernard Shaw with the latter viewing the Act as “an extermination of the Irish people as such to save them from their terror of life and one another.”<sup>30</sup> *Motley’s* debut issue uses a book review section from Arthur J. McHugh to dip a tentative toe into the highly controversial censorship question. This debate had been raging in Ireland since the passing of The Censorship of Publications Act (1929) and there had been a recent flurry of exchanges in the Irish print media.<sup>31</sup> Alongside reviews of recently published books including *Ellen Terry And Her Secret Self* by Edward Gordon Craig and *The Gates Flew Open* by Peadar O’Donnell, a measure of tentative support was offered to Liam O’Flaherty due to the fact that an intended review of his novel, *The Puritan*, could not be published under provisions of the Act. The reviewer Arthur J. McHugh explained: “As this page goes to press I learn the “The Puritan” has been banned. Unfortunately, I am therefore prevented from publishing the review.”<sup>32</sup> Manning herself had very strong views on Censorship, believing that, “Censorship killed Ireland” so it was inevitable this would feature in some respect in the debut issue.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> G. Bernard Shaw, ‘The Censorship’, *The Irish Statesman*, vol. 11, no. 11 (17 Nov. 1928), 207.

<sup>31</sup> This act followed the earlier Censorship of Films Act of 1923 which established the office of the Official Censor of Films and a Censorship of Films Appeal Board, named The Committee on Evil Literature from 1926.

<sup>32</sup> Arthur McHugh, ‘Books’, *Motley*, Vol 1, No. 1 (January 1932), 15.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Susan Howe, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2018, New Haven.

Censorship was a hugely controversial issue in Ireland since the inception of the new state and could be seen as an accurate barometer of the political and social mood of the country in the post-revolution years, as Terence Brown observes: “it might be wise to see Irish social and cultural conservatism reflected most obviously in the Censorship of Films Act of 1923, the Censorship of Publications Act of 1929.”<sup>34</sup> Conceived through bitter struggle and built on a platform of instability, a certain element of conservative harshness advanced inexorably in successive government policies. As Diarmaid Ferriter comments, “Cumann na nGaedheal’s commitment to strong state centralisation was an inevitable reaction to the civil war, and presaged an approach to the distribution of power in Ireland which was to become the hallmark of successive administrations.”<sup>35</sup> Within this framework a de facto alliance existed between Church and State with regular clerical statements and pronouncements issuing forth on matters of morality, creating what J.J. Lee describes as “A morbid preoccupation with occasions of sin in dance halls [that] would dominate pastoral pronouncements throughout the twenties and thirties.”<sup>36</sup> However, Lee feels the assuagement of the church’s policy masked a different motivation from the government: “The obsession with sex permitted a blind eye to be turned towards the social scars that disfigured the face of Ireland.”<sup>37</sup> Lee believes censorship was in fact a

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<sup>34</sup> Terence Brown, *Ireland a Social and Cultural History 1922-2001*, 30.

<sup>35</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2010), 306.

<sup>36</sup> J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: politics and society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 158-159.

<sup>37</sup> Lee, 159



collaboration between the Catholic middle class and the clergy who strongly supported Cumann na nGaedheal in the 1920s. "Censorship, Irish style, suitably symbolised the impoverishment of spirit and barrenness of mind of the risen bourgeoisie, touting for respectability."<sup>38</sup>

*Motley* would return to the censorship debate more thoroughly in later issues and with greater imagination and daring. Therefore, from the outset *Motley* established its unconventional and high-brow aspirations while offering a hint that it was unafraid of entering the contemporary debate. Adam McKible and Suzanne Churchill feel this is a feature commonplace with the little magazine: "Defying mainstream tastes and conventions, some little magazines aim to uphold higher artistic and intellectual standards than their commercial counterparts, while others seek to challenge conventional political wisdom and practice."<sup>39</sup> A measure of the interest generated by this new publication can be gauged by the response in the letters section of the second issue of *Motley* which was published in April 1932. Although generally praising the issue, and in a veiled reference to the censorship of O'Flaherty's novel, a Mr P. Murray wondered if McHugh's literary review section should be retitled 'Books To Burn.'<sup>40</sup> Other readers seized the opportunity to criticise Edwards'

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>39</sup> Adam McKible and Suzanne Churchill, 'Little Magazines and Modernism: An Introduction', 3.

<sup>40</sup> P. Murray, 'Correspondence', *Motley*, vol 1, no. 2 (April 1932), 14.

recent production of Christine Longford's *Queens And Emperors*.<sup>41</sup> Mark Rampeon complained, "Last week's production at the Gate has been the only one which I have not enjoyed" although he did offer his support to the publication: "I wish to thank the editor of *Motley* and hope its success will be eternal."<sup>42</sup> 'Respectfully Indignant' though was less charitable, believing the play antisemitic he remarked: "Looking at the tittering and amused audience, I realised that people had not advanced one bit since the middle ages when 'Jew Bating' was a dish served with great relish" and asserted Mr Edwards' part in the first act was "more like that of an Oriental Beggar than that of a king."<sup>43</sup> Therefore it is evident that the magazine had engaged with elements of the Dublin literati and the letters section was a recurring feature throughout the magazine's history.

The issue also featured several advertisements. Recourse to advertising revenue in *Motley* may seem at odds with its radical agenda, but it is typical of little magazines to be pragmatic about their sources of revenue in order to maintain their survival, as Brooker and Thacker note, "[Little magazine's] periodical codes would seem to conflict with its uncompromising cultural politics, but in essence it simply used the economic means at hand for its own ends rather than be used by them."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Queens and Emperors* premiered at the Gate on 15th March 1932. *The Irish Times* described the piece as "only the very thinnest of comedy." *The Irish Times*, 16<sup>th</sup> March 1932, 6.

<sup>42</sup> 'Correspondence', *Motley*, Vol 1, No. 2 (April 1932), 14.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Brooker and Thacker, 15.

One can recognise a distinctive editorial shape forming, primarily a self-promotional element with discussion and commentary on the work and current programme of the Gate theatre, and praising its past achievements. This aspect is evident in an early article entitled 'The Theatre And The Plays':

In the course of its four years of existence the Dublin Gate Theatre has produced a surprisingly large number of plays, and even more surprisingly than the large number is the great variety of our productions. A theatre that can jump straight from the heights of tragedy in *Hamlet* to the borderlands of farce in *Topaze*, or from Percy Robinson's dignified figures in Mexican history to Mary Manning's impassioned drama of contemporaries and fellow citizens of our own, and is continually making journeys in time and space, in type and method as surprising and as rapid as these, cannot be accused of monotony.<sup>45</sup>

These editorials and occasional features had a habit of flattering the theatre's audience while at the same time thumbing its nose at its rivals; a particularly noteworthy example surfaced in the same article published in April 1932:

The audience at our theatre is highly intelligent; it is most attentive and follows every word of a play with eagerness, and with determination to miss nothing. It has a keen sense of the dramatic, appreciates fine speech, and has an eye for beauty whether in play, production, acting, setting or lighting. They are, perhaps, more easily moved to tears than to laughter, and their appreciation is none the less profound because it sometimes lies too deep for cheers. Ill-timed applause and half-witted guffaws we leave to other theatres.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Unattributed author, 'The Theatre and The Plays', *Motley*, vol. 1, no. 2 (April 1932), 2. *Topaze* (1928) is a play in four acts by the French writer Marcel Pagnol. It tells the story of a modest schoolteacher who is fired for being too honest and decides to become a dishonest businessman. The play premiered on 9 October 1928 at the Théâtre des Variétés. It was performed on Broadway in 1930 with Frank Morgan in the title role. The Gate produced the play in February 1932 directed by Hilton Edwards and with Micheal Mac Liammóir in the titular role. The play has had several film adaptations including a 1961 adaption directed by and starring Peter Sellers. The play *Archdupe* is listed in the Gate Theatre Archives at Northwestern University as a play by Percy Robinson performed at the Gate Theatre in 1931.

<sup>46</sup> Unattributed author, 'The Theatre And The Plays', vol. 1, no. 2 (April 1932), 2.

This incessant repetition of the value and prominence of the Gate is a constant feature throughout the lifespan of *Motley* which feels both unnecessary and a miscalculation on behalf of Manning as it leaves the reader with a distinct sense of editorial defensiveness. The work of the Abbey Theatre is largely ignored, with *Motley* preferring to praise the work of smaller Irish theatres and local small companies. The Gate, a theatre famous for its prolific output, adventurous programming and distinctiveness of style should not feel the need to consistently justify its place in the contemporary theatrical community.

One only need examine Frank O'Connor's record of his time as a board member of the Abbey recorded in his memoir *My Father's Son* which offers a clear insight into the mind of the Abbey management with regard to the Gate Theatre: "Meanwhile across the street from the Abbey two enthusiastic penniless actors from London, Micheál MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards, were filling their little theatre, the Gate, with productions of European classics like *Brand*, *Peer Gynt* and *Anna Christie*. When anyone mentioned their success Yeats was furious."<sup>47</sup> The discomfort the Abbey felt with the Gate's success even went as far as requiring the leadership of the organisation to implement a change in management structure and programming ethos: "So the first thing the new board did, just as Hayes joined it, was to import a young English director called Hugh Hunt and a young English stage designer called Tanya

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<sup>47</sup> Frank O'Connor, *My Father's Son* (London, Macmillan, 1968), 142.

Moiseiwitsch, to balance Edwards and Mac Liammóir and set them to producing a rigmarole of 'European' plays like *Noah*, *Coriolanus* and *Dr Faustus*."<sup>48</sup>

To Manning's credit though, from the outset she was not afraid to continue the tradition of *The Irish Statesman* with the promotion of new writing talent. Brooker and Thacker describe one of the principle motivating paradigms of the little magazine as, "servicing new writing, introducing readers to new movements in the arts across different continents, engendering debate, disseminating ideas, and challenging settled assumptions."<sup>49</sup> In the previous decade AE offered encouragement, direction and support to many young writers, publishing work by the likes of Seán Ó Faoláin, Frank O'Connor and Patrick Kavanagh. This exposure is the lifeblood for new and young writing talent, providing a platform for the work and the psychological justification that the author is pursuing the right path. It is also what makes these 'little magazines' a crucial organ in the development of twentieth-century Irish literature. In the second issue of *Motley*, Manning published a poem by the twenty-one-year-old Michael Sayers entitled *Mood*:<sup>50</sup>

Being young and fond and foolish  
How should I presume to doubt?  
God upon a monarch like a shout

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>49</sup> Brooker and Thacker, 3.

<sup>50</sup> Michael Sayers (1911-2010) was a 20th-century Irish poet, playwright, and novelist. He studied French at Trinity College and was taught by Samuel Beckett. Several titles he co-authored with Albert E. Kahn made him a target of US blacklisting during the McCarthyism era of the 1950s. He wrote scripts for TV in the 1950s, and as a screenwriter in the 1960s for movies including *Casino Royale*.

Of trumpet sounds as bold as flesh:  
I can recall the exile; I have no wish  
The serried ranks of rules to flout.

Malice have I none, or little as may be.  
Desire and ostentation trouble me  
But little or not at all as the case may be.  
O, but thine eyes, they trouble me!

I come to think of soft sweet pipings,  
Lutes that sing as sweet as shaking branches of a tree;  
My heart is futile like a lad that's sings  
Of olden sorrow that yet bears no history.<sup>51</sup>

Sayers would go on to a distinguished literary career and was an important commentator on the rise of the right-wing movement in Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s. *Motley* continued offering valuable exposure and support of young talent throughout its existence.

One noteworthy example of this patronage is an effusive review of the self-published *Twenty Poems* by twenty-two-year-old Niall Sheridan and Donagh MacDonagh. In her two-page analysis Christine Longford was effusive about the technical prowess and emotional intelligence of the young writers:

Mr Sheridan and Mr MacDonagh know the first things about poetry: they know the value of words, and they know that the use of poetry is to express an intensity

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<sup>51</sup> Michael Sayers, 'Mood', *Motley*, vol 1, no. 2 (April 1932), 4.

of feeling and thought of which prose is incapable. They have a technical mastery of verse, but their poetry is not versified prose: and because they know the conventional melodies, they are the better qualified to make experiments.<sup>52</sup>

The theatre promoted its avant garde nationalist tendencies through *Motley* and used it as a noticeboard to reach out to new writing talent:

The Gate never forgets its ambition to be in the truest sense a national as well as an international theatre, and to give a chance to native writers whose works show merit, if they are suited to our company, our methods of production and our audience. We invite, as in the past, the dramatists of Ireland to send us their plays, and promise a sympathetic reading, and we will endeavour to produce the best and most suitable, when the opportunity arises.<sup>53</sup>

The November 1933 issue saw an interesting new development, when the editors devised a competition to discover new writing talent among young people below the age of thirty, with the inclusion of a literary prize open to the public. The competition entitled 'Come into the Sun' was judged by Frank O'Connor with the prize money offered of three guineas by Moya Llewelyn Davis: "We hope that this sincere effort to discover and encourage native genius will bear fruit. Help us by advertising it as much as possible among your friends."<sup>54</sup> It was these incentives that were particularly refreshing and valuable and *Motley* would continue to offer literary prizes up until its final issue.

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<sup>52</sup> Christine Longford, *Motley*, vol 3, No. 3 (April 1934), 12-13.

<sup>53</sup> Unattributed author, 'Still Going Forward' *Motley*, vol. 2, no. 5 (September 1933), 2.

<sup>54</sup> Unattributed author, "'Motley' Literary Completion', *Motley*, Vol 2, No. 7 (November 1933), 2.

As *Motley* continued its publishing life, an increasing sense of radicalism becomes more evident in its pages. Reacting to the establishment of the Fianna Fáil government earlier that year one can detect a shift in the tone of the magazine with a more polemic perspective becoming increasingly evident and a greater emphasis on social commentary moved to the centre of its ethos. *Motley's* third issue, published in August 1932, saw a change in form and branching out of subject matter with longer, more detailed articles; it also featured contributions from Seán Ó Faoláin and a poem by Blanaid Salkeld.<sup>55</sup> Ó Faoláin sets out a characteristically damning critique of provincialism, what he termed the “Gaelic Mist”, and its negative impact on the Irish literary movement, condemning most of the major writers to exile: “The prose-writers who have been in the main realists it would except under no terms and, as a result, the prose men are almost without exception, in exile – to name a few, [Liam] O’Flaherty, [George] Moore, [Con] O’Leary, [Ernest] Boyd, [Conal] O’Riordan, [Eithne] Strong, Miss [Kate] O’Brien, [James] Joyce.” He concludes the piece with an obvious swipe at the post revolution Ireland at that time and he evoked Madame Roland’s famous anti-revolutionary appeal:

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<sup>55</sup> Seán Ó Faoláin (1900-1991) was one of the most influential figures in 20th-century Irish letters. A short-story writer of international repute, he was also a leading commentator and critic. From 1940 to 1946 was a founder member and editor of the Irish literary periodical *The Bell*. The list of contributors to *The Bell* included many of Ireland's foremost writers, among them Patrick Kavanagh, Patrick Swift, Flann O'Brien, Frank O'Connor and Brendan Behan. Blánaid Salkeld (1880-1959) was an Irish poet, dramatist, actor, and publisher. She acted with the Abbey Players under the stage name Nell Byrne. She contributed numerous book reviews to *The Dublin Magazine*, *Irish Writing*, and *The Bell*. The salons she hosted in her home were frequented by Kate O'Brien, Arland Ussher, Patrick Kavanagh, Flann O'Brien, and Micheál Mac Liammóir. Her first volume of poetry, *Hello Eternity*, was praised by Samuel Beckett.



It is weariness of the provincial rabble – I use Joyce’s word - that has driven George Moore to write beautifully of mediaeval Europe when he had begun to write beautifully of Ireland; the loss is there merely national. But it is exile also, it seems to me, that has set Joyce thinking and writing esoterically, and O’Flaherty, at times, melodramatically. While it is that native provincialism gripping those that have remained at home which has produced the sentimentalism of the happy patriates. O, Liberty – one might well conclude – how many crimes have been committed in thy name.<sup>56</sup>

Contributions such as these would prove valuable practice for O’Faoláin as he cut his teeth before becoming more deeply involved in little magazines such as *Ireland To-Day* (1936-38) before establishing his own celebrated monthly, *The Bell*, in 1940.

The following month saw *Motley* take a distinct shift towards the left of the political spectrum with a step into the world of agit-prop theatre through a featured article by a contributor identified only as “Sean” calling for ‘A Workers’ Theatre.’<sup>57</sup> Sean, we are told, “has lived for some time under the Soviet; he worked in Russian Theatre, and is a personal friend of Serge Eisenstein the famous film director.”<sup>58</sup> Who ‘Sean’ was must remain moot but what he has to say chimes with Manning’s politics:

Can Dublin succeed in creating a workers’ theatre movement? I am doubtful. A workers’ theatre must reflect in no small measure the social consciousness of the masses. If the social consciousness of the masses is poorly developed, then a workers’ theatre will end in being a “little” theatre putting on those plays that

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<sup>56</sup> Seán Ó Faoláin, ‘Provincialism and Literature’, *Motley*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (August 1932), 4. Marie-Jeanne ‘Manon’ Roland de la Platière (1754-1793), was a French revolutionary, salonnière and writer. She was part of the post-revolutionary Girondin faction and was executed by guillotine after being convicted by the National Convention of conspiring with exiled Aristocrats.

<sup>57</sup> Sean, ‘A Worker’s Theatre’, *Motley*, Vol 1, No.4 (September 1932), 3.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

cost the least or such plays that the authors themselves finance to ensure presentation.<sup>59</sup>

This is a particularly brave stance as there was a growing suspicion of left-wing politics and an emerging pro-fascist group emerging in Ireland at that time. Manning would later that decade produce her novel *Mount Venus* (1938) which was an elaborate critique of the Irish right and the De Valera government.

Manning's 'Processional' also celebrated the birth of the Irish Academy of Letters which had taken place in a ceremony at the Peacock Theatre on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> September: "Dr Yeats lavished praise on the work of Frank O'Connor and Francis Stuart. He asserted that Liam O'Flaherty's novel, *The Puritan*, was a masterpiece, suppressed, of course, by our "preposterous Censorship" and spoke of the influence those four Irish writers, O'Flaherty, O'Donnell, Stuart and O'Connor were exercising in the world of literature."<sup>60</sup> In the same issue Austin Clarke offered a pro-feminist piece 'Love in Irish Poetry and Drama' and *Motley* noted in its introduction that his recent novel, *The Bright Temptation* "...has just come under the ban of the Free State Censors."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 3. The idea of A Workers Theatre had been prevalent for some time mainly in Soviet Russia and Weimar Germany, particularly in Brecht's ideas of *Lehrstücke* or learning plays which were highly didactic in purpose and sought to politicise their audience.

<sup>60</sup> Mary Manning, 'Processional', *Motley*, vol 1, no.5 (October 1932), 7.

<sup>61</sup> Austin Clarke, 'Love in Irish Poetry And Drama', Vol 1, No. 5 (October 1932), 3. Austin Clarke (1896-1974), was an Irish poet, playwright and novelist. Clarke's three novels: *The Bright Temptation* (1932), *The Singing Men at Cashel* (1936), and *The Sun Dances at Easter* (1952) were banned by the Censorship of Publications Board.

Soon after the establishment of the Irish Academy of Letters, *Motley* strode into a battle that had been raging through the letters sections of the *Irish Times* as a result of a speech Father Gannon made in November 1932 condemning the recently founded Academy of Letters. In the speech Fr Gannon deplored Yeats and Shaw as “aspiring to the role of moral philosophers or universal intellectual guides to the Irish people” and he declared “to both of them in this capacity the majority of people have deep seated and well-founded objections.”<sup>62</sup> *Motley’s* response was rapid and lacerating, although Manning was careful to publish under a pseudonym: “Bishops must show an example of good manners to their flocks; it is part of their job. But no such restraint is imposed on any other kind of controversialist, and I am sadly perturbed by the self-control of the tough fellows who have gone forth to battle either for or against the Academy of Letters.”<sup>63</sup>

The debate about the Academy of Letters persisted and one must admire the courage Manning in publishing a particularly incendiary article penned by P.S. O’Hegarty which was highly critical of certain members that comprised the Academy.<sup>64</sup> He dismissed several members of the academy including Seán Ó Faoláin whose *Midsummer Night’s Madness* he considered, “does not seem to me to be of such

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<sup>62</sup> *Irish Times, The New Irish Academy - “AE” responds to Father Gannon*, 15<sup>th</sup> November 1932, 7.

<sup>63</sup> L.M.S. ‘Concerning the Controversy’, *Motley*, vol. 2, no. 1 (January 1933), 4.

<sup>64</sup> Patrick Sarsfield O’Hegarty (1879 – 1955) was an Irish writer, editor and historian and a former member of the Supreme Council of the [Irish Republican Brotherhood](#).

exceptional merit to be included.”<sup>65</sup> Regarding Peadar O’Donnell, he felt that the Donegal author “has written one good minor book, *Islanders*, one not so good, *Adrigole*, and several others of decreasing merit.”<sup>66</sup> O’Hegarty saved his special spleen for Liam O’Flaherty whose work he dismissed: “in its style, artificial, and in its matter, that it has one thing to say, that he said it in his first book”. His short story work he condemned as “second rate on the whole.”<sup>67</sup> O’Hegarty did, however, venture some names for inclusion including Rev. J. O. Hannay, Dr J.H. Pollock and Shan F. Bullock as meritorious contenders for inclusion in the Academy. In praising Denis Johnston’s expressionist masterpiece, *The Old Lady Says No!*, O’Hegarty offered a side swipe at Ireland’s appreciation of its artists: “If Mr Johnston was an Englishman and had written this play on English life he would be famous in five continents, instead of being sniffed at on an island.”<sup>68</sup>

The griping missives continued in the following issue as the death of George Moore and the refusal of Sean O’Casey and Daniel Corkery to take their places on the Academy prompted O’Hegarty to publish another article on the matter suggesting these places be occupied by Alice Milligan, Stephen Gwynn and Lord Dunsany. He also offered his assessment of the associates, adding a scathing opinion about the

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<sup>65</sup> P.S. O’Hegarty, ‘About The Academy Of Letters’, *Motley*, vol. 2, no. 2 (February 1933), 11.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

appointment of Eugene O'Neill: "After all, especially as we can do without him, let us not be so heartless as to deprive America of her one literary ewe lamb."<sup>69</sup> O'Hegarty then turned his attention to the Gate Theatre actors – in the following issue of *Motley*, his article 'A Cold Bath For The Gate' offered salacious criticism of some of the theatre's performances, the acting ensemble and singled out Edwards for particular attention as, "of late been more often inarticulate than articulate. He is getting into the habit of running his words one into the other and slurring over syllables which makes him somewhat hard to follow."<sup>70</sup> Offering words of wisdom he suggested:

It is a point on which the Gate has everything to learn from the Abbey. *Drama at Inish* is a case in point of excellent ensemble. Every word was articulate, and even the most minor part was part of a performance which was a whole performance. It was good all through and not merely good in patches.<sup>71</sup>

The article drew an almost inevitable riposte from Hilton Edwards who, in the same issue published an article entitled 'And A Handkerchief for Mr O'Hegarty'. Edwards rejected the correspondent's earlier comments about Denis Johnston suggesting, "Mr O'Hegarty himself is not entirely free from the sniffing habit, a habit which he shares with the major portion of Dublin's Intelligentsia."<sup>72</sup> With bold resolution Edwards concluded: "The cold baths of a thousand critics cannot hold us back or keep us down.

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<sup>69</sup> P.S. O'Hegarty, 'More About the Academy', *Motley*, vol. 2, no. 3, (March 1933), 6.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>72</sup> P.S. O'Hegarty, 'A Cold Bath for The Gate', *Motley*, vol. 2, no. 4 (April-May 1933), 7.

We are bound to advance. 'Le Roi est nee.' Come out of the snows of yesteryear! Hail brave new world! No more sniffing! Please! A handkerchief for Mr O' Hegarty."<sup>73</sup> This thrust of the sword proved sufficient to end the discussion.

With subsequent issues one can detect a growth in confidence and a more polemic agenda evident in its content. *Motley* soon offered yet more sophisticated commentary on the censorship debate with Seán Ó Faoláin composing a strong piece attacking government policy and its impact on writers in Ireland:

Ireland, of a surety, is a strange place for a novelist to labour in. If he writes about the past, you ask him to consider the present, and if he writes about the present, you warn him that if he doesn't stop it he may have no future. Caught between indifference and impatience, he is troubled by a snort and discouraged by a snore; he has no critics even half as much interested in what he does as in what they are doing themselves; everything he writes is examined, not for its merit, but its content, and the content is measured by a dream – your dream.<sup>74</sup>

*Motley* was successfully keeping the censorship debate in the public eye, a tradition continued and accelerated by Ó Faoláin in the pages of *Ireland To-Morrow* and later *The Bell*, as Terence Brown notes: "From the first issue Ó Faoláin made it his business to mount a sustained, unremitting attack on the censorship board. What gave his criticism its extra cutting edge (and the pro censorship lobby was incensed by the *Bell's* campaign) was that Ó Faoláin could not be dismissed as simply another Ascendency

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<sup>73</sup> Hilton Edwards, 'And A Handkerchief for Mr O'Hegarty', *Motley*, vol. 2, no. 4 (April-May 1933), 8-9.

<sup>74</sup> Seán Ó Faoláin, 'Letter From A Novelist To An Idealist', *Motley*, vol. 2, no. 7 (November 1933), 4.

free thinker writing to the *Irish Times* on behalf of free thought.”<sup>75</sup> September 1933 saw an interesting article entitled ‘A Proposal For The Strengthening Of The Censorship’ where, in the manner of Swift, the writer caustically satirises the policy:

I incline, therefore, to determent rather than to prohibition – a policy which will involve a wide extension of the useful occupation of censoring our neighbours. and will enlarge the revenues of the state. There is levied at present a small tax on imported books: but this is useless as a preventative, and negligible as revenue. We should suppose all foreign books guilty until they have proved their innocence, as a wise man has recommended: that is to say, all books will be denied sale until the censors issue judgement, as is done in the case of films, and be subjected to a considerable tax, both when brought before the board, and later on each copy, if and when they come into circulation.<sup>76</sup>

Although the article is written anonymously, Christopher Fitz-Simon attributes it to Samuel Beckett: “The article is unsigned, but must surely have been written by Samuel Beckett, who was in Dublin at the time – his father had just died – and was a close friend of Mary Manning. It bears a strong resemblance to the much fuller Censorship in the Saorstát (Free State) of 1936.”<sup>77</sup>

With Manning’s interest in motion pictures it was inevitable *Motley* would turn its attention towards the cinema in Ireland. Aside from reporting on new releases and articles praising practitioners of the calibre of the German expressionist actor Conrad Veidt, she also used the columns and reviews as a mechanism for attacks on

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<sup>75</sup> Terence Brown, *Ireland a Social and Cultural History*, 184.

<sup>76</sup> Unattributed author, ‘A Proposal for The Strengthening Of The Censorship’, *Motley*, vol. 2, no. 5 (September 1933), 5.

<sup>77</sup> Christopher Fitzsimon, *The Boys: A Double Biography* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1994), 79.

censorship and provincialism. In her article 'Why Not A Repertory Cinema?' clearly outlines her philosophy:

We want to see *Madchen in Uniform*, *Kameradschaft*, *The way of life*, Eene Clair's last film *Drifters*; and *Excelsior*, and all the modern masterpieces we read about, but never see. We would like to see revivals of the silents, *Greed*, *Warning Shadows*, *The Last laugh*, and *The Student of Prague*; also some of the more interesting talkies made within recent years, *Murder*, *Blackmail*, and various other good talkies with outstanding qualities. The *Mediocre* is too much with us, let us for Heaven's sake pull out of the provincial rut, and demand our rights as intelligent people to the best in Art, the best in entertainment, the best in everything. But are we intelligent people? I wonder – but what about that Repertory Cinema?<sup>78</sup>

The debate on provincialism was continued by Owen Sheehy-Skeffington who contributed an article on the state of the theatre and cinema in Paris with the writer declaring, "The Paris theatre offers but little of outstanding merit at the moment."<sup>79</sup> Yet he was more praiseworthy of Parisian taste and the frequent programming of foreign language movies, in stark contrast, he noted, to Cinema managers in Dublin: "If we can judge by the opinion of the Dublin cinema managers (with one admirable exception), the Irish public is not interested in anything which has not first been translated into English for them. In the French capital, as I write, there are showing seven English films, six German, one Russian, one Japanese, and one Czeck, all talkies."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Mary Manning, 'Why Not A Repertory Cinema?', *Motley*, vol 1, no. 4 (September 1932), 14.

<sup>79</sup> Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, 'Paris: Stage And Screen', *Motley*, vol. 2, no. 1 (January 1933), 10.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.



Manning offered the readership a promise of future criticism although she intended to use this content to promote her anti-provincialism and anti-censorship agenda: "Film criticism is to be a feature of MOTLEY from now on. In our next number we shall endeavour to get advance news on intelligent films coming into this country, where they are to be seen, etc."<sup>81</sup> True to her word, Manning published a two-page film review section where she compared *Street Scene* to *The Melody of Life* and offered her opinions on the current state of Hollywood production.<sup>82</sup> She also offered a 'Films To See' recommendation of current releases, promoting *Kameradschaft*, *Platinum Blonde* and *The Crowd Roared*.<sup>83</sup> An article in a later issue on actress Marlene Dietrich provided Manning with yet another opportunity to attack the Irish Censor:

The censor reduced the first half of *Shanghai Express* to a jigsaw puzzle. The pure spent their time in a puzzled state of bewilderment, the impure reconstructing and filling in the blanks to their own satisfaction. It seems that in Dublin you can put across any suggestive story or situation in a music hall act, but the films must be censored out of rhyme or reason. Curious, very curious.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>82</sup> *Street Scene* is a 1931 American pre-Code drama film produced by Samuel Goldwyn and directed by King Vidor. With a screenplay by Elmer Rice adapted from his Pulitzer Prize-winning play of the same name.

<sup>83</sup> *Kameradschaft* (English: Comradeship) is a 1931 film directed by Austrian director G. W. Pabst. The film is noted for combining expressionism and realism, and concerns a mine disaster where German miners rescue French miners from an underground fire and explosion. *Platinum Blonde* is a 1931 American romantic comedy starring Jean Harlow, Robert Williams, and Loretta Young. The film was written by Jo Swerling and directed by Frank Capra. *The Crowd Roars* is a 1932 American pre-Code film directed by Howard Hawks starring James Cagney and featuring Joan Blondell, Ann Dvorak, Eric Linden, Guy Kibbee, and Frank McHugh.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, Vol 1. No.7, 14.

In 'The Films' Manning again took an opportunity to make a critique of censorship: "Within recent years the establishment of certain forms of dictatorship, the growth of self-conscious nationalism among the smaller nations, with corresponding activity amongst religious bodies, has led to an ever increasing censorship of the artistic mind."<sup>85</sup> Manning was supported in her film criticism by Owen Sheehy-Skeffington who offered his appreciation of avant-garde French cinema tastes in Paris: "Almost every fortnight *Monde* gives the public an opportunity of seeing an unusual film, of which they might otherwise ignore the existence. The German film, *Emile et les Dectectives*, was their last production. A film acted largely by children not of the infant prodigy type, it is sufficed by a real simplicity, which is rare on the screen. Produced under somewhat similar conditions to *Melchen in Uniform*, being acted by over a hundred children, most of whom had never acted before, it has a great freshness about it."<sup>86</sup>

Manning employed a variety of forms to implement her anti-censorship agenda. In a late issue of *Motley*, she contributed a short satirical children's story as an overt condemnation of the state's attitude to censorship and foreign films entitled 'The Fairchild Family At The Films'. Mr Fairchild explains to his children that, "most of the films we see here are made in foreign countries, such as England, Russia and Hollywood, where promiscuity is not only condoned but applauded". Wiping away

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, Vol 1 No.7, 11-12.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, Vol 1, No. 7, 11.

a tear he continues, "Crowds of poor misguided souls go to these films and are led astray. If it wasn't for our good, kind censor, I shudder to think what might happen."<sup>87</sup> In her final clout at the government censorship policy, Manning wrote a short satirical piece entitled *Bongo-Bongo*, which was no doubt a satirical nod to the film *Tarzan and Jane* the previous year that had featured Maureen O'Hara in the titular role.<sup>88</sup> In the piece, an Irish family is marooned on an Island of pygmies where a beautiful girl is about to be burned at the stake. Manning supplied a footnote: "designed to meet the requirements of censorships in all parts of the world except the Irish Free State. -Here the Pygmy scenes were cut in their entirety."<sup>89</sup> An early indication of the motivating principles behind Seán Ó Faoláin's *The Bell* are offered in this issue: "The Gaelic revivalist, the Irish-Irelander, the would-be separatist, every brand of active Nationalist dislikes the word [Anglo-Ireland] so thoroughly that he ends by disliking his own people, almost, indeed, by disliking himself."<sup>90</sup> This stance anticipates the rationalising agenda for *The Bell*, as Kelly Matthews concedes: "Such a statement prefigures the founding mission of *The Bell*, which would aim to redress this break in the Irish psyche and resolve what Ó Faoláin and others saw as a national identity

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<sup>87</sup> Mary Manning, 'The Fairchild Family at The Films', *Motley*, vol. 2, no. 7 (November 1933), 13.

<sup>88</sup> *Motley* vol 2, no.8, 14. Maureen O'Sullivan (1911-1998) was an Irish born actress, best known for playing Jane in the Tarzan series of films during the era of Johnny Weissmuller.

<sup>89</sup> Mary Manning, 'Bongo-Bongo', *Motley*, vol 2, no. 8 (December 1933), 14.

<sup>90</sup> Seán Ó Faoláin, 'Letter from a Nationalist', *Motley* 2:7 (November 1933), 4.

crisis.”<sup>91</sup>The pages of undoubtably provided a welcome opportunity for Ó Faoláin and others to stimulate debate and provoke the readership with their thoughts and ideas.

*Motley* also reported on the ongoing production of Denis Johnston’s film of Frank O’Connor’s short story *Guests of the Nation*, which was in production during the summers of 1933 and 1934 and which received its premiere at the Gate Theatre in December 1934. As the film was shot over a fifteen-month period with, quite literally, scenes acquired in the directors’ parents back garden, this exposure would serve as valuable pre-publicity for the project and maintain a level of interest and energy for everyone involved. This ambitious project was the first wholly native independent Irish film production.

Along with its social and political agenda *Motley* was also industrious in provoking debate on the quality of drama in Ireland, the position of new writing and the responsibilities of theatre:

Is there a host of worthy successors to the great ones? The Gate has given Ireland E.W. Tocher, Mary Manning, David Sears and some other people of great promise. A stream of genius if you like but hardly a flood as yet! The Abbey has the same tale to tell. Nor have the minor groups unearthed the buried treasure.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Kelly Matthews, *The Bell magazine and the representation of Irish identity: opening windows* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012), 12.

<sup>92</sup> Unattributed author, ‘The Present Position of Irish Drama’, *Motley*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (November 1932), 2. The Gate also organised two symposiums debating the state of Theatre in Ireland.

The principal of avant garde nationalism was consistently at the heart of the philosophy of the theatre and its perceptions of the paths it should follow in the future.

*Motley* called upon a shunning of what it viewed as ancient forms of drama, and it craved a new, modernist approach in form and ideas in order to create a distinctive Irish voice and aesthetic from a new drama of national consciousness:

Ireland is in transition; the nation is finding its soul. New forces are at work; new ideas are crowding in upon us. At the same time, many ancient things that are a vital part of our nationality are coming once again to be honoured. We are finding our language, and with it not so much our ancient culture as the path to a new culture arising out of that essential part of Ireland which transcends time. When our feet are once firmly set upon that path, our minds will doubtless pour forth new riches and a wonderful Irish drama will be born.<sup>93</sup>

The Gate rejected the post-revolutionary realist movement in Irish theatre; in an article entitled 'Realism' the directors attempted to explain their reasoning:

In fact our recent production of *Romeo and Juliet*, represents one of the final stages in the emancipation of the Gate from the realist obsession, which has afflicted the theatre, and in particular Irish theatre for so many years. And the most gratifying thing is that the audience does not seem to feel the lack of that realism which ten years ago most of them would have taken for granted. Which shows that the mind of the public is also being emancipated.<sup>94</sup>

The issue also reported on the recent symposium which was designed to address the question of internationalism in theatre although it seems to have been more than a little chaotic in its proceedings: "During the evening, the subject 'Should The Theatre

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>94</sup> Unattributed author, 'Realism', *Motley*, vol 1, no. 7 (December 1932), 2.

Be International?’ was gradually filed down to the burning questions: “Where were you in 1916” or “What did you do in 1922?” and “Is it necessary to be pre-Truce I.R.A. to write a good play”.<sup>95</sup> “Mr Peadar O’Donnell made, perhaps, the best contribution to the discussion when he said that the real function of drama was not to explain life – but to reveal it – to floodlight the facts of life. He also said that writers cannot be consciously National. He can only work on material that excites him, write out of his own environment.”<sup>96</sup>

*Motley* reported on an attempt by English playwrights to make sense of the Anglo-Irish war of independence. The London production of *The Key*, a play by R. Gore Browne and J.L. Hardy provided an English perspective on the recent conflict and in effect was very reminiscent of Frank O’Connor’s *Guests of the Nation*. The play features Andrew Kerr, a young British secret service agent serving in Dublin in 1920. In the first act Kerr is preparing to go out on a second raid of the evening, but his passionate wife Janet implores him not to go. He proceeds nevertheless and while he is gone the young aide-de-campe of the General at Dublin Castle, Lieutenant Tennant, seduces her. Andrew returns unexpectedly early and suspects that Janet has had a lover in the flat. An argument ensues and Janet confesses. Andrew in a rage leaves the flat without his weapon and is captured by the IRA. We learn that earlier an IRA man

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<sup>95</sup> Unattributed author, ‘The Symposium’, *Motley*, vol. 1, no. 7 (December 1932), 5.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 6. The Gate held a symposium on Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> November with Lord Longford in the chair, the symposium was entitled ‘Should the Theatre Be International’.

named Conlon is about to be hanged by the British and negotiations begin for a trade-off between the two men. However, the promising premise suddenly breaks down in the third act and the critic feels the writers display their lack of understanding of the Irish conflict and succumb to melodrama: “There was an obvious straightforward end to this story: that Conlon should be hung and Kerr shot, Janet left to her broken heart, and Tennant to his conscience. But the authors couldn’t face this. They collapse into a modified happy ending.”<sup>97</sup>

*Motley* ceased publication with its May 1934 issue promising “to return again in the autumn”.<sup>98</sup> The relatively short life span of the little magazine is a very common feature of the format. Edward Bishop reasons that this is due to the fact that, “the little magazine is always in an adversarial position to the dominant culture, and when it loses that adversarial edge, or the enthusiasm of its backer, it dies. Thus most little magazines have a very short run.”<sup>99</sup> In the case of *Motley*, though, more value may be placed on the stamina of the principal player, Manning and the factor of exhaustion may feature. This was a fact not lost on Seán Ó Faoláin who recruited editorial support

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<sup>97</sup> S. Llewellyn Davies, ‘The Key’, *Motley*, vol. 2, no. 7 (November 1933), 10. In 1934 *The Key* was made into a motion picture, directed by Michael Curtiz, with the screenplay by Laird Doyle. The piece was a vehicle for actor William Powell who played Tennant, with the narrative angled as a romantic lead for Powell. Powell was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actor three times: for *The Thin Man* (1934), *My Man Godfrey* (1936), and *Life with Father* (1947).

<sup>98</sup> *Motley*, ‘Till we meet again’, vol 3. no.4.

<sup>99</sup> Edward Bishop, ‘Re:Covering Modernism – Format and Function in the Little Magazines’, *Modernist Writers and the Workspcae* ed., Ian Wilson, Warwick Gould and Warren Chernaik (London: Macmillian 1986), 287.

for *The Bell* and attempted to make its workings more organised and professional. As Matthews notes, Ó Faoláin learned from the mistakes of *Motley* and *Ireland To-day* by not having a lone editor: “*The Bell* was managed by an established board and not one editor alone, and Ó Faoláin worked assiduously to treat his contributors as professionals.”<sup>100</sup> Through its twenty-eight-month life span *Motley* undoubtedly generated excitement, interesting social commentary and afforded a much-valued outlet for young and established Irish writing talent, and although it would be remiss to suggest it provided a template for Ó Faoláin, it certainly offered a signpost.

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<sup>100</sup> Matthews, *The Bell magazine*, 13.



## **Cross Cut: Experiments in expressionism – early Irish film and the European avant-garde**

It is because I realise that the script is function of its means of realisation that I am anxious to make contact with your mastery of these, and to beg you to consider me a serious Cinéaste worthy of admission to your school.

Letter from Samuel Beckett to Sergei Eisenstein, 2<sup>nd</sup> March, 1936.

The early 1930s saw a number of Irish film enthusiasts, drawn mainly from the Dublin theatrical community, schooled and inspired by the European avant-garde, who sought to express themselves using the ideas and stylistic conventions of these movements. At the very heart of this new Irish collective was Mary Manning. This chapter will examine the contribution Manning made to a swell of independent films that were shot in Ireland in the early 1930s and will consider how these ideas transferred and helped formulate, not only the work she did with filmmakers, but also her theatre practice. I will also examine how contemporary European cinema - and in particular the German Expressionist movement and Russian cinema - had a profound influence on Manning, and how she appropriated some of these ideas and stylistic conventions into her first play *Youths The Season-?*, while affording it a uniquely Irish sensibility.

In the 1930s the Irish film industry was markedly inferior to its British and European counterparts. Early efforts at film making in Ireland were mainly newsreels, short documentaries or whimsical comedies; cinema managers also had the practice of filming their audiences coming into the movie theatre and screening the footage at

the next screening, no doubt in an attempt to entice their patrons to return to see themselves on screen. The first fully fledged Irish film production, *Irish Wives and English Husbands* (1907), was produced by the British Alpha Film Company.<sup>1</sup> Looking to the Irish audience abroad, the narrative of choice in these early efforts was mainly emigration and its impact on the land and people. There has been little scholarly writing on this period of early Irish film, the most significant contributions have come from Liam O'Leary whose painstaking and invaluable collection of materials and ephemera are held at the National Library of Ireland.<sup>2</sup> The biggest success from this period was *The Lad From Old Ireland* (1910), an American motion picture directed by and starring Sidney Olcott and written by and co-starring Gene Gauntier. In the film a young man, forced to flee to America, makes good and returns to save his sweetheart from the absentee landlord. It was the success of this film that led the American based Kalem Company to establish a production base in Killarney, making thirty mainly emigration dramas and romantic melodramas. It is interesting to note an early instance of pressure from the British censor objecting to the Robert Emmet historical drama, *Ireland's Martyr* (1914), forcing Kalem to withdraw the film from distribution.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on early film production in Ireland see Denis Condon, *Early Irish Cinema 1895-1921* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> The National Library of Ireland houses this extensive collection of documents, manuscripts, journals and newspaper clippings and ephemera along with other items such as photographs and film stills, posters, slides, artefacts, VHS tapes, audio reels and cassettes. Liam O'Leary (1910-1992); a founding member of the Irish Film Society and film historian and researcher. O'Leary laid the foundation stone of the Irish Film Archive, in April 1992, where his film collection is now preserved.

<sup>3</sup> Denis Condon, *Early Irish Cinema 1895-1921* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008), 106.

Although these films were particularly popular in America, the outbreak of the First World War forced production to cease.

Throughout the period of the First World War, film production in Ireland began to be swayed by the call of cultural nationalism. The first serious native Irish film-producing house, The Film Company of Ireland, was founded in 1915 by Irish-American lawyer (and former Fenian) James Mark Sullivan. Arrested and interned during the Easter rising, Sullivan never attempted to disguise his nationalist sympathies, and collaborating with John MacDonagh (brother of Thomas MacDonagh who was executed by the British post-rising), the pair began to adopt an interesting propagandist edge to their productions. Their most successful film was *Knocknagow* (1918); based on the novel by Charles Kickham, this epic story of forced emigration became a huge success abroad, especially in America. In 1920, the company had a notable hit with *Willy Reilly and his Colleen Bawn*, a tragic story based on true events in eighteenth-century Ireland where a Protestant girl in love with a Catholic gentleman comes to a tragic end. This surge of energy in Irish film making ended in 1919 when, deeply affected by the death from influenza of his wife and son, Sullivan returned to the United States.

After independence, film production did continue - albeit with a dramatic reduction in both output and quality - but the boundaries of subject matter were clearly defined by the church and state. One of the first pieces of legislation passed by the new state was the Censorship of Films Act (1923). In his first year the newly

appointed Irish censor, James Montgomery, banned 104 films and cut a further 166.<sup>4</sup> In his book *Irish Film*, Martin McLoone argues that it was this censorship (what he describes as the infantilization of the Irish people), in tandem with the suspicions of cultural nationalism, along with the economic impediments and what he terms as government 'state socialism', which hampered the development of the post-independence native Irish film industry. He argues that self-sufficiency propagated through cultural nationalism and the state built a 'cultural wall around society'.<sup>5</sup> Although there was an extremely verbal opposition to censorship among intellectuals there remained unanimous support for these measures from the 1920s making effective film production impossible. The closest attempt to a native Irish film production in this period was Issac Eppel's scripted and produced *Irish Destiny* (1926) directed by Englishman George Dewhurst. Produced to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the Easter Rising, this propagandist attempt at a War of Independence epic received pragmatic government support and the film stopped short at dealing with the civil war. However, neither the IRA or the Church were blind to the power of the cinema. In November 1926 armed men seized a print of the British film, *Ypres*, from the Masterpiece cinema in Dublin: the film celebrated the British campaign in the First World War, and obviously met with the disapproval of the local IRA. The cinema was destroyed in an explosion the following year when the management

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<sup>4</sup> Kevin Rockett, 'Film Censorship & the State', *Film Directions*, Vol III, No.9, 1980. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Martin McLoone, 'Irish Film: the emergence of a contemporary cinema', *British Film Institute*, 2000, 25.

refused to stop showing the film.<sup>6</sup> In 1937 Bishop MacNamee of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise wrote that Irish women were ‘lured’ by the “glamorous unrealities of the films” into emigration.<sup>7</sup>

The year 1930 saw a resurgence of energy and a flurry of film production in Ireland with Mary Manning at the very core of this new cinematic movement. This new drive was initiated by Irish people, funded and supported locally, utilised native talent and aimed at an Irish audience. Manning already had some impressive film credentials; in the late 1920s she had established a reputation for herself as a theatre critic with the *Irish Independent*, she also had a short spell as a film critic with *The Irish Statesman*, edited at that time by George Russell until it ceased publication in 1930.<sup>8</sup> That same year Manning co-founded The Dublin Film Society which organised screenings in Dublin of European Art House films. It was through this association that Manning came into contact with a young film enthusiast from Dublin called Norris Davidson. A Cambridge undergraduate at that time, Davidson had ambitions to enter the film industry, and he wanted to make a film as an industry visiting card. Together the pair founded Irish Amateur Films and they began planning their first venture. In July 1930 a forty-minute-long piece *By Accident* was shot on a Cine Kodak camera and

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<sup>6</sup> Anthony Slide, *The Cinema and Ireland* (Jefferson; London: McFarland, 1988), 14.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 31

<sup>8</sup> *The Irish Homestead* was the precursor to *The Irish Statesman*. The *Homestead* ceased publication in 1918 but was afterwards revived in October 1921. In 1923 it was amalgamated with the *Irish Statesman*, and in this format it continued, under the editorship of Russell, until 1930.

using 16mm stock.<sup>9</sup> An autodidact, Davidson scripted, directed and edited the piece. Manning's role on the production was as an assistant director and also to provide production support through casting and locations, she also played a small role in the film. The likely budgetary constraints were overcome by shooting exclusively outdoors using natural light, and in locations in and around Dublin City Centre and Bray.

The film is a non-linear, dark existential piece focusing on a young man who falls off a cliff in a freak accident at the very moment that he realises he has lost the girl with whom he is in love. What makes the film interesting is the stylistic efforts in its narrative, visual and editing style. Through a series of flashbacks, the piece looks at occurrences in the central character's youth juxtaposed with surreal sequences. At one point he is offered a lift in a car driven by a character symbolising death, as they proceed on their journey the car knocks down a pedestrian, who, it is revealed, is the young man. The piece emulates the ominous progression of the incoming sea. It consistently moves from shots of the young man bleeding on the ground at the base of the cliff - to surreal flashback (growing darker in tone) - and then back to the young man at the cliff. It concludes with the man realising through a series of title cards that his death will be recorded as suicide and not accident. The piece itself is ambitious in both scope and narrative and exhibits some very obvious Russian stylistic influences.

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<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to Philip Quinn at the Irish Film Archive for locating, digitising and providing me with viewing copies of the available titles. I am also indebted to Kathleen Dickson at the British Film Institute for allowing me access to their print of *Guests of the Nation*.

There is extensive use of montage, juxtaposing of scenes, and disjunctive editing. Although obviously low-budget there are some quite ambitious touches with shots mixing and merging and attempts at in-camera dissolves. The opening sequences have interesting images of O'Connell Street with a bustling population cut between shots of trams, and epic panoramas of O'Connell Street taken from the top of Nelson's Pillar. It is altogether an intriguing work and very unlike anything that had previously been made in Ireland.

The experience of working on *By Accident* gave Manning a taste for film making that she continued to explore that summer when, using Davidson's camera, she shot her own film entitled *Bank Holiday*. This title is unavailable, in January 2019 the Irish Film Archive reported to me that regrettably they believed that the film has been lost. However, Manning's film was greeted with critical praise. *The Irish Independent* in August 1930 described it as "a far less ambitious attempt than '*By Accident*', but one which shows a shrewder appreciation of the present limitations of Irish amateur films and considerable skill in making the best use of them."<sup>10</sup> The pair made two further films that summer under the auspices of Irish Amateur Films: *Pathetic Gazette*, based on the Cuchulain and Deirdre myth and *Screening in the Rain*. The former title has also been lost but *Screening in the Rain* has survived. This ten-minute-long piece, shot during the annual Gate Theatre garden party at the Spanish Embassy, shows leading figures in the Dublin theatre scene essentially socialising and performing in high

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<sup>10</sup> *Irish Independent* (26 Aug. 1930): 6.

spirits for the camera. Manning had, in May of that year, come to the attention of Gate directors Hilton Edwards and Michael MacLiammóir and it is quite likely that she suggested the piece to Davidson and the theatre. Sadly, we can only speculate as no credits appear for the film and there is no additional information about the piece in the O'Leary Archive. Nevertheless, *Screening in the Rain* is an interesting and valuable piece of work, less ambitious in scope than *By Accident*, as it consists of a series of single set ups with very little camera movement and distinctive editing - but it serves as a valuable memento to a theatre organisation in its infancy, and the spirit of the personalities that orbited it.

The work completed and the new term at Cambridge beckoning, Davidson was content to leave the films as industry calling cards, but it was due to the intervention of Manning's mother that they played to an audience at the end of that summer. She helped arrange screenings of *By Accident* and *Bank Holiday* at the Peacock Theatre in a double bill between August 25th-30th 1930, introduced by Lennox Robinson. They both received a very good critical response and were seen by W.B. Yeats and his brother Jack, who, obviously intrigued, returned for a second viewing. Robinson was quick to acknowledge the significance of these films and recognised the possibilities for Irish artists expressing themselves in this form. In an interview with *The Irish Independent* he praised the work as the "beginning of an intelligent making of Irish pictures by intelligent Irishmen."<sup>11</sup> It would appear this 'intelligent Irishman'

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<sup>11</sup> *Irish Independent* (26 Aug. 1930): 6.



succeeded in his objectives, as after completing his studies he showed the film to John Grierson, the head of Empire Marketing Board Film Unit, who immediately employed him as an assistant director. Davidson would go on to a successful career as a producer and documentary filmmaker with the BBC and RTÉ.

Manning's final contribution to the new energy in Irish filmmaking was her collaboration with Denis Johnston on the film of the Frank O'Connor short story *Guests of the Nation* (1934). Johnston had just finished directing and playing Terrence Killigrew in the first revival of *Youths The Season-?* when he met and was impressed by Norris Davidson at a party given by Lennox Robinson on 23rd December 1932. The following day Johnston wrote in his journal; "Why shouldn't we make a picture of our own the way Davidson did? What about 'Guests of the Nation?'"<sup>12</sup>

*Guests of the Nation* was adapted and scripted by Mary Manning from the title story of Frank O'Connor's first book of short stories originally published in 1931 by *Atlantic Monthly*. Set in the War of Independence, it is a simple narrative about the bond that develops between two young IRA volunteers and two British soldiers kidnapped to prompt the release of IRA men held in Kilmainham Jail. Soon news reaches them of the execution of their comrades, and it is ordered that the soldiers are to be shot in reprisal. The tragic paths of the piece are brilliantly captured in the final

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<sup>12</sup> Denis Johnston, 3<sup>rd</sup> Omnibus X Book, Denis Johnston Papers, Trinity College Dublin, 68.

line: “And anything that happened to me afterwards, I never felt the same about again.”<sup>13</sup>

It would appear Johnston was greatly enthused by his meeting with Davidson as he set to work immediately invited Manning for lunch on Stephen’s Day to discuss the project. Manning took the role of adapting and writing the script her brother John recruited as cameraman. They were not blind to the logistical difficulties that lay ahead of them:

Our technical assets consisted of only a couple of sixteen-millimetre film cameras, with two knowledgeable non-professionals to handle them – Harold Douglas and John Manning. We had no studio, no lighting, no moviola, no dollies – not even a clapper board. But we were eager to see for ourselves what was in this business of film-making.<sup>14</sup>

Manning used her connection with the Fianna Fáil Minister of Defence Frank Aiken, whom she had met through her cousin Erskine Childers, to procure ‘in-kind’ support from the Free State Army in the form of vehicles, weapons and uniforms. The active support of Edwards, MacLiammóir and Lord Longford was soon to follow, and The Gate Theatre Production<sup>15</sup> of *Guests of the Nation* was shot on the successive summers of 1933 and 1934.

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<sup>13</sup> Frank O’Connor, *Guests of the Nation* (Macmillan & Co, 1931), 48.

<sup>14</sup> Denis Johnston, *Orders and desecrations: the life of the playwright Denis Johnston* (Dublin, Lilliput Press, 1992), 92.

<sup>15</sup> Title sequence, *Guests of the Nation*, dir: Denis Johnston, Gate Theatre Productions (1935).

The beginning of the creative process is likely to have entailed an extensive dialogue between writer and director about such determining factors as style, content and what they were trying to achieve in the film. Johnston's choice of Manning would seem to indicate that he trusted her stylistically, and it's very likely that they had a shared aesthetic vision for the piece. This is further indicated by the fact that she liaised with Davidson over cinematographic elements, in a letter of 4th April 1933 Davidson advised Manning:

You can get a kind of camera mix with a Kodak. It is rather hard word, I had four in *By Accident*. A mix is made by fading out on the end of one take, winding back, setting up on the next scene, in fading in again. You get a fade out by telling someone to stop the exposure right down as slowly as possible while the camera is running on the last few feet of your scene. The result is often rather jerky, and I can only advise it when you are mixing from group to group, or landscape to landscape; it comes rather apparent when the interest is focused on a single figure."<sup>16</sup>

Like Davidson's film, *Guests of the Nation* was shot on a low-budget and mainly in exterior locations, and using actors from the Abbey and Gate companies. Barry Fitzgerald - a keen golfer - agreed to perform in the film if Johnston would film him playing golf so he could work on his technique. The interior cottage scenes where the captives were held was filmed in a makeshift roofless set constructed in Johnston's parents' garden.

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<sup>16</sup> Letter from Norris Davidson to Mary Manning, 4<sup>th</sup> April 1933, O'Leary Archive, National Library of Ireland.

Manning's shooting script for *Guests of the Nation* provides a clear indication of the influences of German Expressionism and also elements of Russian cinema. The second page of the script has the following passage:

It has been completed thanks to the collective effort of the artists and technicians who have given their services and help without reward and thought the facilities granted by the many private persons and public bodies including the department of defence. It is, in short, intended as a practical demonstration of what can be done at home with little or no resources by Irish men and women working out for themselves the technical problems of a new art.<sup>17</sup>

This does not appear in the actual film but it echos of the opening titles from Dziga Vertov's, *The Man and a Camera*. Perhaps they initially intended including this text in the film and later abandoned the idea.

The opening sequences show an IRA column capturing a RIC barracks; a heroic figure raises a tricolour; a volunteer takes aim on an escaping RIC man only to be signalled to spare the man by the soft touch on his shoulder and gentle shaking head of a smiling beatific older volunteer:

Feeney behind the wall raises his rifle and sights/ The R.I.C. man scrambles up a hill and over rocks. He is panting/ Feeney looks along the sights. A hand appears on his shoulder. He looks around and up./ The Commandant looks down. Grins and shakes his head./ Feeney and the Commandant look over the wall. Then Feeney lowers his rifle and rises./ The R.I.C. man climbs up towards the camera, tears open his tunic, [To signal the British Army] pants and looks back from behind a rock.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Mary Manning, *Guests of the Nation*, shooting script, 1933, O'Leary Archive, National Library of Ireland. 2

<sup>18</sup> Manning, *Guests of the Nation*, shooting script, 1933, O'Leary Archive, National Library of Ireland. Sequence A. Scene 1. When quoting from Manning's script I have used the '/' symbol to indicate a specified cut to a new scene.

High and low camera angles move the action from eye level to the ground, elevating the position of the men into cut-out figures constantly shape shifting as they move around the screen displaying military manoeuvres in the dark. This is a very exciting sequence, with dramatic silhouettes and actors shot from low angles giving the characters an imposing and impressive presence. The influence of Kravchenko and Eisenstein can be clearly sensed in both the photography and the mise-en-scene. There is extensive use of elemental shapes in the composition of shots: actors march in and out of the frame on steep diagonals and clamour over constructivist style obstacles.



*Guests of the Nation*. Picture copyright Irish Film Centre.

Manning's description of the build-up to the ambush scene between the British Army and the IRA is clearly designed to build dramatic tension through the use of montage, a feature common in Russian cinema:

Side view of lorry passing. Faces of Tommies hanging over the side. /Birds wheeling in agitation in the air. /Rifle and bayonet. /Wheels turn. /Column comes down hill & turns along road. /A sleeping dog before a cottage wakes

and sits up. /Bonaparte's face as he marches. He wonders what he hears. /wheels.<sup>19</sup>

This section of the script, with the cuts, shows a very clear intention to create a montage sequence. In the actual film they took this idea a stage further. In this seventy second sequence, there are no fewer than sixty-one editing cuts, each scene timed to a similar length. The scripting and direction of this section of the film is an obvious homage to Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and Pudovkin's *The End of St. Petersburg* (1927), where the battle scenes have similar frequency and length in the cuts in order to create a sense of dramatic tension and confusion for the audience.

What is fascinating about Denis Johnston's film *Guests of the Nation* and what makes it different from any film created in Ireland at that time is the strong influence of the Russian school of cinema and Eisenstein in particular which can be evidenced by the editing of the piece. Continuity editing was the most common form at that time: designed to maintain the illusion, mask the filmmaking processes and therefore make films more immersive and believable. Techniques in continuity editing included cutting on action, cutting from eyeline to what is being observed, cross cutting between action and the 180-degree rule.<sup>20</sup> Although this type of editing is evident in *Guests of the Nation* what stands out in the film is the extensive use of montage.

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<sup>19</sup> Mary Manning, *Guests of the Nation*, shooting script, 1933, O'Leary Archive, National Library of Ireland. Sequence B. Scene 3.

<sup>20</sup> The 180-degree rule in film-making states that two characters in a scene should always have the same left/right relationship with each other. The rule dictates that you can draw an imaginary line between these two characters and try to keep the camera on the same side of this 180-degree line.

The idea and theories of montage emerged from the post-revolutionary school of Russian cinema and its practitioners. Following the revolution, Soviet leaders were very quick to seize upon the idea of cinema as both a propaganda tool and as a mechanism for influencing the masses. The Moscow Film School was founded in 1919 by the director Vladimir Gardin and the students began to analyse how films were constructed.<sup>21</sup> The primary function of the school was to train the next generations of filmmakers to make agit prop work in support of the Bolshevik government. However, due to the isolationist stance of the nascent government, film stock was incredibly rare in Russia at that time, and it was impossible to import.

A leading member of that school was Lev Kuleshov who established a radical and experimental group which became known as the Kuleshov workshop.<sup>22</sup> With film stock being so rare the students spent their time making films without celluloid. The students' activities took a major shift in focus upon the release of D.W. Griffiths' film *Intolerance* (1919). Lenin appreciated the film's themes of a plea to the proletariat and its agitational quality and ordered the film to be shown in cinemas across Russia. The students at the Kuleshov Workshop began an intense study of the film and created hundreds of re-edits to example a variety of different emotional impacts. When the

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<sup>21</sup> The Moscow Film School was founded in 1919 by the film director Vladimir Gardin and is the oldest film school in the world. Directors who have taught at the school include Lev Kuleshov, Marlen Khutsiev, Aleksey Batalov, Sergei Eisenstein, Mikhail Romm and Vsevolod Pudovkin. Alumni include Sergei Bondarchuk, Elem Klimov, Sergei Parajanov, Alexander Sokurov and Andrei Tarkovsky.

<sup>22</sup> Lev Vladimirovich Kuleshov (1899 – 1970) was a Russian and Soviet filmmaker and film theorist. He was one of the founders of the Moscow Film School. He was intimately involved in development of the style of film making known as Soviet montage, especially its psychological underpinning.

1922 trade agreement with Germany saw film stock become more readily available in Russia, Kuleshov began experimenting using celluloid. His first experiment became known as the Kuleshov effect, in which he took a shot of an emotionless face and placed it in a sequence alongside three different shots: a bowl of soup, a girl in a coffin and a woman in a seductive pose. He discovered each combination produced vastly different emotional responses from the viewer. Kuleshov concluded that meaning in film is not dependent on spatial combination but in the ordering of the shots. The workshop became convinced the true artform in cinema was in the editing process and they called this theory montage, from the French verb monter which means to assemble. As David Bordwell explains:

For Kuleshov, montage was the essential factor differentiating cinema from the other arts and forming the basis of the specific impact a film can make. In a series of informal experiments, he showed that editing could create emotions and ideas not present in either of the single shots. A man and a woman look offscreen; cut to a building. We will assume that they are looking at the building, even if the first shot was made in Moscow and the second in New York. A man with a neutral expression looks off; cut to a shot of a banquet table; cut back to him, and now he will look hungry. Kuleshov doctrine treated montage as the director's principal tool in shaping the exact response desired.<sup>23</sup>

Michael Wood describes montage as, "not only the organisation of cinematic material, it is the implication of meaning – of a meaning that can only be implied, since films,

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<sup>23</sup> David Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (London: Routledge, 2020), 29.



like dreams, have a syntax which functions simply by association and accumulation.”<sup>24</sup>

These ideas were further developed by a young former civil engineering student and theatre practitioner, Sergei Eisenstein.<sup>25</sup> The young Eisenstein began his career at the Moscow film school and briefly came under the influence of Kuleshov:

Eisenstein got his first lessons in film direction from me. True, he didn't study with me very long – about three months – but Eisenstein himself said that any man can be a director, only one needs to study three years and another three hundred years... Together with Alexandrov, he attended our workshop in the evening (in the attic of Meyerhold's theatre), and together we did some work on developing shooting scripts mostly for crowd scenes... We studied together how to work out editing scenes on paper, when there wasn't any film. That was before his debut – that is, before *Strike*.<sup>26</sup>

A more significant relationship in Eisenstein's artistic development was his friendship with editor and filmmaker, Esther Shub, a friendship which would have profound implications on the emerging director.<sup>27</sup> As Yon Barna explains:

At the end of March 1924 she [Shub] was busy cutting Lang's *Dr Mabuse*; she virtually remade it, in fact, with Eisenstein as a fascinated onlooker, and it was

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Wood, 'Modernism and film', Levenson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 174.

<sup>25</sup> Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein (1898-1948) was a Soviet film director and film theorist, a pioneer in the theory and practice of montage. He is particularly noted for his silent films *Strike* (1925), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1928), as well as the historical epics *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and *Ivan the Terrible* (1944, 1958).

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Yon Barna's book, *Eisenstein* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg Limited, 1973), 71.

<sup>27</sup> Esther Shub, (1894- 1959) was a pioneering Soviet filmmaker and editor. She is best known for her trilogy of films, *Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927), *The Great Road* (1927), and *The Russia of Nicholas II and Leo Tolstoy* (1928). Shub is recognised as the creator of compilation film and is known for her revolutionary techniques with editing and assembling preserved and archived footage.

eventually released in a much shortened version under the title *Gilded Putrefaction*. Ester Shub was also deeply interested in Kuleshov's activities and used to experiment with the assorted fragments of film let over from the films she had cut. Sometimes these films complied to standard length from several serials, when the fragments consisted mainly of the introductory recapitulations. Together with Eisenstein at her home, where she had a small cutting table and projector, she would study their possibilities, putting together the most unlikely pieces with the most bizarre results. The knowledge Eisenstein gained from these experiments with Ester Shub was to have a substantial influence on his later work: they not only opened up to him the 'mysteries' of montage, but also sowed the seeds of many ideas that he subsequently brought into fruition.<sup>28</sup>

Another significant factor that influenced Eisenstein's development was his interest in German expressionist films, which were frequently shown in Moscow, and in which he encountered many methods of expression similar to those he attempted in a rudimentary way in his theatre work.<sup>29</sup> Eisenstein regarded the entire process of a film as a series of collisions. In his theory the collision of one shot against another created a conflict that produced a new idea, what he termed a synthesis. This new idea would collide with another anti-thesis, creating another synthesis. Consistently throughout the film these dialectics build up like a series of explosions in an internal combustion engine, driving the film forward. He defined five methods of montage and how these collisions between shots can be created, each one building up in complexity: Metric montage, the most basic type of montage where shots are timed in exactly equal measure to each other in a sequence; Rhythmic montage is the most common form

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<sup>28</sup> Yon Barna, *Eisenstein* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg Limited, 1973), 71.

<sup>29</sup> Barna, *Eisenstein*, 75.

where the cuts are based on the action or image within the shot and maintain continuity. He defined tonal montage as where the shots are linked by an expressive visual quality, for example the Sea Mist sequence in *Battleship Potemkin* where an image of the mist cuts to the water and then cuts to silhouettes. Overtonal montage combines all the elements of metric, rhythmic, and tonal montage to create sequences that impact and influence how audiences perceive a film's tones or overtones. Intellectual montage combines images that draw an intellectual or metaphorical meaning for an audience.

Eisenstein's most influential work, *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) was constructed of 1,346 shots and it stands as the best example of Eisenstein using montage to illicit an emotional response from the viewer. The film is a dramatization of the mutiny that occurred in 1905 in Odessa when the crew of the Russian battleship Potemkin rebelled against its officers.<sup>30</sup> In this film, made to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the 1905 revolution, Eisenstein, a committed Bolshevik, sought to create an accomplished anti-capitalist agit-prop missive using his 'shock' theories of montage: "His aim, first and foremost, was to produce a cinematographic 'montage of shocks.' The content of

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<sup>30</sup> The mutiny was a major event in what would become known as the First Russian Revolution. From 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1905, there was a wave of mass political and social unrest that spread through vast areas of the Russian Empire. The mutiny on the Potemkin broke out on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1905 and is widely viewed as the first step towards the 1917 Revolution.

film, he believed, should be unfolded in a series of shocks linked together in a sequence and directed at emotions of the audience.”<sup>31</sup>

In *Guests of the Nation* all five forms of montage are evident within the film. The opening battle sequence between the IRA and British troops employs both metric and rhythmical montage, with cuts timed precisely giving way to more frenzied and rapid editing as the pace of the battle increases. Immediately following the battle there is an example of tonal montage where two shots from the smouldering barracks cut to the IRA men’s country village and its smoking chimneys, once again this is outlined in Manning’s script: “A thin spiral of smoke rising from the barricades.[Fade Out] A thin spiral of smoke rises. Pan downwards to a cottage chimney.”<sup>32</sup> Contemporary European cinema style is here merged with more traditional Irish motifs, allowing the audience to identify more closely with the piece. The audience are shown an idyllic, rural village scene, heavily feminised in sharp contrast to the previous battle scenes, church bells are summoning the villagers to mass. A female courier delivers a message from the commandant to two volunteers emerging from mass that they must guard the two captured British soldiers.

Throughout this section of the film the captives and guards are increasingly humanised, and there is extensive use of comic set pieces. The four men eat, smoke, wash, laugh and yawn together and the emerging closeness is illustrated by an

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<sup>31</sup> Barna, *Eisenstein*, 80.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* Sequence B. Scene 1.

increased physicality in the performances. It is at this point that a real sense of humanity and gentleness emerges in Manning's shooting script, as she shows the developing bonds of friendship between captor and captive. In an almost slapstick encounter Hawkins slips and falls into a stream while collecting water with Noble, here Manning presents us with a scene of brotherly, rural idyll with the old lady adopting a maternal role that is confirmed at the film's devastating conclusion:

Noble laughs./ Hawkins laughs./ Noble helps Hawkins out. They both laugh immoderately . Hawkins rings out his clothes./ Noble fills the bucket and follows Hawkins up the path still laughing./ From above Bonaparte and Belcher watch Hawkins and Noble come up the path laughing./ Belcher looks at Bonaparte and taps his head. They both look back./ The pair meet outside the cottage and explain what has occurred. Belcher and Bonaparte smile and laugh too. Noble imitates Hawkins face when he fell in. /The old woman looks out of the cottage in some surprise.<sup>33</sup>

Later when the four men are playing cards and sharing cigarettes, the older soldier ruffles the hair of the younger volunteer in a fatherly gesture. It is interesting to note that the framing and composition of this sequence is reminiscent of Cezanne's 'The Card Players' (1890-95). As this section of the film progresses the roles and responsibilities of the volunteers become confused, the captors occasionally ignore their weapons and turn their back on their captives. As this section develops the bond and camaraderie between the four men deepens. Once again there is extensive use of

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<sup>33</sup> Mary Manning, *Guests of the Nation*, shooting script, 1933, O'Leary Archive, National Library of Ireland. Sequence B. Scene 4.

montage with a series of extreme close ups of every character's face inter cut in quick succession.



*Guests of the Nation*. Picture copyright Irish Film Centre.

Further examples of the technique include overtone montage when the captured IRA man is brought to trial, cross cut with a ceilidh, cross intercut with Bonaparte cycling into the city and shots of the hangman's noose. During the climactic sequences of the film there is an example of intellectual montage when we see a note posted on the door of Kilmainham Jail that the IRA man has been executed. That is followed by a shot of a man removing his hat in sympathy, cut to another man doing exactly the same, then cross cut to several different church steeples with their bells ringing; the action then cuts back to shots of the two men clutching their ears, before cutting to the hideout where an alarm clock is ringing, signifying the impending doom of the two soldiers.

Another feature of Eisenstein's work which is clearly evident in *Guests of the Nation* is the extensive use of close-up. Eisenstein regarded the close-up as a crucial factor in the film narrative process, as Barna explains: "Eisenstein was to use it to

symbolic rather than purely illustrative effect. In other words, the purpose of his close-up was not merely to show a cheek, or some other object in detail, but to express an idea through it – to endow it, as it were, with a new significance.”<sup>34</sup> Johnston’s film is replete with close ups, beginning with the opening sequence of the aftermath of the barracks attack which is established by eight close ups. The highly dramatic sequence when the British soldiers apprehend the IRA man is captured in expressive close-up. Johnson uses the device to illustrate the developing friendship between Hawkins, Belcher, Noble and Boneparte which is expressed through a series of metric montage close-up shots of their faces. When the news arrives that the soldiers may be executed, the anguish of their captors is again conveyed through a series of close ups.

The final section of the film sees a further shift in mood and style: exterior and interior shots of Kilmainham Jail, intercut with a ceilidh dance sequence at Vaughans Hotel (the Dublin headquarters of the IRA), appear to suggest that life goes on despite the threat of imminent execution and death. Manning offers a hint of the impending fate of the soldiers by using the Expressionist shadow motif when we return to the cottage:

The morning sunlight streams through the window on Hawkins and Belcher asleep on a pile of sacks. The bars of the windows throw shadows across their bodies.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Barna, *Eisenstein*, 74.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* Sequence B. Scene 4.

Meanwhile the smiling faces of the dancers are intercut between an IRA man being led to be hung, and a messenger is dispatched to seal the fate of the two British captives. The game of war is played out to images of a dance hall in full swing. In this sequence the dance hall becomes a visual metaphor for the War of Independence. The dancers' smiles become silent screams; their open mouths referencing the Cubist-experimentation of the films of Eisenstein and the photography of Rodchenko, which was at the forefront of avant-garde visual art as a metaphysical reaction to the carnage of war. The dizzy, repeating ceildh dance is also reminiscent of war as a spine-chilling grimace in the face of man and women as they await their fate on a carousel ride.

In Manning's script she outlines the Kilmainham Jail sequences in clear Expressionist style by specifying the lighting for the scenes. In describing the row of British Soldiers sitting behind the table Manning's shooting script is very specific about the lighting requirements: "Lit from below. Foreground figures all in silhouette." Twice more specifying in the same sequence "From below pick out the lights of the faces."<sup>36</sup> With this lighting the British officers have an almost spectral quality, with ominous shadows cast on the wall behind them. During production of *Guests of the Nation*, the only sequences that were shot in anything like studio conditions were the Kilmainham Jail scenes. These were shot on the stage of the Gate Theatre, where, with access to stage lighting and a stage, Johnston filmed the sequences in an expressionistic style. The court martial scene has the IRA volunteer

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Sequence C. Scene 3.



marched through a shadowy Kilmainham jail, its imposing backdrop is reminiscent of the cityscape design elements of Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*. Then we cut to the concluding scenes: now the IRA volunteers arriving at the cottage are no longer portrayed as heroic, but peer sinisterly through the gable window, gazing suspiciously at the four men happily playing cards inside. Once again Manning uses the shadow, but this time it's the creeping shadow figure suggestive of Nosferatu or Caligari which symbolises the grave peril facing the captives:

The four men are playing cards in the cottage. A shadow crosses them. They look up. / The Commandant is in the doorway. Feeney is behind him. He beckons Bonaparte and Noble out.<sup>37</sup>

In a powerful conclusion the soldiers meet their fate stoically, the older soldier wrapping his possessions neatly along with some food to give his guard, who all the while is digging the soldiers' graves. In a powerful conclusion the men are marched out to their fate – "Four sets of feet cross the mud at the cottage door, leaving tracks"<sup>38</sup> - later only two return. As the old lady blows out two candles she hears two distant shots. Bonaparte and Noble return to the as "shadowy figures"<sup>39</sup> and the old lady breaks down in tears.

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<sup>37</sup> Mary Manning, *Guests of the Nation*, Shooting script. 1933. Sequence C. Scene 4. O'Leary Archive National Library of Ireland.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Sequence E. Scene 5.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid Sequence E. Scene 3.

The influence of the European avant-garde was not limited to Manning's work with filmmakers, it is also a clear and defining influence on Manning's stage work at that time. One can detect the cinematic influences and in particular the influences of German expressionist film in Manning's play *Youths The Season-?*. Born out of a sense of post Great War horror, and necessitated by economic hardships, the German expressionist film movement borrowed heavily from visual and stylistic trends emerging in the world of theatre and art in Germany at that time. The directors and cinematographers were particularly influenced by Max Reinhardt's innovative lighting and Mise-en-scene for his 1918 production of Reinhard Sorge's *The Beggar*, where real settings were replaced by imaginary ones through the use of experimental light and shadow. The motion pictures of the German Expressionist movement are mainly horror or science fiction in genre and are characterized by highly stylized sets, painted backdrops and landscapes and a very particular visual style. The cinematography has the omnipresent stylistic motif of light and shadow, with the trademark use of low-key lighting to produce a dramatic Chiaroscuro effect. Shadows prevail in the world of German Expressionism as an expression of menace of impending danger, with the obvious iconic exemplar of the image of the claw-like shadow hand of Nosferatu reaching for the door or the reflected penumbra depicting a horrific murder. The two foremost scholars of German cinema Siegfried Kracauer and Lotte Eisner have both identified the pre-eminence of shadow in Weimar cinema as an indicator of the need for early German film makers to express the dark and

threatening forces they saw in the post First World War German psyche. In his book

*From Caligari To Hitler*, Kracauer notes:

It was their expressionist nature which impelled many a German director of photography to breed shadows as rampant as weeds and associate ethereal phantoms with strangely lit arabesques or faces. These efforts were designed to bathe all scenery in an unearthly illumination marking it as the scenery of the soul.<sup>40</sup>

The performance technique was exaggerated and often grotesque. Notable works include Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), the aforementioned *Nosferatu* (1922) directed by F. W. Murnau, Arthur Robison's *Warning Shadows* (1923) and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). Manning saw and greatly admired all of these titles, and they had a profound influence on Manning's aesthetic development, as elements of all of these films are woven into her work. Nowhere is this more evident than in her debut play.

Set in the Drawing Room and Studio of the privileged Millington family, *Youths The Season-?* is a dark satire that exposes the shallowness of Dublin life in the 1930s for the disillusioned and disenfranchised post-revolutionary, protestant ascendancy youth. These 'bright young things' – educated, privileged, bored – are motivated by pleasure and decadence. The play shares many of the common narrative features of German Expressionist cinema: a dark storyline with a growing sense of foreboding, an anti-heroic character at the centre of the story, paranoia, madness, and the intimate relationship between desire and rejection and the lack of resolution between the

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<sup>40</sup> Seigfried Kracauer, *From Caligari To Hitler, A Psychological History of The German Film* (Princeton University Press, 1947), 75.

two. Throughout the play a sense of tension and menace grows, and impending disaster seems the inevitable outcome. The tension is established early in the first act with no less than five references to suicide or self-harm. At the very beginning of the Act 1 Desmond, the youngest Millington declares:

I often have presentiments, and I have one now. Something is going to happen in this house, something evil and overwhelming.<sup>41</sup>

Between the dazzle, wit and privilege of these characters it seems obvious a darker presence lurks. The arrival of Terrence Killigrew allows this darkness to have a focal point. Disillusioned poet-cum-alcoholic loafer, Killigrew dispenses insults and literary references in equal measure, and is shadowed by his doppelgänger, the enigmatic Horace Egosmith - who throughout the play never speaks, serving as an ever present watchful presence. Characters are wilfully wooed and rejected; Connie the bohemian artsy Millington daughter rejects the imperial official Harry Middleton, and, in turn rejected (seemingly for fun) by Killigrew. Toying cruelly with Connie, Killigrew's rejection is a literary parody in an attempt to don the mantle of the erudite bad-boy:

I will arise and go now, and sober up at Davy Byrne's, and a small bottle buy me there.<sup>42</sup>

The eldest Millington sibling, the studious and formidable Deirdre is cold and sarcastic towards her Doctor fiancée Gerald Parr – rejecting his attempts to kiss her. He responds in the second act with a public flirtation with party guest Pearl Harris

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<sup>41</sup> Curtis Cranfield ed., *Plays of Changing Ireland – Youth's The Season-?* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1936), 324.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 332.

much to the consternation of Deidre. Even young Willie Harris, embarrassed by the attentions of pushy and available American debutant Priscilla Converse, rejects her advances, preferring instead to spend the night in the Millington's bath tub.

It is in the Act 2 party scene that the influences of German Expressionism become starker and more apparent. In the stage directions for Act 2 Manning describes Desmond's artist studio: The decoration is modern and flavours of the macabre. The gramophone is to the extreme left of the stage. There are no chairs. A seat cut from the wall encircles the room. There is one light over the centre of the room and another over the cocktail bar; the rest of the room is in shadow.<sup>43</sup>

The set design specifications described here are completely non-naturalistic and very different from the conventional design outlined for Acts 1 and 3. No pictures are available of the Act 2 scene, but we do have something which gives us a vital clue about how the scene would have looked: director Hilton Edward's original lighting plot for the production.<sup>44</sup> The plot of Act 1 has eleven lanterns of which one is listed as a floodlight and eight are listed as spotlights (the other two are unspecified). The plot also specifies "fire alight in the fireplace".<sup>45</sup> This would have applied an extra source of light with a warm glow. Edwards also specified "no changes during this act". The lights are also indicated as "full". Further directions are specific as to where the lights are to be concentrated on specific items of set and furniture, and on the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 350.

<sup>44</sup> The following notes are taken from lighting plot documents located in the Gate Theatre Collection, Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Libraries, Chicago, Illinois.

<sup>45</sup> Curtis Cranfield ed., *Plays of Changing Ireland – Youth's The Season-?* (New York, The MacMillan Company, 1936), 323.

various stage areas (Stage Left/Right). All this demonstrates a naturalistic lighting plan, common for staging of that time. A similar lighting plot exists for Act 3, with an even amount of naturalistic style lighting cover provided.

The lighting plot for Act Two however is very different. There are only five lights listed for this act. There is no indication of what type of lights these are but if we reference the lighting plan of Act One it indicates what the lights were and how they were used. They consist of two spotlights and three floodlights. The spotlights are directed on the gramophone and bar respectively. A further direction of "Pendant attached" is listed with these lights. The inclusion of the pendant direction would suggest they were specific key lights for that particular area. The direction specified for the floodlights as "on set" would indicate their purpose as fill lights. Furthermore, the colour gels specified for the floodlights "Frost" and the others were number 7 gels which is a very translucent pale yellow colour. The deployment of five lights with single principle key lights, along with frosted gels and a number 7 gel would have created a strong contrast between light and darkness, along with sharp and distinctive shadows and an almost ghostly and otherworldly effect. The rest of the stage is likely to have been in an inky black state. So, in effect what Manning and Edwards' objective behind the stage directions and lighting plot was an attempt to create the Chiaroscuro effect, similar to German Expressionist Cinema. This would have had a startling visual impact on the Gate's audience: spectral actors coming in and out of darkness, creating eerie and menacing shadow effects would have enhanced the sense of an almost malevolent and supernatural foreboding.

In the text shadows are used to describe people, stage setting and events. After Egosmith's departure in Act One Desmond describes him as "his [Terrance] lousy shadow"<sup>46</sup> In the stage directions of Act Two Manning expertly uses shadow to build dramatic visual tension: at the beginning of the act Killigrew and Connie are onstage alone - during this exchange Terrence brutally rejects her. Immediately prior to this Egosmith slips into the scene and 'stands in the shadow'<sup>47</sup> voyeuristically observing the scene. Terrance tells Connie:

For once I'll be sincere. I don't love you Connie. I'll never love anyone. I can't even love myself. [Egosmith coughs genteelly. Terrence turns and sees him in the shadows.] Oh, you - [he laughs] for the moment - d'you know, Horace old man - I thought I saw myself, and behold, I was a very ordinary fellow.<sup>48</sup>

It is at this point that the shadow motif collides with another significant feature of German Expressionist Cinema - the use of mirror and reflected image. Mirrors and reflected images are extensively employed in German expressionist cinema as not only to symbolise the distortion of the self, but also to present a picture of a distorted reality for emotional effect.

As Lotte Eisner suggests: "Life is merely a kind of concave mirror projecting inconsistent figures which vacillate like the images of a magic lantern, sharp focused

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 341.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 352.

<sup>48</sup> Curtis Cranfield ed., *Plays of Changing Ireland – Youth's The Season-?*, 352.

when they are small and blurring as they grow.”<sup>49</sup> Characters often gaze into mirrors at cathartic moments: reveals, narrative twists or pivotal moments often occur through or within sight of a single or multiple mirrors. The most startling example of this is in Arthur Robison’s *Warning Shadows* (1923). In this nightmare vision of infidelity and insecurity, a Baron invites several friends to a dinner party at his house; unbeknown to him the guests are all covetous of his wife. Through a series of shadow puppet inspired scenes the protagonists play out the action and consequence of their desires. Extensive fetishisation of mirrors and reflected images symbolise the infidelity of the Baron’s wife; in every scene of attempted seduction she is seen gazing into mirrors, or her reflected image is observed by her desirous admirers. At one point the camera is set up so it appears she emerges from a mirror to greet her suitors. The Baron voyeuristically spies his wife’s reflected image in an embrace with a lover; emasculated by the event – and then in a state of shock at his discovery, he gazes grotesquely into a series of mirrors. Pointing at himself in an act of self-loathing and spinning around trapped between three mirrors, it seems the Baron is unable to escape his own reflection, only finally succeeding in doing so only by smashing a mirror.

In the Millington’s’ Drawing Room setting for Act 1 and Act 3, there is a mirror over the mantelpiece which seems an irresistible magnet to the family, who each at some point regard and comment upon their image. The reflected self is rarely impeccable in the world of the play, with frequent references to violence or self-

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<sup>49</sup> Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen, Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt* (University of California Press, 1973), 130.



loathing usually accompanying characters as they consider their reflection. As he carefully combs his hair in the mirror Desmond laments that he will shoot himself when he goes bald. He ponders:

You know I often think it would be amusing if our real selves the inner man, or still small voice, or whatever it is, would suddenly take human form and confront us. We all cover up our real self under a dust heap of trivialities; but occasionally it insisted on being heard.<sup>50</sup>

With the first appearance of bohemian sister Connie, Manning could not resist a reference to Russian Constructivist cinema:

Connie [affectedly rushing to the mirror]. Darling Toots, there you are. I'm so sorry I was late, but the film was so marvellous, I just had to stay and see it through twice – it was one of the new Russian films, all about a steam engine or something.<sup>51</sup>

This is a reference to Dziga Vertov's Russian avant-garde classic *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). The director described the film's aesthetic objectives of the work in its opening title sequence: "This film is an experiment in cinematic communication of real events. Without the help of intertitles. Without the help of a story. Without the help of theatre. This experimental work aims at creating a truly international language of cinema based on its absolute separation from the language of theatre and literature."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Curtis Cranfield ed., *Plays of Changing Ireland – Youth's The Season-?*, 403.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted from the title sequence from *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929).

Manning used a similar descriptive opening passage in her script for *Guests of the Nation*.

The mirror continues to be referenced in Acts 1 and 3. When Connie's suitor Harry Middleton arrives unexpectedly in Act 1 she dashes to the mirror exclaiming: 'It's Harry! My God! My Face!'.<sup>53</sup> Even the Millington's seemingly earthy and unaffected friend Toots Ellerslie comments on her reflection. In post party recuperation at the beginning of Act 3 she describes herself as: "the living corpse"<sup>54</sup> a reference to *Nosferatu*. Later in the act she laments: "At the moment I look like a bad case of leprosy."<sup>55</sup> In the play Killigrew and Egosmith are not only doppelgängers, but reflected images of themselves: both this idea and the relationship between these two characters are very likely inspired by characters in German Expressionism. The 'split-self' and doppelgänger is another prominent feature employed in German Expressionist cinema. Once again Eisner considers that "for the German the demonic side to an individual always has a middle class counterpart. In the ambiguous world of the German cinema people are always unsure of their identity and can always lose it by the way."<sup>56</sup> Caligari is both esteemed doctor and fairground trickster, *Nosferatu* is both master of the castle and vampire, in Fritz Lang's *Destiny* (1921) the character of

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.

<sup>56</sup> Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 110.

Death is also an ordinary traveller. In literature the doppelgänger motif brings about the fear of identity theft with the startling appearance of an identical other who has subversive or malicious intentions. As Michal Tal argues: "Doppelgänger literature deals with human identity and the fragile concept of the self by featuring protagonists whose self is radically challenged by the formation or appearance of another identical character, or by the splitting of the self into several independent elements."<sup>57</sup> In *Youth's The Season-?* the balance in the relationship between Killigrew and Egosmith is both ambiguous and distorted; but, as with the cinematic characters, it has a catastrophic conclusion. When we first meet Egosmith we are offered a red herring when he is described as "a contrast to his companion in both neatness and respectability."<sup>58</sup> Killigrew "pushes him to the front, Egosmith bows timidly to the room at large and bows nervously."<sup>59</sup> Throughout the play it seems Egosmith's growth in stature and confidence is inversely proportional to Killigrew, and both characters are given a progressively darker edge. By Act Three, when Egosmith's name is first mentioned, a coronet playing outside breaks into "scenes that get brighter" and by contrast Manning's stage directions describes the scene "grows perceptively darker"<sup>60</sup> thereby

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<sup>57</sup> Michal Tal, "The Encounter with the Identical Other: The Literary Double as a Manifestation of Failure in Self-Constitution" *Humanities* 7, no. 1: 13, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h7010013>

<sup>58</sup> Cranfield ed., *Plays of Changing Ireland – Youth's The Season-?*, 330.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 395.

giving a pertinent visual indication of menace with the very mention of his name. The moment the question of identity and purpose with Egosmith is finally addressed, we are given a clear indication of a diabolical subtext behind the relationship, and it is suggested that time may be limited for Killigrew:

Toots: Egosmith isn't normal.

Connie: Don't be ridiculous.

Toots: He's an unquiet spirit. He's Terrence Killigrew's Doppelgänger. Listen, there's his voice in the wind.

Connie: Don't!

Deirdre: Who is Egosmith?

Toots: Egosmith is Terrence. Terrence is Egosmith; the two in one, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde; and it's war to the death between them. I wonder who will win? [Pause] Perhaps even now the battle is over.<sup>61</sup>

Killigrew's entrance in Act Three increases the energy and momentum of the narrative, this is accompanied by further allusions to Egosmith as a controlling and dark presence. We learn that after the party - drunk and upset by the fight he had with Harry Middleton - Killigrew had "gone down to the forty foot" for a sobering swim (an obvious nod to Joyce), and managed to lose Egosmith. It would appear he was in some form of prison and Egosmith was his jailer: "Last night I was mad - down there alone with those melancholy waves, those eternal rocks, eternal pain - something did snap in my brain. Suddenly I felt as light as air, I realised it was finished. Egosmith

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 395.

had left me - I was free.”<sup>62</sup> His recondition of his own image provides him with a clear vision of his flaws and pretensions, provoking a mental pandemonium of self-loathing: “If I ever met myself face to face I’d shoot myself. Well Flossie I met myself last night, and I saw, what do you think, that I was just a picturesque windbag! [Toots laughs] - a book of handy quotations - a melancholic misfit.”<sup>63</sup>

Like Cesare who predicts the dawn time of death in *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1921), Killigrew ominously predicts the portentous arrival of Egsmith at six o'clock, the chiming of the clock is accompanied by doors banging ‘somewhere in the house’<sup>64</sup>. Killigrew, desperate to escape his mirror image, shoots himself through the heart in the play’s shocking and dramatic finale. The play struck a chord in Dublin and was a success with both audience and critics and was twice revived by the company. The critics recognised the dark paradoxes in the play while acknowledging its receptivity to the local Dublin audience. *The Irish Times* critic observed:

The play is finely written, with many telling lines. It has a light wit that should make it acceptable elsewhere, but probably nowhere but in Dublin will its loving cruelty be full appreciated.<sup>65</sup>

Whereas, D.M. writing in *The Irish Press* was puzzled yet affirmative:

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

<sup>65</sup> *Irish Times*, 9th December 1931. Press cutting. Gate Theatre Collection, Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections Northwestern University Libraries, Chicago, Ill.

These dreadful young people! Did they not see – did she not see, how cheap was their cynicism, how shallow their wit, how joyless and hopeless their way of life? But in the second act their folly became so foolish, their crudeness so blatant, that one knew their author saw it.<sup>66</sup>

Manning would use her editorial position with *Motley* to further espouse her views on European cinema. Along with serving as a manifesto for the theatre's artistic policy, *Motley* provided publication opportunities for new and established literary talent as well as a focal point for arts debate and opinion. It was inevitable therefore that Manning's views on cinema would form an integral part of her editorial policy. *Motley* not only offered film reviews and news of film production, but Manning supplied her opinion on the state of film production and cinema programming. Within much of her writing about the cinema at this time, a clear sense of her admiration for German Expressionism and Russian cinema is evident. In 'Why Not A Repertory Cinema?', Manning presented a bold article where she laments the lack of 'intelligent' films and film criticism in Dublin, and lambasts contemporary cinema programme managers:

There is no Dublin management with sense enough to supply the obvious demand for intelligent films. The film Society [Of which Manning was co-founder] tried and failed, not through lack of response, but because of legal restrictions, and enormous import duties.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Mary Manning, 'Why Not a Repertory Cinema?', *Motley*, (Dublin Gate Theatre, Sept. 1932), 14-15.

Citing the recent Gate Theatre successes of *Hamlet* and the presence of two repertory theatres, she argued that there existed an erudite Dublin audience and presented a compelling argument that intellectual film content could have handsome box-office merit: "Over twenty thousand people paid to see *The End of St. Petersburg...*?"<sup>68</sup> It is interesting that Manning referenced Pudovkin's film – a piece that she and Denis Johnston would later homage in their film *Guests of the Nation*. The article praises a British repertory cinema, the Academy Cinema in London's Oxford Street, applauding recent revivals which, Manning notes, included *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*. She completed the article with a demand for revision in Dublin programming and a call for revivals: "We would also like to see revivals of the silents, *Greed*, *Warning Shadows*, *The Last Laugh* and *The Student of Prague...*"<sup>69</sup>, these titles, along with *Caligari* encapsulated a list of German expressionist classics of the 1920s. She concluded in typical bombastic style: "The mediocre is too much with us, let us for heaven's sake pull out of the provincial rut, and demand our rights as intelligent people to the best in Art, the best in entertainment, the best in everything."<sup>70</sup>

In a later *Motley* piece, Manning's enthusiasm for Expressionist cinema is distinctly expressed in her article *Hail Veidt*, where she lavishes praise on the German actor and star of the classics which she references in her article:

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

Conrad Veidt, surely the greatest film actor of our time, was seen this month at the Grafton in the British film, *Rome Express*. His last appearance here was in *Congress Dancesin* which he was overshadowed by the exploitation of Lilian Harvey, but occasionally he loomed out of the ground tremendous, suave, smiling and sinister. All good film fans remember Veidt in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [sic], *The Student of Prague*, *Waxworks* and *The Hands of Orlac*. In those days he was given parts worthy of his genius.<sup>71</sup>

She also praised the technical prowess of the filmmakers in comparison to British talent: "The wisest thing the British studios ever did was link up with Ufa, out of this bargain they get the benefit of the best technicians and two of the greatest film actors in the world."<sup>72</sup>

A clue to Manning's importance to the planning and production of *Guests of the Nation* can be seen in Denis Johnston's handwritten production journal.<sup>73</sup> This is a logbook and planner recording the progression of the film production from the initial meeting on through to the end of the acquisition of shots. On the second page he recorded a contact sheet of sorts with a list of the names, address and contact numbers of all the key players in the production, both cast and crew. The first name on the list is Mary Manning and her brother John with an address listed as 35 Wellington Place, Dublin 4.<sup>74</sup> Incidentally the name at the bottom of the list, and with an address in 27

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<sup>71</sup> Mary Manning, 'Hail Veidt!', *Motley* (Dublin Gate Theatre, Mar 1933), 10-12.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Denis Johnston, Production journal. This is an exercise book held in the O'Leary Archive, National Library of Ireland consisting of a miscellaneous collection of notes, timetables, meetings, addresses, shot lists and production matters. MS 5,000/276/17.

<sup>74</sup> Denis Johnston, Production journal. 2



Eccles Street on Dublin's northside is Peadar O'Donnell, the writer who "made violent love" to Manning.<sup>75</sup>

At several points in this journal Manning's name is recorded alongside various tasks and responsibilities: for example on the furniture and props list for the Cottage Interior scene the word "Mary" is written beside: "Candles, Lamp and Candles, Pipe Cup (woodbines), Some hard loaf, Sticks, Mattress & Sacking, Basin, Looking Glass." The words "Abbey and Mary" accompany bucket and pictures".<sup>76</sup> It is therefore highly likely that Manning was involved in the prop sourcing and art direction of the film. At another point in the journal there is a record of the characters that would form the IRA column in the ambush scene and the actors that were to play them; beside the character of "clerk", Johnston had recorded "Mary's Friend".<sup>77</sup> In the same page the character of "Intellectual" is credited to the author Frank O'Connor. This would strongly suggest that Manning was involved in the casting process. Manning also had a hand in security elements, Johnston's diary recorded Manning chasing away some IRA volunteers who seemed to have taken a keen interest in the rifles the production had borrowed from the Free State Army, when they were shooting the location ambush scenes.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Mary Manning, 'I remember it Well - Some Bits of Autobiography', *The Journal of Irish Literature*, Vol. XV, No.1, ed. Robert Hogan, Gordon Henderson & Kathleen Danaher, 34.

<sup>76</sup> Denis Johnston, Production journal. 18.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>78</sup> Denis Johnston, "3<sup>rd</sup> Omnibus X Book" Denis Johnston Papers, Trinity College Dublin.

*Guests of the Nation* received a very positive response from critics after its premiere. *The Irish Press* hailed the film as 'an epic'<sup>79</sup>, while the *Irish Independent* considered the film as the best yet produced in Ireland:

The spontaneous outburst of applause at the end counted for far more than the enthusiasm of the average cinema audience. Founded on Frank O'Connor's novel of the Anglo-Irish War, with the same name, it is remarkable for first-class photography, remarkable capable direction and very judicious "cutting."<sup>80</sup>

The film featured performances from actors who would continue to distinguished careers both in Ireland and Hollywood including Barry Fitzgerald, Cyril Cusack, Shelah Richards and John O'Dea.

The overwhelming impression one gets from looking at the Archival materials, Johnston's records and the subsequent writings from the participants in the project is a real sense of communal effort. This spirit is reflected in the notes Manning's brother John wrote in the programme for a screening on 16th March 1960:

We met all the troubles and problems encountered by amateurs, unpredictable weather and lighting, retakes, continuity, assembling or collecting the cast...there were many incidents. On one occasion we all arrived on a Co. Wicklow location only to find I had forgotten to bring any stock...Yes there was a wonderful sense of cooperation between us all, and none grudged the time and energy and patience involved.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *Irish Press*, 26<sup>th</sup> January 1935.

<sup>80</sup> *Irish Independent*, 26<sup>th</sup> January 1935.

<sup>81</sup> Taken from programme notes by John Manning for a screening of *Guests of the Nation* on 16<sup>th</sup> March 1960, at the Abbey Lecture Hall by The Irish Film Society. O' Leary Archive, National Library of Ireland.

However, Manning's time in Ireland was drawing to a close. At the end of that year she left Dublin for what she believed would be a short holiday visiting relatives in America. Soon after her arrival she attended a dinner party on Christmas Eve 1935 in Boston, Massachusetts. Sitting next to her was a young Harvard law graduate, Mark De Wolfe Howe, who had recently returned from a spell as an assistant producer in Hollywood. The pair quickly developed a relationship, no doubt helped by their shared enthusiasm for the cinema, and were married six weeks later.

Before settling into married life in America, Manning returned to Dublin in the summer of 1936 with two young Bostonian debutantes, Isabella ('Belle') Gardner and Elizabeth ('Betty') Stockton, and determined to 'kick up their heels'. Their suitors included a young Ernest Childers and Samuel Beckett.<sup>82</sup> Betty Stockton was wholly unlike anything the young Beckett had ever encountered and the young man became instantly infatuated with her. As his biographer Deirdre Bair explains:

She had grown up in an atmosphere of refinement and cultivation which enhanced her natural sparkle and gave her a dimension of maturity beyond her years. She was a sophisticated debutante who knew her own value as a person; aware of her natural beauty, she used it as a charm and a gift to others and never as a means to a selfish end. She was generous, witty, gentle, and amusing, and Samuel Beckett had never, in all his years, met anyone like her.<sup>83</sup>

Belle was very charmed by Childers but Betty rejected Beckett who sought solace with his childhood friend.

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<sup>82</sup> James Knowlson, *Damned To Fame – The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 228.

<sup>83</sup> Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*, 253.

That summer Manning embarked on a brief and passionate love affair with Beckett. As she said in a 1992 interview with Beckett biographer James Knowlson:

Both of us were frightened and lonely. I was terribly frightened. I got married in a hurry over here [in the USA] and I didn't know whether I was right or not... It was two frightened, lonely people about the same age, the same society, the same background, suddenly in crisis and that was it.<sup>84</sup>

The affair was of understandable concern to both families' parents who breathed a collective sigh of relief when Manning set sail back to Boston in the first week of September 1936.<sup>85</sup> There has been some speculation regarding Manning's affair with Beckett and the parentage of her firstborn child, Susan, who was born in June 1937. For example, Jose Landers unfairly claims that, "For decades afterwards, Manning herself pretended that Susan, her firstborn, was Beckett's child".<sup>86</sup> However Deirdre Bair's position on the matter is more convincing: "As the summer drifted on, he grew silent and tight-lipped when friends mentioned Betty, but he never asked about her. He drifted into a sexual relationship instigated by the woman he called the Frica, but almost before it began it was ended by both their mothers, who realised the unsuitability of the liaison and saw to it that both their errant children were separated

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<sup>84</sup> James Knowlson, *Damned To Fame*, p. 229.

<sup>85</sup> Mary Manning's first daughter Susan was born on June 10<sup>th</sup> 1937 leading to some speculation as to her parentage.

<sup>86</sup> Jose Landers, 'Desperation and Ineffectuals: Mary Manning's Gate Plays of the 1930s', *The Gate Theatre, Dublin: inspiration and craft*, David Clare, Des Lally, and Patrick Lonergan (eds) (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018), 108.

by great physical distance.”<sup>87</sup> In her footnote to this passage Bair concedes: “The woman in question wishes to remain anonymous”.<sup>88</sup> I believe Manning exercised the utmost discretion in respect to her friendship with Beckett. Her second daughter Fanny Howe put any question of Susan’s parentage beyond doubt, acknowledging that her sister and the great writer, “looked so alike”. Any tantalising notion was put to bed scientifically: “the fantasy could be fuelled until DNA settled it.”<sup>89</sup>

In conclusion, the first half of the 1930s saw the beginning of a truly independent, mini-surge in native Irish film production. This movement emerged from nowhere as the practical or logistical infrastructure for producing work did not exist in the country at that time. Films were shot on location in Ireland with Irish actors and financed, scripted, produced, directed and edited by Irish people. What we saw was a group of individuals keen to express themselves stylistically and using their contemporary European influences. Manning, with her boundless energy, both practically and creatively was at the very centre of this movement inspired by the European avant-garde. By emulating these elements as an aesthetic expressive form and weaving these forms within her play, Manning was clearly identified herself with the expressionist movement. Although Manning would return to Ireland periodically she eventually settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts but her restless creative energy

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<sup>87</sup> Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Fanny Howe, *The Winter Sun: Notes on a Vocation* (St Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2009), 36.

would see her continue to experiment with new means of expression and aesthetic forms in this new period of her life.

**New Departures - Manning the novelist:**  
***Mount Venus* and the influences of**  
**Maria Edgeworth, Elizabeth Bowen and Kate O'Brien**

“There must be perfect towns where shadows were strong like buildings, towns  
secret without coldness, unaware without indifference.”

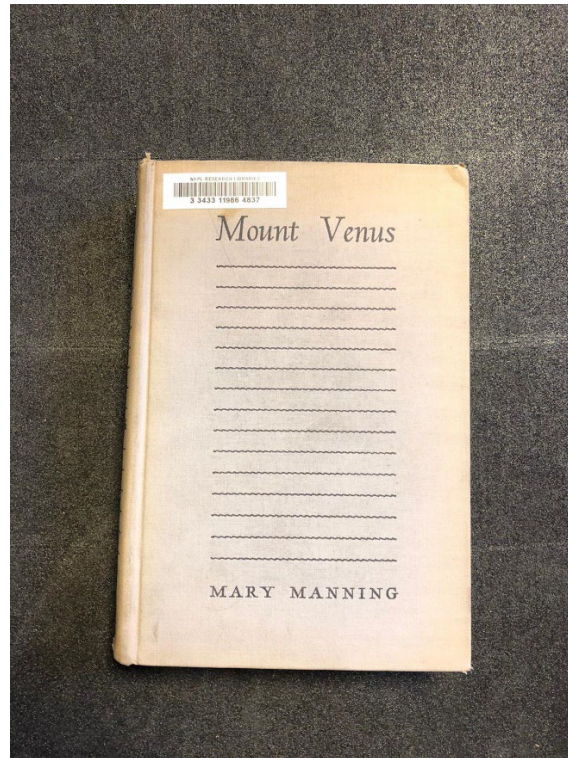
Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September*

Following her arrival in the United States the newly married Mary Manning produced a significant change in direction with the publication on 4th October 1938 by Boston based Houghton Mifflin, of her first novel, *Mount Venus*.<sup>1</sup> This departure was a necessary and logical progression, prompted by a strong political motivation and influenced by the work of her contemporaries and in particular by her fellow Irish fiction writers Kate O'Brien (1897-1974) and Elizabeth Bowen (1899-1973). The novel, with all its charming eccentricities and abundance of narrative threads, marks a significant step up in ambition – both in terms of genre and scope – for Manning and has at its core a very strong Socialist discourse. Manning, who according to her daughter Susan Howe was “a life-long and committed socialist”, would strongly express these sentiments through the pages of this work and create an elaborate critique of the pro-fascist movements and the Irish post-revolution political system.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The title is now incredibly rare, the only available copy I could locate was in the New York Public library. I owe a debt of gratitude to the staff of that library for making the title available to my brother to make a photographic copy of the piece during a weekend vacation in January 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Susan Howe, 22nd July, 2018, New Haven, CT.



*Mount Venus* novel front cover – New York Public Library.

Manning was no stranger to novelists: her social milieu in Dublin was almost exclusively comprised of encounters with the literati; she had conducted romances with Anthony Powell and Peadar O'Donnell, and her lifelong friend, Samuel Beckett, had written a novel a few years earlier, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, in which Manning and her mother had been satirised.<sup>3</sup> Written in 1932 when Beckett was twenty-six years old, the novel is stylistically influenced by Joyce who at that time was immersed in creating *Finnegans Wake*, and for whom Beckett had assisted as a private

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<sup>3</sup> Although Beckett's novel was not published until 1992, excerpts of the work were published before he completed the piece in 1932, and Manning undoubtedly was aware of its existence. Beckett refused to allow the entire novel to be published during his lifetime, on the grounds that it was "immature and unworthy": however, his biographer Deirdre Bair believes that his reluctance to make it available to the reading public was to avoid offending lifelong friends, including Manning, whom Beckett satirised in the book.



secretary. Interspersed with autobiographical elements, there are five key female characters in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, all of whom were intimately connected to the author. The character of the Smeraldina-Rima was based on Beckett's cousin and former lover Peggy Sinclair who had died the previous year. The Syra-Cusa character was inspired by Lucia Joyce (daughter of James Joyce) who became infatuated with Beckett; they had a complicated relationship made more difficult by Lucia's worsening schizophrenia. The poet Ethna MacCarthy who Fintan O'Toole maintains was Beckett's first love provided the inspiration for *The Alba*.<sup>4</sup> Manning and her mother Susan were given a particularly odious portrayal as 'The Fricas':

Now a most terrible and unexpected thing happens. Into the quiet pages of our cadenza bursts a nightmare harpy, Miss Dublin, a hell-cat. In she lands singing Havelock Ellis in a deep voice, itching manifestly to work that which is not seemly. If only she could be bound and beaten and burnt but not quick. Or, failing that, brayed gently on a mortar...A septic pudding hoodwinks her, a stodgy turban of pain it laps her horse-face. The eye-hole is clogged with the bulbous and the round pale globe goggles exposed. Solitary mediation has furnished her with nostrils of generous bore. The mouth champs an invisible bit, foam gathers at the bitter commissures...What shall we call it? Give it a name quick. Lilly, Jane or Caleken Frica? Or just plain Mary?<sup>5</sup>

The author was even more merciless with Susan Manning:

The Frica had a mother, and thereby was partially explained: a bald caterwauling bedlam of a ma with more toes than teeth. As a young mare she had curvetted smartly, lifting the knees chin high, and had enjoyed certain measures of success in certain quarters. And if the dam trot, as the saying runs and we all know to our cost, shall the foal then amble? She shall not. Nor did.

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<sup>4</sup> Fintan O'Toole, 'Beckett in Love', *The New York Review of Books* (20 August 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (London: Faber & Faber, 2020), 180.

For did she not caper caparisoned in those nightmare housings and in her absinthe whinny notify Belacqua that her darling ma bade him to a party with back stairs, claret cup and the intelligentsia.<sup>6</sup>

In these passages Beckett creates a grotesque pairing, with the mother and daughter merging quasi-sexual imagery into a horse-like impression and concluding with a veiled reference to the coffee house and meeting place Manning's mother ran at that time in Dawson Street. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a Fricatrice as a 'Lewd Woman' and Beckett's biographer James Knowlson believes he borrowed the term from Jonson's *Volpone*, IV, ii: "To a lewd harlot, a base fricatrice".<sup>7</sup>

This link to the Manning is reinforced by Beckett's use of the 'Frica' moniker in a 1934 letter to Thomas MacGreevy: "Geoffrey is up to his eyes and of course parked with the Fricas".<sup>8</sup> This is a reference to his friend Dr Geoffrey Thomson who Knowlson confirmed through an interview with John Manning, spent time with the Manning family during the summer of 1934.<sup>9</sup> Knowlson suggests that Beckett had deep reservations about publishing the work as he feared some Dublin friends, including the Mannings, "would recognise themselves in his book as well, as they gazed through the rather flimsy veils in which he had clothed his characters."<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless the

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<sup>6</sup> Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, 180.

<sup>7</sup> James Knowlson, *Damned to fame: the life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 732.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 154.

<sup>9</sup> Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 154.

<sup>10</sup> Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 183.

friendship between Beckett and the Manning family continued despite the cruel lampooning, and Knowlson acknowledges there was a great fondness between them with Beckett visiting on his infrequent returns to Ireland. Mary Manning consistently championed Beckett's work in the US throughout the 1930s and 1940s, regularly proposing his work to publishers.

Given Manning's familiarity with Beckett, both as playwright and author of fiction, in addition to her lively interest in the Irish literary scene more generally, it is unsurprising that she should be tempted into penning a novel of her own. Written in nine sub-divided chapters, populated with a variety of peculiar and unconventional characters, peppered with Irish literary references, and brimming with her famous characteristic caustic wit and humour, *Mount Venus* is Manning's attempt to mirror the Ireland of the 1930s. Not unlike her work with *Motley*, the novel clearly illustrates the author's views on the flaws that existed in her native land at that time and is consciously framed within an international context – commenting on a growing pro-fascist movement across the continent, most notably engaging with the crisis in Spain, while, closer to home, ruminating on De Valera's government and the prominent role that the Catholic Church played through these turbulent times both in Ireland and further afield.

The Mount Venus of the title is a large sprawling mansion in Rathfarnham on the outskirts of Dublin. The novel is populated with a variety of eccentrics, idealists and radicals clinging to an outmoded ideal of revolution and a romanticised view of

what a new Ireland could look like. The household is presided over by the patriarchal Caroline Crosby known as the Doña. Born into a privileged country family and restless from an early age she abandons the demesne, and, following stints in London and Paris, finally settles in Dublin. The house is a buzzing hive of activity with a mad cap assortment of eccentric rustic servants, visiting academics and the occasional leftist dropping by for tea. Married twice the Doña's various D'Costa and McConnell progeny are for the most part idealistic radicals of the old school. The brooding eldest son Michael and half-brother Barry have both spent stints in prison for a variety of rebellious activities, daughter Liza boasts a string of broken love affairs and dreams of capturing a rich husband. The family is completed by the adopted daughter Mariam who serves as one of the few voices of reason in the novel, although she is far from conventional, and Michael's mythology fixated American wife Delia. The timeline of the novel is two years, and it follows the fortunes of the various family members as they navigate life, love and revolutionary politics. The plot of the piece is quite complex but everything is subservient to comic set-pieces and is very reminiscent of the Marx Brothers who were at the height of their popularity at that time; Manning, being a cinephile, would undoubtedly have been a fan.<sup>11</sup> There are three central narrative strands in the novel: the Doña's dealings with the Lucas Street leftist revolutionary group based in Central Dublin and her power struggle with the

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<sup>11</sup> The Marx Brothers three most successful films were released in the mid-1930s *Duck Soup* (1933), released by Paramount, *A Night at the Opera* (1935), released by MGM and *A Day at the Races* (1937), released by MGM.

younger firebrands, Michael's increasing dissatisfaction with the movement and his departure to fight in the Spanish Civil War, and daughter Liza immersion in an unconventional love triangle. Like Manning's earlier work at the Gate Theatre what engages the reader is Manning's comic ability and deft skill at characterization and her adroit handling of large dramatic set pieces. The novel is set in the Ireland just proceeding De Valera's move into power and a strong social commentary is evident in the novel with critiques of censorship and the growing pro-fascist movement prevalent in Ireland at the time. However, at the core of the novel there exists a touching pathos and humanity that is well composed by the writer: a tragic element seeps into the story and fractures the family unit by the novel's conclusion and the Doña, realising the new post-revolution Ireland holds no place for her, abandons the family home.

Manning places *Mount Venus* firmly in the 'Big House' genre of the Irish novel, a form Terence Brown believes was an aspirational manifestation of the Ascendancy class, struggling to establish an identity in the new state: "The emotional state of Anglo-Ireland in the period was registered in a number of novels which appeared in the 1920s and early thirties that employed the Big House as a metaphor which might allow the author to explore the socially disintegrated world of the Protestant ascendancy."<sup>12</sup> Seamus Deane argues that Yeats's defence of the Ascendancy assisted the relocation of the political theory of aristocracy into a literary context: "The big

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<sup>12</sup> Terence Brown, *Ireland: a social and cultural history 1922-79* (London: Fontana, 1981), 110.

house surrounded by the unruly tenantry, culture besieged by barbarity, a refined aristocracy beset by a vulgar middle class – all these are recurrent images in twentieth century Irish fiction which draws heavily on Yeats's poetry for them."<sup>13</sup> This fits very well with *Mount Venus*, as the sense of the residents of the house under siege from male outside influences is a prevalent theme throughout the novel.

The 'Big House' novel is a form initiated by Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1801) and explored in arguably its sharpest focus by Manning's contemporary Elizabeth Bowen in her 1927 novel *The Last September*. Echoes of both writers can be detected in Manning's work, establishing these 'Big House' credentials of the novel from the opening page: "It is generally expected of most Anglo-Irish 'County' families that they should combine a charming eccentricity with an amusing insolvency."<sup>14</sup> The 'Big House' novel was a mainly Irish sub-genre essentially involving narratives set in and around the large Irish country manor with mainly Anglo-Irish neighbours and local Irish Catholic peasants. The importance of this very popular and enduring sub-genre within the Irish novel is pointed out by Vera Kreilkamp who considers the form to 'represent a major tradition in Irish Fiction.'<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals, essays in modern Irish literature 1880-1980* (London: Faber, 1985), 31.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Manning, *Mount Venus* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo Irish Novel and the Big House* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 157.

Written in 1800 at a time when the British and Irish Parliaments were preparing the legislation that would eventually emerge as the Act of Union (1800), *Castle Rackrent* tells the story of three generations of an idiosyncratic landed family as seen through the eyes of their long-time servant, Thady Quirk, recorded and commented on by an anonymous editor.<sup>16</sup> Regarded as the first 'Big House' novel, Edgeworth provides the reader with highly amusing portrayals of the eccentricities of four generations of the family until they eventually cede the estate to Quirk's canny son, Jason. This characterisation would be particularly appealing to Manning who made quirky and eccentric characters a prominent feature in her work. *Castle Rackrent* begins with the self-indulgent drunkard Sir Patrick O'Shaughlin, who dies, "just as the company rose to drink his health with three cheers, he fell down in a sort of fit, and was carried off; they sat it out, and were surprised, on inquiry in the morning, to find that it was all over with poor Sir Patrick."<sup>17</sup> The estate passes to the litigious Sir Murtagh Rackrent who "used to boast he had a law-suit for every letter in the alphabet", meets a similar fate, "All on a sudden he stopped, and my lady too. Something has surely happened, thought I; and so it was, for Sir Murtagh in his passion broke a blood-vessel, and all the law in the land could do nothing in that case. My lady sent for five physicians, but

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<sup>16</sup> The Acts of Union 1800 were parallel acts of the Parliament of Great Britain and the Parliament of Ireland which united the Kingdom of Great Britain and the Kingdom of Ireland to create the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The acts came into force on 1 January 1801, and the merged Parliament of the United Kingdom had its first meeting on 22 January 1801.

<sup>17</sup> Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, edited with an introduction by George Watson (Oxford University Press: London, 1964), 11, 15.

Sir Murtagh died, and was buried.”<sup>18</sup> It now becomes the turn of the cruel Sir Kit Rackrent, who, not for love, marries “a JEWISH by all accounts” and subjects her to meals of pork and sausages, locks her up in a shed, and fights a number of duels until the inevitable occurs when “he received a ball in a vital part, and was brought home, in little better than an hour after the affair, speechless on a hand-barrow to my lady.”<sup>19</sup> The final Rackrent, the profligate Sir Condy, cannot find the time to deal with the mounting bills, “for in the mornings he was a-bed, and in the evenings over his bottle, where no gentleman chooses to be disturbed” and leaves the family bankrupt.

The novel though is an elaborate satire of attitudes within Irish society and a forewarning of an impending complacency about what must inevitably follow from a political union with Britain. As Stanley Solomon argues:

The irony of the novel, then, is not limited to the Quirks' rise and the Rackrents' fall, but is also directed against Thady's moral insensitivity in his attitude toward his masters. Maria Edgeworth, however, is in no sense a genial satirist dealing with an old man's moral imperceptiveness. Thady is a symbol of a general attitude, manifest everywhere in the book, of indifference to evil. The ironic condemnation in *Castle Rackrent* is as far-ranging as that of any classical ironists. It is aimed at all the Irish people by a novelist who spent her life in Ireland.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, 25-33.

<sup>20</sup> Stanley J. Solomon, 'Ironic Perspective in Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*', *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 2, no. 1 (1972): 70-71.



Deane considers *Castle Rackrent* to be, “the aggressive prelude to Edgeworth’s later novels on Ireland, a demonstration of the ruin which an irresponsible aristocracy brings upon itself and its dependants.”<sup>21</sup> Edgeworth is quite clear in the concluding passages of her novel about her views on the impending legislation, suggesting it is a union fuelled by alcohol rather than wisdom:

It is a problem of difficult solution to determine whether a union will hasten or retard the amelioration of this country. The few gentlemen of education who now reside in this country will resort to England. They are few, but they are in nothing inferior to men of the same rank in Great Britain. The best that can happen will be the introduction of British manufacturers in their places.

Did the Warwickshire militia, who were chiefly artisans, teach the Irish to drink beer? or did they learn from the Irish to drink whisky?<sup>22</sup>

If Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* comes, then, from a moment of Irish historical crisis when the country is on the verge of losing its very identity, *Mount Venus* is similarly born from a time of tumultuous change as the young postcolonial nation struggles to redefine itself, a struggle laced with the kind of comedy beloved of Edgeworth more than a century earlier.

Mirroring Edgeworth’s novel, the Mount Venus of Manning’s title is the large house in Rathfarnham outside Dublin inhabited by the various McConnell and D’Costa family members. The choice of location for the house is an interesting one as Rathfarnham was also the location of Riversdale House, W.B. Yeats’ home at that time,

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<sup>21</sup> Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), 92.

<sup>22</sup> Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*. 97.

it is also where Patrick Pearse established his Irish Language school St Ednas. The family is convoluted yet colourful, headed by the matriarchal Doña, a fusion of Maud Gonne, Countess Markievicz and Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, widow of an executed republican and minor celebrity among the Dublin wags: “The Doña is like the Book of Kells; she’s part of the National Collection; you can see her but you can’t touch her.”<sup>23</sup> The Doña’s two children by separate marriages, Michael D’Costa and Barry McConnell are very much revolutionaries of the old-school. Their flighty and self-obsessed sister Liza who likes to play Chopin “with a lot of fire and inaccuracy”<sup>24</sup> is more concerned with her romantic life. Michael’s wife Delia, a wealthy young American heiress whom he met while canvassing for a new political party and promptly married after a whirlwind romance, is a radicalised socialist. The family is completed by the earthy and likeable Marian, the Doña’s niece by marriage and adopted daughter.

Marian comes to live at Mount Venus after her mother has died of Spanish flu and following the death of her father, killed the following year in a War of Independence ambush the following year. She serves as one of the few steady voices of reason in the novel; in one amusingly insightful episode she defines each of the family through their individual brand of insanity: “Delia’s prettily insane. The Doña is magnificently insane. Barry is quietly insane whereas Michael is romantically

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<sup>23</sup> Manning, *Mount Venus*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

insane.”<sup>25</sup> This facet is, again, highly reminiscent of Maria Edgeworth and, although there are parallels in the submission of comical and highly eccentric characterisation, Marian is not a Thady Quirk, wryly observing and dispassionately commenting on the demise of the Rackrents. The Mount Venus household is replete with various rustic helpers and frenetic revolutionaries including Serena, Rowley and Birdie. The fearsome Serena is the vehicle for many of the attempts at a colloquial humour in the novel – a feature Manning would explore later in her career with the Aul Fella narrator in her adaptation of *The Saint and Mary Kate* which I will discuss in a later chapter. Proceedings are observed by family friend and former lover of the Doña, the misanthropic and reflective artist Corney McBey, who serves as the voice of reason and good sense who at some point everyone seems to turn to for advice.

While Maria Edgeworth is an ever present prompt to Manning’s imagination, the influence of her Irish contemporary, Elizabeth Bowen, is even more evident in *Mount Venus*. Bowen was born an only child in Dublin 1899, and, like Manning, came from Anglo-Irish stock. Her ancestor Henry Bowen came to Ireland with Cromwell’s conquering forces in the mid-seventeenth century and was granted a large estate in North Cork in payment for his services. In the 1770s Harry Bowen built the large family home of Bowen’s Court near Kildorrery. Elizabeth Bowen’s life was categorised by a series of childhood traumas which left her with a profound sense of dislocation that is reflected throughout her work. Her father was a solicitor who practiced in

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

Dublin, but the family returned to Bowen's Court every summer. When she was seven her father suffered a nervous breakdown, and she and her mother went to live with a series of relatives in the south of England. In her early teens her mother died of cancer, and this had a particularly traumatic psychological impact on the young girl. As her biographer, Victoria Glendenning, explains, "Elizabeth was thirteen when her mother died and in [her cousin] Audrey's opinion she never really got over it. One of the words at which her stammer consistently balked was 'mother'".<sup>26</sup> She spent the next several years living with various family members in the south of England. The transitory nature of her childhood, as well as her father's mental illness and her mother's early death created a deep well of anxiety which she drew from throughout her literary career and helped forge her characters, as Deane observes: "Her heroines are displaced people – orphans, divorcees – and her world is disorientated, a sequence of broken surfaces, perceptions, accidents."<sup>27</sup> After finishing boarding school, she attended art school in London for two years and this sense of herself as an artist is evident her work. As a writer her output was prolific, publishing ten novels and several volumes of short stories during her lifetime. In 1924 she married Alan Cameron and settled for a time in Oxford and then later in London where her literary associates included Virginia Woolf. Nevertheless, she maintained her connection with Bowen's Court, returning there with her husband most summers, frequently

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<sup>26</sup> Victoria Glendenning, *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977), 84.

<sup>27</sup> Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, 206.

entertaining her literary friends. Virginia Woolf described the fading majesty of Bowen's Court as: 'merely a great stone box, but full of Italian mantelpieces and decayed eighteenth-century furniture and carpets all in holes'.<sup>28</sup>

Bowen's work is characterised by an obsession with landscape and a sense of place, in particular as it relates to Bowen's Court. As an Anglo-Irish writer who lived through the turbulent years of 1916-23, a sense of threat is evident in her work, most notably in her novel *The Last September*. This connection with her ancestors and their place is central to Bowen's work. The 'Big House' for Bowen justified a sense of position and stability for her and her ancestors, creating a physical and psychological insularity which she found not only refreshing as a writer but which provided a catalyst for eccentricity. Writing in *The Bell* in 1940 she explained:

There is also – and this, I think, is the strength of such households – a very great feeling of independence: in the big house one does not feel overlooked; one lives by one's own standards, makes one own's laws and does not care, within fairly wide limits, what anyone outside the demesne wall thinks. This may tend to exaggerate, to the point of absurdity, the family's individual point of view: there are a thousand legends of eccentricity. But it does make for a sort of hardiness and absence of social fear. And ennui, that threat to life in Ireland, is kept at bay by the constant exigencies, some of them unexpected, of the house and place.<sup>29</sup>

These 'legends of eccentricity' amongst the residents evident in *Castle Rackrent* are further explored in both *The Last September* and *Mount Venus*, providing ample

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<sup>28</sup> Letter to Vanessa Bell, 3 May 1934, in Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (eds), *The Letters of Virginia Woolf. Vol 4: A Reflection of the Other Person 1929-31* (London: Harcourt, 1978), 299-300

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Big House', *The Bell*, vol. 1, no. 1 (October 1940), 75.

opportunity for fascinating and humorous characterisation set against a backdrop of political unrest in Ireland.

The Naylor of Danielstown host dinners and tennis competitions while the conflict escalates in and around their demesne. Similar to *Castle Rackrent* the comedy in both novels is rooted in the eccentricities of these characters, with both pieces satirising the Anglo-Irish upper classes. Alongside eccentricities in the female characters there are deeper psychological issues at play, as Vera Kreilkamp suggests:

Her heroines both flee from and seek houses that function as symbols of a psychic shelter that defines and threatens them. Simultaneously struggling against the confines of traditional roles as nurturing mothers, submissive daughters or loving wives, and reacting fearfully to their flight from these roles, Bowen's protagonists inhabit and reject a variety of domestic settings that present themselves as possible solutions to a sense of homelessness.<sup>30</sup>

For Bowen the most striking hallmark of her family members was that they never really showed their feelings. It was considered impolite to show anxiety or fear or even happiness, everything including family tragedy is accepted stoically. Bowen does not make her characters' feelings evident through their speech, actions or thoughts. She chooses not to tell the reader if the characters are sad or happy, the reader must deduce that through the surroundings.

Through the bricks and mortar of Danielstown, Bowen constructs a majestic symbol of Anglo-Irish indifference and alienation. Bowen considers the basic

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<sup>30</sup> Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 142.

metaphor of the novel to be “the emptiness of the spaces in the house and the space between the house and the landscape and society it has been set amidst.”<sup>31</sup> The importance of landscape for Bowen appears in her writing and was frequently employed as an emotional indicator for the reader. For example, at the end of *The Last September* (set in 1922), when the big house is burnt down, the owners of the house, Lord and Lady Naylor, stand outside watching it burn, speechless, stoically watching the inferno. But up at the top of the avenue “the thin iron gate twanged (missed its latch, remained swinging aghast).”<sup>32</sup> This is a device present in all of her novels, the landscapes feel the trauma which the characters cannot. The action is mostly located in the drawing rooms and libraries and grounds of the big houses where the portraits of the ancestors hanging on the walls feel the pain and suffering that the emotionally cauterised characters are numb to. Similarly in *Mount Venus* the author turns to nature and the landscape as an allusion for the reader of impending action or emotion flux within the characters. Deane believes the burning of Danielstown had wider literary significance:

Elizabeth Bowen is the writer in whom the internal as well as the external collapse of an English civilisation is finally registered. The strange death of liberal England included the stranger death of Ascendancy Ireland. With her work, the last remnant of social faith disappeared from Irish fiction – that is, faith in the enduring power of contemporary society to confer meaning on the individual life. Although the Big House continued to reappear in novels from 1930 to the present day, its function was largely a nostalgic one; it was an image

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<sup>31</sup> Brown, *The Literature of Ireland*, 112.

<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1948), 283.

of memory, an indication of political conservatism, even an expression of cultural disdain for the contemporary moment.<sup>33</sup>

Manning repeatedly opens chapters or sub-sections of *Mount Venus* with vivid descriptions of the weather or landscape, conjuring the mood for the reader, a feature manifest in some of Bowen's short form work. For example, Bowen's early short story, 'Sunday Evening' begins:

It was six o'clock, the dusky sky was streaked with gold behind the beech trees and the bells were already beginning: they had sat like this since tea. Mrs Roache had turned half-round to watch the sunset her hands were clasped along the back of her chair and her chin rested on her interwoven fingers.<sup>34</sup>

In a beautiful early passage from *The Last September* Bowen creates a wonderfully evocative description of the twilight at Danielstown:

The screen of trees that reached like an arm from behind the house – embracing the lawns, banks and terraces in mild ascent – had darkened, deepening into a forest. Like splintered darkness, branches pierced the faltering dusk of leaves. Evening drenched the trees; the beeches were soundless cataracts. Behind the trees, pressing in from the open and empty country like an invasion, the orange bright sky crept and smouldered. Firs, bearing up to pierce, melted against the brightness. Somewhere there was a sunset in which the mountains lay like glass.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Deane *Celtic Revivals*, 206.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *Collected Stories* with an introduction by John Banville (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 86.

<sup>35</sup> Bowen, *The Last September*, 34.



One can detect echoes of Bowen's style in some of Manning's passages, for example she begins the second chapter of her novel:

Sunday opened with a burst of sunshine, but towards noon clouds gathered over the mountain – the sun gradually disappeared – a brooding pallor spread over the sky, the air being hot and heavy, and swallows darted in and out of the eaves or skimmed low across the fields. The whole countryside seemed to be waiting in hushed anticipation for a storm to break its painted stillness.<sup>36</sup>

There are further similar descriptive openings in the novel – setting the scene for the confrontation between the rival factions she begins: "It was blowing up for a storm. The trees were swaying in a mad dance against the sky, and a pale frightened little moon was scudding through the clouds seeking shelter."<sup>37</sup> And a few pages prior to this we get an even firmer nod to *The Last September* and its adolescent narrator:

I was very young at the time, nineteen, and the Doña was always preaching at me to live fully, never to be afraid of life, and I must experience everything.

'I know,' agreed Marian. 'It's awful. She's terribly disappointed in me; says my face is not only an open but an empty book. Oh, Liza, I'll have to do it – take a lover I mean.'<sup>38</sup>

Bowen was adept at employing the supernatural in her writing, particularly through her short story work. Megan Kuster suggests Bowen's use of the supernatural in her short form work was an expression of Anglo-Irish isolation: "Bowen had previously used the short story form to embolden the dread of the supernatural. In

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<sup>36</sup> Manning, *Mount Venus*, 43.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>38</sup> Manning, *Mount Venus*, 244-245.

her earliest Irish ghost stories, 'The Back Drawing-Room' for example, the terror has an ethnic dimension related to the Anglo-Irish settlers' profound sense of displacement. For Bowen, the essence of the supernatural is evocation of terror and this momentary state of affective abhorrence can be magnified by being contemplated in isolation."<sup>39</sup> Manning also employs a chilling supernatural element following the death in the Spanish Civil War of the eldest son Michael; the family is metaphorically haunted by his death for the remainder of the novel but it is Barry who receives ghostly visitations from his dead brother:

Up at Newmount, Barry lay very still under his grey hospital blanket and tried to sleep, tried to ignore the voices in the wind, tried to shut out the conflict in his own mind, but sleep wouldn't come. Instead out of the darkness rose Michael, as he had come every night since his brother first heard of his death. Barry saw his dark arrogant eyes, heard as if in a waking dream, the well-remembered voice saying: 'Well how are you? Better now?... 'Wait a minute – don't go – don't leave me alone – the dawn isn't up yet. Do you sleep well Michael?' 'Very peacefully Barry, very quietly; it's only when you call me that I'm disturbed.' 'Oh, God, God, God, if only I could believe!'<sup>40</sup>

A further feature shared by both *Mount Venus* and *The Last September* is the manner in which their respective narratives conclude, pointing towards the encroachment of the ubiquitous political menace and demise of 'The Big House'. With Bowen's novel the ever-present threat inevitably manifests itself in the death of the young British Army officer and Lois' suitor Gerald and the catastrophic burning of

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<sup>39</sup> Megan Kuster, 'Who's Afraid of "The Demon Lover"? Ireland and the Supernatural in the Short Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen', *The Green Book: Writings on Irish Gothic, Supernatural and Fantastic Literature*, no. 4, 13–26.

<sup>40</sup> Manning, *Mount Venus*, 287-288.

Danielstown by the IRA – something the writer herself feared for Bowen’s Court. *Mount Venus* concludes with the attack on the Lucas Street premises when the building is attacked and fire bombed by a large right-wing mob. With the dilution of the Doña’s influence in the Lucas Street group and the disintegration of the family signalled by the death of Michael the illness of the remaining son Barry and the desertion of daughter Lisa, it is very clear to the matriarch that remaining in Dublin is futile and she abandons Mount Venus seeking a fresh political challenge organising the workers in the North.

Manning’s novel opens in the late nineteenth century and tells the bizarre story of how the family came to reside at *Mount Venus*. The Doña was born Caroline Crosbie, youngest daughter of a landed gentry family in County Sligo. After a ‘dazzling first season’ as a debutante in London she moves to Paris where, much like Kate O’Brien, she has an unhappy marriage that lasts barely a year. She then takes up with an Irish artist living in the city, Corney McBey, and enjoys a bohemian lifestyle with a social circle that includes W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge, Countess Markievicz and George Moore. Upon the death of her father and the succession of his title to her brother William, Caroline returns to the family home but becomes restless after a few months and ends up in Dublin. There, on George Moore’s recommendation, she begins searching for a house in Rathfarnham. Like Danielstown in *The Last September*, and mirroring the real-life fate of Moore’s ancestral home, Moore Hall in Carnacon, County Mayo, the

Crosbie country house is later destroyed by Republicans during the War of Independence. It is Moore who introduces her to Mount Venus:

Behind the house loomed a little hill on which, outlined against the sky, stood a ruined mansion known as Mount Venus. History relates that it was built during the eighteenth-century by a reckless country gentleman for his beautiful mistress who loved the gentle view of the pasturelands melting into the sea. Sometime during the last century, long after the lovers were dust, Mount Venus was burnt down and only the skeleton remained; nobody had ever rebuilt it, though Moore told Caroline to do so, but she very sensibly refused.<sup>41</sup>

A hint of Yeats' mysticism is offered when Caroline, initially wary of the house as she fears it is too close to a druid circle, declines the opportunity to purchase the property but is soon persuaded otherwise by Moore. Two years after her return to Ireland she meets and marries the love of her life, labour leader Martin McConnell, has two children with him, Barry, born in 1906, and Liza born in 1908. Martin is subsequently executed for his part in the 1916 rising which encourages in her a rabid hatred of England; she subsequently throws herself into an active role in the Anglo-Irish war. Caroline settles permanently at Mount Venus and subsequently becomes involved wholeheartedly in the nationalist movement, learns Gaelic, and performs in various revolutionary plays. Because of her Spanish name, dark hair and swarthy good looks she is given the moniker 'The Doña'.<sup>42</sup> The choice of Rathfarnham for the location of the house was interesting choice for Manning

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<sup>41</sup> Manning, *Mount Venus*, 4.

<sup>42</sup> It is interesting to note that there is a character in Frank O'Connor's 1932 novel *The Saint and Mary Kate* named Doña. Manning would adapt the novel for The Abbey Theatre later in her career.

The family is immersed in a revolutionary group and seditious publication based in Lucas Street in Dublin city centre. Introducing the reader to the Lucas Street leftist group, the firebrand radical Considine offers an anti-clerical leftist rant:

No it is our anti-clericalism which has unsheathed the naked swords of the Fascist forces against us. We have dared defy the Holy Roman Hierarchy who, in the days of the Great Famine, told the people to starve if need be, but in any case to pay their rents! But we can echo Michael Davitt. "Make no mistake, my lord bishops, Democracy is going to rule in this island".<sup>43</sup>

The main action of the novel examines the challenge to the socialist old guard by the new political radicalism. Alongside this turmoil the movement itself is under an increasing threat from the Christian Soldiers reactionary right wing political force modelled on Eoin O'Duffy's Blueshirt movement of the 1930s.<sup>44</sup> The growing tension between the factions is presented against the imposing, ever present, spectre of the Spanish Civil War. This facet is coupled with a romantic sub-plot involving Liza, her cousin Dick Crosbie and the American journalist Ricky Talbot.

The novel represents a powerful critique of the political situation in Ireland in the 1930s and is reminiscent of Kate O'Brien's *Pray for the Wanderer* published in the same year. O'Brien's novel is an outright attack on Eamon De Valera, portraying him

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<sup>43</sup> Manning, *Mount Venus*, 91.

<sup>44</sup> The Blueshirts were a paramilitary organisation in the Irish Free State, founded as the Army Comrades Association in Dublin on 11 August 1932 under the leadership of Eoin O'Duffy. The group provided physical protection for political groups such as Cumann na nGaedheal from intimidation and attacks by the IRA. Some former members went on to fight for the Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War after the group had been dissolved.

as a quasi-dictator; it is also critical of the Fianna Fáil government, and in particular its treatment of writers and artists. The novel's main character Matt Costello, undoubtedly based on O'Brien herself, is a writer who, after some recognition in London, returns to his native 'Mellick', O'Brien's fictionalised hometown of Limerick. Costello finds his work pilloried by the local middle-class community and in frustration decides to leave Ireland again: "Oh green and trim Free State! Smug, obstinate and pertinacious little island, your sins and ignorances are thick upon your face and thickening under the authority of your 'sea-green incorruptible'!"<sup>45</sup> Manning, like O'Brien, was deeply concerned with the Irish political landscape, writing from the vantage point of an exile. Both women turned this factor into an advantage, embracing a sense of liberty and allowing it to flow through their work. Jane Davison considers this feature to be crucial for O'Brien offering her "a measure of religious, sexual and artistic freedom which was impossible in Ireland of their day" and placing her "among an elite group of Irish writers who lived in self-imposed exile, were greatly influenced by their new surroundings, but whose work was preoccupied with interpreting life at home."<sup>46</sup>

It is important to explain the highly volatile atmosphere that existed in Ireland at that time which led to the rise of a pro-fascist movement and which forms the

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<sup>45</sup> Kate O'Brien, *Pray for the Wanderer* (Bath: Chivers, 1976), 153.

<sup>46</sup> Jane Davison, *Kate O'Brien and Spanish literary culture* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2017), 9-10.

background for *Mount Venus*. The growth of Fianna Fáil and the election of the first two de Valera Governments, in 1932 and 1933, saw political tensions in Ireland rise to an intensity not seen since the civil war. Tim Pat Coogan describes the January 1933 snap general election as “possibly the most violent of the century.”<sup>47</sup> Amongst the first actions de Valera took when he took office was to order the release of IRA prisoners in March 1932, and he suspended much of the public safety legislation aimed against the group. This, in turn, led to the formation of a reactionary organisation, the Army Comrades Association (ACA), an ex-military group of pro Cumann na nGaedheal supporters initially founded as a protective association. A semi-benevolent group open to members of the National Army, it initially declared itself to be non-political but became increasingly militant and was frequently involved in clashes and street battles with the IRA.

By the end of 1932, the ACA was providing sizable bodyguards at Cumann na nGaedheal rallies as attempts were made by the IRA to disrupt their meetings. Fianna Fáil also began to attack the core tenets of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and an economic war began in August 1932 which undermined a decade of Cumann na nGaedheal economic policy. Committed to the defence of free speech and to depose what they perceived to be the growing threat of communism, the ACA claimed a membership of over 30,000 by the end of 1932. The two successive electoral defeats triggered a crisis within Cumann na nGaedheal which saw their powerbase subside as de Valera

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<sup>47</sup> Tim Pat Coogan, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century* (London: Arrow, 2004), 196.

appeared to have the mandate he needed to undo the Treaty and prosecute the economic war. Realising they needed a new approach to deal with de Valera, the conservative, right-leaning and pro-treaty elements in Irish society initiated a year of dramatic restructuring as they attempted to adapt to the new political status quo.

Into this volatile political tumult entered General Eoin O'Duffy, who at that time was a deeply controversial figure in Irish politics. A leading member of the IRA, he had served with distinction during the War of Independence and acted for a time as its chief of staff. During the Civil War he was appointed by Michael Collins onto the War Council and took charge of the National army in Munster, which saw some of the bloodiest action of the conflict. Following a mutiny in the civic guard he was appointed Commissioner of An Garda Síochána by Cumann na nGaedheal, a post he was fired from in 1933 when De Valera was re-elected Taoiseach. Unshackled from the constraints of officialdom, O'Duffy began to drift increasingly towards the political far right as he embraced European fascism. He joined and rapidly became leader of the Army Comrades Association; now renamed the National Guard, they soon became popularly known as the Blueshirts. With their parades and paramilitary attire, they echoed Italian and German shirtist movements and quickly became associated with European fascist parties in the Irish public's psyche. As Terence Brown explains:

It was inevitable that the National Guard with its zest for marches and public displays of mass support, its uniform of blue shirts and its raised arm salutes should immediately be associated with contemporary Fascist movements of continental Europe. The fact that O'Duffy was also sympathetic to the



corporatist ideas of the Italian Fascists made it seem all the more likely the Blue shirts movement was an Irish expression of a European phenomenon.<sup>48</sup>

Political clashes and street violence between rival factions became commonplace and paranoia and hostility was particularly directed towards left wing and communist sympathisers. Coogan describes the atmosphere of vigilantism and violence prevalent in Dublin in 1934, which Manning would use as the inspiration for the attack on the Lucas Street premises in *Mount Venus*:

A house in Eccles Street had been donated for use as a workers' college by Madame Despard, a sister of Lord French and a left-wing intellectual who moved in British Labour Party circles frequented by figures like Sir Strafford Cripps. Many of the workers who availed themselves of the Eccles Street facilities were left-inclined members of the IRA, but the tenants also included the friends of Soviet Russia. Not far away, in Strand Street, was Connolly House, the headquarters of the Irish Revolutionary Workers Party... A Jesuit preacher in Gardiner Street church, which is in the Eccles Street area, was particularly strong on the dangers which stalked Dublin's streets. Groups of rightist youths, mobilised in an organisation known as St Patrick's Young Men's League, began marching in Dublin, occasionally stopping pedestrians to check their religious practices (the wearing of medals and scapulars met with approval in their eyes). Religious fervour mounted throughout the month of March and on the 27th both houses were attacked and some damage caused. On the 29th, a mob gathered, looted Connolly House, and after doing what it could to wreck the place, set it on fire.<sup>49</sup>

In an effort to unify the various conservative and right-wing organisations, including the Blueshirts, O'Duffy was appointed leader of a new political party, Fine Gael. O'Duffy's biographer, Fearghal McGarry, describes the General as an ideal

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<sup>48</sup> Terence Brown, *Ireland: a social and cultural history 1922-79*, 162-163.

<sup>49</sup> Coogan, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, 212.

candidate to overthrow the de Valera yolk at this point and assume dictatorship: “A dynamic figure with strong ties to the military and police; the leader of a militant movement of army veterans that a desperate establishment had turned to in order to defeat an apparently revolutionary threat to their interests.”<sup>50</sup> However, while most of the membership of this new party was deeply conservative, many found O’Duffy’s rhetoric too extreme and divisive and within a matter of months he was sidelined. By the mid-1930s, he had become a marginalised and embittered figure and he left Fine Gael in 1935. The Fine Gael party would deeply regret their involvement with the organisation, as Roy Foster explains: “The Blueshirt flirtation remained an embarrassing episode in the pedigree of Fine Gael (and in that of several sympathetic intellectuals, including W.B. Yeats).”<sup>51</sup>

Several weeks after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Count Ramírez de Arellano, a London based Carlist aristocrat, identified Ireland as a potential source of support for the Spanish fascists. De Arellano’s objective in this venture was not just a financial one, but he also began to investigate the possibility of raising a brigade of Irishmen to fight in Spain. He approached the Archbishop of Armagh, Cardinal Joseph McRory, for advice and McRory immediately identified O’Duffy as the ideal

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<sup>50</sup> Fearghal McGarry, *Eoin O’Duffy: a self-made hero* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 268.

<sup>51</sup> R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London: Penguin, 1988), 549.

candidate for someone to lead such a venture. Accepting the mantle with relish, the General quickly published a call to arms in several Irish newspapers:

Conditions in Spain have now reached a stage when it becomes necessary for the Christian nations of the world to take serious notice of the position, if that great Catholic people are to be saved from annihilation. It would appear that the conflict in Spain is not political. It is a life and death struggle for the Faith on the one hand, and Anti-God Communism, directed from Moscow, on the other.<sup>52</sup>

He concluded the letter with the rallying cry, "Should we not go further and raise an Irish Volunteer Brigade for service in Spain?"<sup>53</sup> That same day a front page article in the *Evening Herald* with the headline, "Priests Burned Alive" informed the Irish public of "Reports of terrible atrocities are reaching Perpignan (France) from the Spanish state of Lerida. It is said that not a military officer or priest has been left alive by the Red elements. One report says that priests have been tied to olive trees and burned alive."<sup>54</sup>

This call energized thousands across right-wing and conservative circles in Ireland and generated a romanticized idea of war in a foreign land with frequent references to the crusades. However, while many in Ireland were enthused, it was plainly obvious Cardinal McRory's suggestion for a leader had been a poor one. The day after his call to arms, the General made the inexplicable decision to travel to

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<sup>52</sup> Eoin O'Duffy, *Irish Press* (10<sup>th</sup> August 1936), 8.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Evening Herald* (10<sup>th</sup> August 1936), 1.

Holland for a two-week holiday, hindering recruitment and preventing any logistical planning or organisational work to be undertaken. Nevertheless, this ineptitude was masked by a groundswell of public support for military intervention in Spain. Aileen O'Brien, an Irish American anti-communist activist who had spent the preceding eighteen months touring Ireland with an anti-communist exhibition, saw the outbreak of the war in Spain as a Christian call to arms. She joined forces with others on the far right of Irish politics and established the Irish Christian Front (ICF) to bolster support for the cause of Spanish fascism. Others in this venture included Patrick Belton and Nazi sympathiser Alexander McCabe. In late August and early September of the same year Ireland the incendiary atmosphere in Ireland at the time can be gauged by the demonstrations organised by the ICF. On the 30<sup>th</sup> August a major rally in Dublin was attended by fifteen thousand people and received widespread press coverage. This was followed by an even larger show of forty thousand people in Cork a few weeks later. The atmosphere at these rallies was highly charged with falsified reports circulating that nuns had been crucified in Barcelona and other anti-Catholic outrages. In this environment there was widespread support for an Irish Brigade and press reports estimated seven thousand people had applied to join. Due to the bungling leadership of O'Duffy only seven hundred Irish Brigade soldiers actually made the journey to Spain and proved ineffective on the battlefield, suffering more casualties from disease and friendly fire than from enemy engagements.

Manning, growing more aesthetically robust and ambitious with her novel, transcends any notion of provincialism by embracing the Spanish situation. Within this context we can see that Manning engages with a growing international pro-democracy and anti-fascist movement. Ernest Hemmingway, who Manning undoubtedly modelled the character of Talbot in *Mount Venus*, began to write journalistic pieces in support of the Spanish Republic at the beginning of the crisis, and would later cover the war as correspondent for the North American Newspaper Alliance (NANA). Other artists like W.H. Auden and Virginia Woolf donated proceeds from their work to the cause, and George Orwell volunteered for the International Brigade, fought in the trenches, and was wounded by a sniper in April 1937. By contrast, the mainstream Irish press was mainly sympathetic or in some cases ostensibly in favour of the Spanish Nationalists, depicting them as noble defenders of a Church besieged by a tyrannical adversary as evidenced in an article published in *The Irish Independent* on 6 November 1936: "For almost four months Christianity has been fighting for its life in Spain. The communists in every country, and their sympathisers in the press, have propagated the lie that the fight is between fascism and democracy. It is not. It is between Faith and Antichrist."<sup>55</sup> Some Irish publications sought to counter this influence, in particular *Ireland Today* (1936-1938), a left-leaning magazine that Frank Shovlin argues, "saw itself as having a crucial role to play in

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<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Jane Davison, *Kate O'Brien and Spanish literary culture* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2017), 8.

providing the Irish public with an alternative view of the Spanish conflict to that supplied by mainstream broadsheets and, most specifically, by the conservative *Irish Independent*.”<sup>56</sup>

Mount Venus, as well as owing debts to *Castle Rackrent* and *The Last September*, is, then, very heavily influenced by the work of Kate O’Brien, who, like Manning, found early success as a playwright. With her debut play, *Distinguished Villa*, which premiered on the 12th July 1926 at the Haymarket we see the genesis of what later became a hallmark of her work, characterised by innovative portrayals of the sexual frustrations of young women uncommon on the British stage, and an understanding of the wide diversity of sexuality and gender expression. For a writer whose work was famously proscribed by the Irish censor, O’Brien was careful not to fall foul of the British Lord Chamberlain, Lord Cromer, taking careful measures that the rehearsal text would not affront the censor. As she explained in an article in the *Irish Independent*:

[The play] was sent to the Lord Chamberlain last week. Unfortunately owing to a rush, a copy, containing some rather frank passages, which had been deleted for the production, was used, and the Lord Chamberlain’s department said that it would be impossible to pass the play for production on Monday, as it would have to go before the advisory committee. On Friday we wrote to the Lord Chamberlain himself, enclosing a properly cut copy and explaining our mistake. He very kindly read it himself on the same day and communicated his permission on Friday.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Frank Shovlin, *The Irish Literary Periodical 1923-1958* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 82-83.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Irish Lady Play’, *Irish Independent* (12 July 1926), 8.

The play was a success, receiving glowing notices from the press. O'Brien received a message of support from Sean O'Casey, himself in London at that time for the West-End premiere of *The Plough and the Stars*, receiving a telegram which read, "Dublin ventures to congratulate Limerick".<sup>58</sup>

O'Brien's work was underpinned by what Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka terms, "Activist Fiction; that is, fiction that is conceived or perceived as a political act or intending a call to action."<sup>59</sup> Although O'Brien's novel, *Mary Lavelle*, is set in 1922, it is still very much concerned with the political situation in Spain and the threat of repression from a fascist yoke. First published in 1935 and subsequently banned by the Irish Censorship Board, the uniqueness of *Mary Lavelle* is that it was written before the fascist uprising and preceded the clamour among the wider circle of European and American artists and intellectuals against the war. Both O'Brien and Manning's work have a strong socialist message running through the narrative, both feature leading protagonists that are members of the higher social strata and taken with revolutionary socialist zeal, and both advocate the importance of anarchy as a potential catalyst for social change.

Manning gives the name of Considine to the Doña's closest Lucas Street revolutionary counterpart in a direct reference to O'Brien's earlier work, *Without My*

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<sup>58</sup> Lorna Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987), 39.

<sup>59</sup> Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka, *Kate O'Brien and the Fiction of Identity – Sex, Art and Politics in Mary Lavelle and Other Writings* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2011), 38.

*Cloak*.<sup>60</sup> There are also several stylistic parallels with O'Brien in *Mount Venus*. Both novelists, for instance, periodically employ stream of consciousness to forward the narrative. Manning offers the reader insights into several of the main characters using this device. In a moving account we are given an insight into Delia's grief for her husband; battling her inconsolable anguish with the distraction of mundane tasks, the passage concludes:

There's the work that Marian left for you – "Suggestions for a Cultural Programme." That's better. Now get busy. Michael, oh Michael my darling, where are you? Why don't you answer me? Just once – tell me where you are. Michael! No use moaning like that. No use calling him. He won't answer, and you must get used to loneliness. Remember you were a lonely child, and now you must be a lonely woman. That's right; begin all over again. "Suggestions for a Cultural Programme." Remember. No! Crush down memory, that smiling enemy. Crush it, force it down, kill it. Ah, but you can't. It rises again triumphant and undefeatable. No power on earth can break the gossamer ribbon that binds you to the Dead.<sup>61</sup>

Other stylistic parallels link the two authors. For example, the opening chapter of *Mary Lavelle* is comprised primarily of three letters from Mary to her father, her former teacher Mother Liguori and her lover in Mellick, John. In Manning's novel chapter six is comprised of the letters from Liza to Marian outlining her time with Dick in Devonshire. The predominant feeling from Liza is that she "would die of

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<sup>60</sup> First published in 1931 and winner of the James Tait Black Prize and Hawthornden Prize, *Without My Cloak*, follows three generations of the Considines, a leading family of merchants from Mellick, a fictionalised city based on O'Brien's native Limerick.

<sup>61</sup> Manning, *Mount Venus*, 265.



boredom if she had to live in this house forever.”<sup>62</sup> Her stay is abruptly curtailed when we learn that Michael has been killed fighting in Spain. *Mount Venus* not only has a socialist polemic at its core, but it also contains a very strong anti-clerical message. This anti-Catholic dogma is a feature Manning would utilise in her later adaptations, in particular her 1968 adaptation of Frank O’Connor’s *The Saint and Mary Kate* for the Abbey Theatre which will be discussed in a later chapter. Again, Kate O’Brien is an important prompt, as Mentxaka further elaborates on O’Brien’s politics: “Broadly, her books are soaked in a socialism and a feminism very much informed by her historical context. Individualist feminism is crucial to her work – and so is a libertarian attitude. Libertarian, anti-authoritarian politics are crucial to every one of O’Brien’s novels, normally articulated through the right of individual women to full freedom and full equality.”<sup>63</sup> Mentxaka argues that O’Brien’s stylistic choices were part of a wider literary apparatus defined at the 1934 Soviet Writers Congress as “knowing life so as to be able to depict it truthfully in works of art, not to depict it in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as ‘objective reality,’ but to depict reality in its revolutionary development.”<sup>64</sup>

Manning, as argued in the previous chapter, was deeply influenced by Russian cinema and would visit the USSR later in life. What she is attempting to achieve in

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>63</sup> Mentxaka, *Kate O’Brien and the Fiction of Identity*, 39.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

*Mount Venus* is not only to advocate for the republicans in Spain, but also to serve the reader with a savage critique of the reactionary anti-communist response that was prevalent in Ireland at that time against what was viewed as an emerging threat from the left. Donal Fallon describes this perceived threat:

International events, such as the emergence of a strong revolutionary movement in Spain which would remove the Spanish monarch and bring about a Spanish Republic, and the perceived growing influence of Moscow in world politics, would convince some on the conservative wing of the Irish political spectrum that Ireland was in danger of a political takeover.<sup>65</sup>

This rift between the left and right wing factions is documented throughout the novel and a clash between the two sides is inevitable. Manning consistently lampoons the right, personified by the grotesque, obese creature, Count Healy hissing pro-censorship views at foreign movie posters and his buffoon nephew Anthony. We are offered the Count's views on censorship: "'Those filthy little foreign films must go!' he screamed, leaning over to get a better view. 'We must work towards a stronger and more vigorous censorship.'"<sup>66</sup> In addition, his vapid sexism is detailed when he discovers Antony may have taken a lover: "'A woman', repeated Count Healy, and his voice was heavy with loathing. 'The root of all evil. I will cut my nephew out of

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<sup>65</sup> Donal Fallon, *Dublin Historical Record*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Autumn/Winter 2014), 71.

<sup>66</sup> Manning, *Mount Venus*, 223.

my life and out of my will.”<sup>67</sup> This tension culminates in a documentary style account of an attack on Lucas Street.

The animosity between the left and right factions reaches a climax in the penultimate chapter where a Christian mob besieges the Lucas Street premises and members of the organisation that had gathered for a meeting on April Fool’s Day. This episode mirrors a series of incidents that occurred in Dublin in the early 1930s where growing insecurity and mistrust of Irish communist organisations transformed into violent street confrontations. As Fallon explains:

There was a sinister dimension to the emergence of such anti-communist feeling at that moment in time. In March 1933 Gardai believed that members of this organisation [St Patrick’s Anti Communist League] were central to an assault on Connolly House, the headquarters of the communist movement in Dublin, based on Great Strand Street, which was attacked over three consecutive nights. On these occasions, a crowd of several hundred laid siege to the building, singing religious hymns such as ‘Faith of our Fathers’ and ‘Hail Glorious Saint Patrick.’ R.M. Douglas, a historian who has examined the far-right in Ireland at this time, has noted that the violence in Dublin in March 1933 was some of the worst witnessed in the city since the civil war.<sup>68</sup>

As the anti-communist mob descends on the Lucas Street headquarters the similarities are apparent. Manning describes the scene as follows: “Now perfectly audible to those in the hall was the hubbub in the street outside. Wailing voices singing ‘Faith of our Fathers,’ groans, and booing drifted in through an open window

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>68</sup> Fallon, *Dublin Historical Record*, 74.

near where the Mount Venus party were sitting.”<sup>69</sup> The mood of the crowd gets uglier, and the excitement causes Delia to go into labour. At that moment the mob breaks through the door and it seems violence is imminent. The day is saved by the sudden appearance of Barry:

‘I’ve got a gun here. The first man who moves a step towards the stairs gets a bullet through him.’ the same time Barry moved towards the door and the crowd retreated into the street. Barry followed them out onto the steps and deliberately fired three shots in the air. The crowd scattered and broke in all directions.<sup>70</sup>

Both *Mount Venus* and Kate O’Brien’s *Mary Lavelle* share a theme of differing socialist ideologies within a family of revolutionary protagonists: *Mary Lavelle* features the wealthy proto-socialist, Don Juan, who exercises a pragmatism in his beliefs and recognises the “evil plight of the industrial magnate, but neither his tradition nor his temperament would allow him to believe that the solution of it, if there was one, lay in the abolition of his class.”<sup>71</sup> These beliefs put him directly at odds with his more radical sons, the anarchist Don Pablo and the communist Juanito. In *Mount Venus* Michael passionately believes in the idea of world revolutions pitting him against his brother who feels there “is more to be done at home.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Mount Venus*, 306.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

<sup>71</sup> Kate O’Brien, *Mary Lavelle* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1940), 50.

<sup>72</sup> Manning, *Mount Venus*, 235.

Even though O'Brien and Manning present the reader with strong feisty female characters, both novels place a higher value on a socialist rather than a feminist struggle, with the issue of gender equality largely ignored in *Mary Lavelle* and *Mount Venus*. Although Mentxaka provides examples of the subjugation of feminist doctrine amid the European realpolitik of the 1930s, she considers feminism to be endemic by default within socialist writing, highlighting this absence within *Mary Lavelle*: "when so much [of the novel] is given over to expounding socialist beliefs, a similar articulation of feminism seems to be missing. Feminism was a given in socialist theory, from Charles Fourier to Alexander Kollontai, through Marx, Engels, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman."<sup>73</sup> Barbara Foley recognises an oversight in gender issues as a common feature with left leaning literature of the period: "The left's inadequate treatment of gender issues was by no means restricted to men: Women writers often glossed over problems and even adopted a male gaze themselves."<sup>74</sup>

Building further on this insight, Foley argues that Marxism itself could be perceived as sexist:

How are we to understand this inadequacy? It would be easy to conclude that sexism in the 1930s radical movement proves that class and gender emancipation are only problematically related to one another. One version of the argument would pose that Marxism itself is sexist. Positing a priori the importance of production over reproduction, Marxism forces forms of oppression that have multiple causes into the reductive but purportedly scientific procrustean bed of class. According to this line of thinking, the

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<sup>73</sup> Mentxaka, *Kate O'Brien and the Fiction of Identity*, 63.

<sup>74</sup> Barbara Foley, 'Women and the Left in the 1930s', *American Literary History*, vol. 2, no. 1(1990), 155.

shortcomings of 1930s Marxists can be attributed within Marxism itself, which by its very premises is committed to an authoritarian patriarchal logic.<sup>75</sup>

It is this theme of marriage and how it bears upon the relationship to class and sexuality that Manning examines in characteristic fashion throughout *Mount Venus*. As Jennifer Haytock argues: "Some popular female writers [of the 1930s] who did not conform to or accept the standard of normalcy, and these stories tend to offer revealing insights about class identity, class barriers, and the relation of both to sexual behaviour as people continued to new expectations for women and to understand the implications of the companionate marriage."<sup>76</sup>

This is certainly the case with both O'Brien and later Manning. In *Mary Lavelle*, O'Brien's titular character initiates intimacy with a Basque man, and in *Mount Venus*, the unmarried Liza flippantly offers the reader details of her sexual history, detailing the loss of her virginity as follows: "'Doherty,' she continued, 'was very kind. I didn't enjoy it at all, but I knew it had to be done sometime, and then I was slightly in love with him'".<sup>77</sup> Manning even uses this episode in the novel to offer another poke at the Catholic Church: "'Johnny was married and had five children, so we had to be careful. And besides he was a very good Catholic. You know the type; no matter how late he

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 156

<sup>76</sup> Jennifer Haytock, *The Middle Class in the Great Depression – Popular Women's Novels of the 1930s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 184.

<sup>77</sup> Manning, *Mount Venus*, 184.

caroused Saturday night, he always sidled into Mass on a Sunday morning, suave, well-dressed, and outwardly clean as a new pin.”<sup>78</sup>

Manning has a less than conventional view of the institution of marriage in the novel. Soon after arriving in Paris, the Doña marries a Spanish writer, Miguel D’Acosta. The union is short lived but it does produce a son, Michael, and within a few years Miguel is killed in a political brawl in Madrid. Soon after his death the Doña begins an affair with the painter Corney McBey, “living in really dreadful sin and untidiness”.<sup>79</sup> The Doña’s approach to marriage transfers to the upbringing of her two sons, steeping them in nationalist and revolutionary instruction, which inevitably sees them joining the revolutionary movement and then the civil war on the anti-treaty side. Both children symbolise opposing positions on the revolutionary spectrum, with Michael adopting the perspective of an ideologue, whereas his sibling represents the more extreme and violent dogma: “Barry paid no value whatsoever on human life; in fact he had acquired a well-deserved reputation during the Civil War and after for his quiet deadly ruthlessness.”<sup>80</sup> The tendency towards revolutionary action is carried over to the next generations: Michael’s marriage with Delia is less than conventional and can be seen as a fusion of the revolutionary and the ideologue, merging the modern radical with a figure of Celtic lore. Pictured in the eyes of his idealistic

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

American wife, "Michael was Robert Emmet, Wolfe Tone, 'darling black-head,' Cuchulain, all rolled into one divinely romantic being."<sup>81</sup> The couple meet while Michael is distributing pamphlets of a seditious nature, are married within a matter of weeks, and are a quirky union of the radical and the idealist, yet they share a genuine romantic love. Delia's radicalism is challenged by the worsening European situation, and she is devastated by Michael's decision to go to fight in Spain. The union produces a child, also named Michael, who stands as a symbol of hope for the future. His sister Liza's indifference towards marriage is clear from the outset:

Liza was always announcing her engagement, or breaking it off, or going off to live with someone and coming back by the next train. Once she got right into the registry office with a friend of Michael's, an impetuous poet, but broke away just in time, arriving home dishevelled but single, by the last bus.<sup>82</sup>

Her ideas on marriage are more pragmatic than romantic, she harbours ambitions of social advancement through the institution: "I'm going to find a husband who can afford to support me in a state of delicious, luxurious idleness."<sup>83</sup> She recognises the opportunity to realize this ambition in the form of her cousin Dick Crosbie and the fact a romantic engagement is featured in the novel between two first cousins is very unusual.

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.



On the same day that Liza meets Dick she also encounters the American war correspondent Richard Talbot, initiating a central narrative thread in the novel: Liza, weaves and meanders between the two men, eventually becoming betrothed to Dick, but Talbot – like the war he is assigned to cover for his paper – constantly looms ominously in the background. In this relationship Manning is exploring an emotional conflict between the privileged aristocratic Crosbie against the pragmatic proletarian Talbot. As always Corney offers Liza some good advice: “this Talbot’s a hard nut, but I’m inclined to think he’s worth it; don’t mind the other fellow. But for God’s sake whatever you decide to do – just go through with it. Take the plunge. Marry him, or live in sin with him, but do it.”<sup>84</sup> Liza accepts this counsel, renounces Dick on the eve of their wedding and escapes with Talbot to live unmarried in Singapore. By enticing the reader with the marriage question in a key narrative line in the novel only to reverse and have Liza decline her suitor, Manning is rejecting normalcy in that institution. This narrative line is reminiscent of Maria Edgeworth who herself rebuked marriage at an early age, declaring: “I am not afraid of being an old maid.”<sup>85</sup> Therefore Manning, like Edgeworth, offers her female characters autonomy and independence by the rejection of conventional institutional tropes. As Christina Morrin observes: “Edgeworth’s comments highlighting her personal reluctance to marry, combined with her final privileging of women in *Castle Rackrent*, declare the

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>85</sup> Maria Edgeworth to Sophy Ruxton, n.d. [1802], quoted in Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth, A Literary Biography*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 187.

follies of romantic ideas of love. *Castle Rackrent* highlights an insistence on female self-determination.”<sup>86</sup>

The transnational movement of key protagonists is another theme shared by O’Brien and Manning. In O’Brien’s first novel *Without My Cloak* (1931), the powerful Considine family banish to America the illegitimate peasant girl, Christina, after discovering she had been conducting an illicit affair with their son. And in *Mary Lavelle* it is only in Spain that the title character can recognise her emotional, intellectual and sexual maturity. In *Mount Venus* Michael feels a morbid compulsive duty to travel to Spain to fight against fascism. His departure from Dublin is shadowed with an ominous sense of foreboding: “There goes the Kish Light. And there goes Ireland. And not one star in the sky. No light – no hope – no help for it. Well, I’ve made my choice, and Spain it is. And now I shall go below.”<sup>87</sup> Manning goes a step further by linking new technology with the differences in social class and offering the reader a sense of modernity in the novel. This episode of Michael’s exit for Spain is juxtaposed with Liza being transported by Dick in his private plane to his father’s house in Devonshire.

Although independently wealthy, Dick is employed as a businessman helping to establish a transatlantic aviation company in Dublin. Wendy Perkins suggests women’s attitude towards the advancement of technology is part of a wider emerging

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<sup>86</sup> Christina Morin, ‘Preferring Spinsterhood? Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent* and Ireland’, *Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an Dá Chultúr*, vol. 23 (2008), 36.

<sup>87</sup> Manning, *Mount Venus*, 177.

perspective within feminism at that time which is inherent and commonplace in female writing of 1930s: "The female protagonists represent the disruptions and transitions between the country and the city – and between the different kinds of social relations and social experience associated with each location which...signal the contradictory pulls between the embrace of innovation and change and a desire for stability and continuity."<sup>88</sup> Within Manning's novel, movements, ideologies and people are in a constant state of flux and change. People are regularly depicted in vehicles of some type, Talbot with every appearance is either just arrived from a foreign country or about to depart to one, and, with the exception of Barry, every major character is in some form of transit. Palpable throughout the novel is a constant sense of conflict: conflict of national as opposed to transnational revolutionary movements as symbolised by Michael and Barry's revolutionary expectations; conflict in the Lucas Street movement between the old guard headed by the Doña and the young militants led by Allan Plunkett; and conflict between the old Protestant absentee ascendancy represented by Richard Crosbie and new assimilating Protestantism symbolised again by the Doña.

The discrepancy in class is highlighted with this marriage dilemma; Liza is presented with the promise of social salvation through a union with her wealthy and titled cousin Dick, nevertheless is instinctively drawn to the charismatic and roguish Talbot. Liza, who has spent the greater part of the novel in courtship and then

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<sup>88</sup> Wendy Parkins, *Mobility and Modernity in Women's Novels, 1850s-1930s - Women Moving Dangerously* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 125.

betrothed to Dick, has a cathartic realisation of her social position, and offers the reader a hint of how the novel may conclude: “How could I laugh at them?” she thought. “How could I despise them? Talbot was right; they’re my people. Talbot was right and I’ve lost him forever.”<sup>89</sup>Manning the playwright is evident in many of the large set-pieces she expertly crafts throughout the novel where a myriad of colourful characters interact and the narrative is carried forward. At the beginning of the novel the impending arrival of Cousin Dick Crosbie is met with an invitation to a Sunday afternoon party where a variety of revolutionaries mingle with American academics and the two love rivals Dick and Talbot enter the fray, the device serving to introduce the audience to the remaining significant characters in the novel. Devoting an entire chapter to this episode, Manning is careful to weave an interesting stylistic pattern for the reader by means of giving individual subsections of the chapter to different characters, therefore allowing us to view often opposing outlooks.

We meet Dick Crosbie and Ricky Talbot for the first time along with an American academic with a letter of introduction from the late George Russell, named Forris S. Windpacker. He is accompanied by his wife Madeline, two members of the Lucas Street revolutionary group, Grania O’Hanlon and Bob Considine and the ultra-catholic right wing Anthony Healey, who has the tiresome habit of frequently proposing to Liza and being rebuffed.<sup>90</sup> Later in the novel Manning creates several

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<sup>89</sup> Manning, *Mount Venus*, 315.

<sup>90</sup> Ricky Talbot is depicted as having attended Harvard Law School, the Alma Mater of Manning’s new husband Mark De Wolfe Howe.

arresting and amusing events based around the Lucas street group: in-fighting and intrigues are presented with the wit and mad cap sense of the Marx Brothers, with agitation meetings featuring an anarchist from Spain and a comically politicised nativity celebration at Lucas street with “The Three Kings [...] dressed as stage capitalists with top hats, spats and pot bellies, and Joseph was clean shaven and wore blue dungarees.”<sup>91</sup>

It is, however, in the emotional narrative thread that Manning really captivates the reader. The death of Michael casts a long shadow throughout the remainder of the novel and the delicacy and simplicity with which she presents the grief of the family is particularly moving. The Doña decides to sell Mount Venus and move North to help organise the workers, the guilt-ridden Barry has visions of his dead brother, and we are encouraged to feel that the onset of tuberculosis is a consequence of his grief. Delia, meanwhile, is in a deep personal crisis with a combination of post-natal depression and the turmoil of the struggle to come to terms with the death of her husband. Her salvation arrives in the unlikely form of Barry and together the pair unify in their despair yet resolve to persevere with life for the sake of the newborn child:

Why did she see him as someone lonely and remote, walking towards his fate alone and unafraid? Was that coldness and detachment the amour worn by one consecrated to an abstract idea? He was standing by the crib looking down at the sleeping child. ‘There’s the same innocence in them both,’ she thought. ‘And innocence must be murdered.’ Dear Barry! For two years she had overlooked him. Noisier people had obliterated him. ‘But he is the best of them

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<sup>91</sup> Manning, *Mount Venus*, 205.

all,' thought Delia. 'He's a saint, and I feel he's going to die soon without anyone knowing it.'<sup>92</sup>

Considine announces his plans to farm out his adopted children to various relatives and relocate to a nudist settlement in Finland and Manning cannot resist a final dig at the Irish Catholic Church: "The curb on any sexual freedom leaves a nasty taste in the mouth. There are too many prurient priests around. The attitude to women, the whole Goddam structure is nauseating."<sup>93</sup>

Manning is careful to keep an eye on her potential middle-class American female readership, and ensures a pleasingly melodramatic conclusion to the romantic subplot. On the eve of her wedding, Talbot has begged Liza for one last meeting and, just when the couple have parted for what seems the final time, true to form we have the emotional climax of the narrative which sees Liza having a sudden change of heart:

She reached the main staircase and saw Talbot walking towards the hall below towards the exit. She ran halfway down the staircase and called him. 'Ricky!'

He stood still a moment listening, then turned slowly, walked back to the front of the stairs, and looked up at her without speaking.

'I think-' she whispered, and couldn't go on.

He ran up the stairs and stood a little below her.

'Yes Liza,' said Talbot smiling.

'I'm coming with you.'

'How far?'

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<sup>92</sup> Manning, *Mount Venus*, 347.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

'The whole way.'<sup>94</sup>

The final speech of the novel is entrusted to the wise and astute Corney:

'Oh, come on, lad!' He gripped Barry's arm. 'As surely as the trees bloom in the spring, so will the truth triumph and the world right itself to some purpose. No dictators, no bloody minded aviators, no intolerance or injustice can crush out life, and life and truth are the same. Oh I know everything looks black to you now, but the cause isn't dead, it lives on and flowers on the bodies of those who dies for it. Remember that the May tree will bloom next year. If you can get that into your head, you can survive the winds of March.'<sup>95</sup>

*Mount Venus* received an excellent critical response upon publication, with the literary publication *Kirkus Review* praising the work as "An Irish story with a certain charm in the telling...the book on the whole is delightful reading."<sup>96</sup> Edith A. Warton in *The New York Times* recognised the sharper edge and emotional depth wrapped amidst the madcap zaniness of the piece:

"*Mount Venus*," fortunately, is not all whimsy and wit. It has a solid substratum of very genuine pathos, a rather rueful seriousness beneath its debonair high spirits. Amusing it is, and immensely so, but the erratic denizens of *Mount Venus* are not merely butts for Miss Manning's clever pen. She sees them as pitiful, even tragic. For all their humorous vagaries, they correspond to something that is regrettable and real. If, in short, they were only comedians, one would not read their story as avidly as one does. "*Mount Venus*" is an ingratiating novel. It has all the essentials of prime entertainment, plus a certain satirical pungency which adds sting and body to its charm."<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>96</sup> *Kirkus Reviews*, Oct. 4, 1938, 33.

<sup>97</sup> Edith A. Warton, *New York Times*, 30<sup>th</sup> October 1938, 22.

*Mount Venus* is an insightful and emotionally astute piece of work. Often very funny, the book tries to make sense of the differing ideologies and the post-revolutionary political system in Ireland and in doing so it presents the reader with a memorably unconventional view of Dublin when the city experienced a period of civil unrest not seen for over a decade. Alike to her work with *Motley*, the piece has at its core a strong social commentary and represents a logical next step in Manning's oeuvre, yet there is something deeper and more significant in this work. In writing *Mount Venus* Manning was embarking on an important new stage in her development as a writer. Like her earlier stage plays the novel is indeed loaded with her characteristic incisive wit and idiosyncratic characters but there is evident a significant humanity and stylistic flair in her writing. The novel was only published in the United States, perhaps the war which commenced the following year prevented Manning and her publishers submitting the work to interested parties on the other side of the Atlantic. It is interesting to note that there are no reviews of *Mount Venus* in any British or Irish publication at that time and today the Novel remains largely unknown. Although Manning continued to relentlessly advocate Irish work and Irish writers, in particular Samuel Beckett, her focus would again eventually shift to an entirely new form and means of expression. Borrowing from her experiences in the Dublin literary salons – she would be instrumental in putting in place a movement which would be ground-breaking and help create a collective which was among the most influential in twentieth century American letters – the Poets' Theatre.



## A Decade of Creativity: Manning and The Poets' Theatre in the 1950s

Teach me, like you, to drink creation whole  
And casting out myself, become a soul.

Richard Wilbur, *The Aspen and the Stream*

Peter Davison in his memoir *The Fading Smile* described the confluence of American poetic talent that gathered in and around the Boston area in the 1950s as: “one of the most exciting poetic ‘surges’...ever to take place in America.”<sup>1</sup> One vital part of this surge was the third and final theatre to which Mary Manning was closely associated – the Cambridge based Poets' Theatre. This chapter will assess the crucially important role she had in an organisation which was to have a significant influence on post World War Two American letters. It will also assess how Manning's influence on this theatre was not just as an initiator, writer and producer but how she successfully introduced an Irish perspective into its creative and intellectual agenda.

Manning settled permanently in Cambridge in 1941 after the appointment of her husband Mark De Wolfe Howe to the Law faculty at Harvard, and was given the moniker Molly.<sup>2</sup> With her wit, intelligence and boundless energy she soon became a central figure in the Cambridge literary scene developing close personal friendships

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Davison, *The Fading Smile: Poets in Boston from Robert Lowell to Sylvia Plath* (New York: Norton, 1996), 14. Peter Davison (1928-2004) was an American poet, essayist, lecturer, editor, and publisher. For 30 years he was poetry editor for *Atlantic Monthly*. He published 11 volumes of poetry. His final poetry collection, *Breathing Room* (2000), received the Massachusetts Book Award.

<sup>2</sup> Following her marriage to Mark De Wolfe Howe in 1936, Manning was widely known in Cambridge circles as Molly Howe and occasionally Mrs Mark Howe.

with many leading figures including F.O. Matthiessen and Helen Howe.<sup>3</sup> Revisiting the practice she was familiar with from her childhood and early years in Dublin, Manning was pivotal in initiating the practice of hosting readings and literary discussion in private homes as social occasions in Cambridge. Citing Joyce, Manning's daughter, Fanny Howe remembered this practice in an interview in 2018: "You know the story *The Dead*? The way they all perform at the party? She grew up in that kind of Edwardian household in Dublin, where they did little plays together and tried out things, and she brought that to Cambridge. No one had ever done anything like that before. So they read plays and drank in people's living rooms."<sup>4</sup> This practice rapidly became popular and soon led to the initiating idea of the Poet's Theatre, which came mainly through a series of informal meetings and discussions held in the home of poet and Harvard University professor Richard Eberhart in the summer of 1950.<sup>5</sup> The group, inspired by the success on Broadway earlier that year of T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, and Christopher Fry's *The Lady's Not For Burning*, a triumph in the West End the

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<sup>3</sup> F.O. Matthiessen (1902-1950) was an educator, scholar and literary critic. His best known work, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941). Susan Howe in a personal interview informed me Matthiessen had called and left a message with Manning shortly before he took his own life. Helen Howe (1905-1975) was an American novelist, biographer and monologist. She published seven novels. Her 1946 novel, "We Happy Few," about the intellectual society in Cambridge, Mass., resulted in her being compared with John P. Marquand as a social satirist. She was Mark De Wolfe Howe's sister.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Fanny Howe, Cambridge Mass., 18<sup>th</sup> July, 2018. Fanny Howe b. 1940 Buffalo, New York is an American poet, novelist, and short story writer. She was awarded the 2009 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize presented annually by the Poetry Foundation to a living U.S. poet whose lifetime accomplishments warrant extraordinary recognition.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Eberhart (1904-2005) was an American poet. He won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and in 1977 he was the recipient of the National Book Award for Poetry.

previous year, were concerned with poetry as a dramatic and subversive form, what they termed 'poetic drama'.<sup>6</sup>

An idea began to take shape where the group could create a forum whereby they could express their art and enjoy complete control of their work. The group quickly rejected any idea of commercialism and sought a contrasting stance to glitzy contemporary American theatre. They believed that the writer, and not the audience, was the centre of the artistic process. Reminiscent of her early career at the Gate Theatre, and the film collaborations with Norris Davidson and Denis Johnston; Manning, with a whirlwind of energy and effective administrative zeal, quickly became a very active member of the Poets' Theatre, along with Lyon Phelps and V.R. Lang (better known as Bunny Lang) who created a central motivating nucleus of the group.<sup>7</sup> They proved a formidable trio, disparate, but each in their own way adding a special quality. Manning, the only member who had any significant theatrical experience, became the group's "theatrical conscience... [understanding] better than any of her young colleagues what was playable, what would or wouldn't work

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<sup>6</sup> *The Cocktail Party* had its debut performance at the Edinburgh Festival in 1949 with Alec Guinness in the role of the unidentified guest, the play premiered on Broadway on January 21, 1950, at the Henry Miller Theatre and ran for 409 performances. It received the Tony Award for Best Play on April 9th, 1950. *The Lady's Not for Burning* is a romantic comedy in three acts, written in verse. It premiered at Arts Theatre in London in 1949 starring Alec Clunes, who had also commissioned it. Later that year John Gielgud took the play on a provincial tour followed by a successful London run at the Globe (now Gielgud) Theatre. Gielgud took the play to the United States, where it opened at the Royale Theatre on 8 November 1950, with Pamela Brown, Richard Burton and Claire Bloom.

<sup>7</sup> Violet Ranney "Bunny" Lang, (1924-1956) was an American poet and playwright. She was involved in most of the Poets' Theatre productions until her death of Hodgkin's disease at age 32. Frank O'Hara wrote a series of poems from 1956 to 1959 mourning her death.

onstage.”<sup>8</sup> Donald Hall defined the importance of Manning’s role within the theatre: “There was a lot of cheerful enthusiasm around the Poets’ Theatre.<sup>9</sup> Molly Howe was the most important figure, because she was dynamic and sceptical, enthusiastic and cynical at the same time, an absolutely invaluable combination.”<sup>10</sup> What Harvard graduate Phelps lacked in experience he compensated for with connections and enthusiasm; and the vivacious and charismatic Lang proved to be the perfect foil for Manning. ‘Bunny’ Lang was described by Davison as “the Mae West of the troupe”, he fondly recounts in his memoir how a moment of charm captivated him: “I succumbed to the feeling of helpless devotion shared by all the others on whom she turned the lamps of her attention.”<sup>11</sup> Lang’s biographer, Alison Lurie, who acted in many of the groups early productions described her importance to the company:

From the beginning Bunny was involved in every Poets’ Theatre show, as actress, director, writer, designer and producer. She was not a good actress, though it was marvellous to watch her on the stage...Among the original members as well as those who joined later, no one was single-mindedly anxious to ‘revive poetic drama’. Her motives were less worldly than most, for she did not principally hope to rise in society, to go on the professional stage, to get her poetry published, to become locally famous, or to meet possible lovers. Each of

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<sup>8</sup> Nora Sayre, *Previous Convictions: A Journey through the 1950s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1995), 125.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Hall (1928-2018) was an American poet, writer, editor and literary critic. In 2006 he was appointed as the library of Congress’s 14th Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Davison, *The Fading Smile*, 25 – the author references an interview with Donald Hall, September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

these ends was attained by some member of the theatre; all except the first were realised by Bunny.<sup>12</sup>

Testing their mettle, the group settled on their name of Poets' Theatre and set themselves the challenge of meeting that autumn with manuscripts.

Manning, Lang and Phelps were joined by a group of mainly Harvard graduates, many of whom had been funded by the G.I. Bill, committed to discovering and producing new plays by poets who had been inspired by the modernists; these writers sought through verse theatre to draw an audience away from film and the emerging medium of television. In an introductory speech given by Lyon Phelps at the inaugural meeting on 28<sup>th</sup> November 1950 at Kirkland House in Cambridge he outlined the objectives of the theatre: "At the present time the articulate theatre, when it speaks at all, is in competition with radio, movies and recently television. Language must return to the ear of the audience, or there will be no theatre for poetry."<sup>13</sup> A board of directors was founded comprising John Ciardi, Mary Manning, Archibald MacLeish, John Sweeny and Richard Wilbur.<sup>14</sup> The final members were Richard

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<sup>12</sup> Alison Lurie, *V.R. Lang Poems and Plays with a Memoir by Alison Lurie* (London: Random House, 1975), 14. Alison Lurie is an American novelist and academic. She won the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for her novel *Foreign Affairs*.

<sup>13</sup> Lyon Phelps, "The Objectives of the Poets' Theatre," November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1950, 7PP. MS Thr 833 (542), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>14</sup> John Ciardi (1916-1986) was an American poet and lecturer. In 1956, Ciardi received the Prix de Rome from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Archibald MacLeish (1892-1982) was an American poet, playwright, writer and lecturer. He won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1933 and again in 1953. In 1959 his verse play, *JB* won the 1959 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and a Tony Award for Best Play. Richard Wilbur (1921-2017) was an American Poet, translator and lecturer. He won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1957 and 1989. He was appointed the second Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress in 1987. William H. Matchett was a poet and lecturer. He taught English at the University of Washington from 1954 until 1982.

Eberhart as president, Phelps as vice-president, Lang as secretary and William H. Matchett as treasurer.<sup>15</sup>

Well placed to define the development of The Poets' Theatre having been involved with the group from the outset, Alison Lurie defines three key stages in the organisation's development:

From 1950 to 1955, while I was observing it, the Poets' Theatre passed through three stages or incarnations: bohemian, academic and social. Through it all an aura of art and amateurism clung to it: an aura that people like me found delightful but used to make other people (and sometimes Bunny) scream because it was so inefficient and unprofessional. Always there was the theatrical atmosphere of rehearsals, feuds, affairs, debts and parties. And as the organisation rose (or some would say, fell) it was always surrounded by patrons, proteges, parasites, paramours, flatterers and hangers-on.<sup>16</sup>

The initial phase of the Poets' Theatre saw the focus very firmly fixed on new work by existing members and calls for submissions from new writers from outside the group. The development of new work and writers was central to the ethos of the company; submissions would be considered, and many were offered both staged and table readings, with writers offered feedback and rewrite notes. But with the Poets' Theatre they did not believe in pulling punches, as Manning noted: "there's only one way, really, you've got to hear your script read. You've got to hear it. It's meant to be heard and you've got to hear it, and so sit around, and I think we're pretty severe. And I

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<sup>15</sup> Record of meeting. From Poets' Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>16</sup> Alison Lurie, 28.

think we're more severe when the unfortunate authors aren't there."<sup>17</sup> This candid and sometimes caustic environment could breed more than a few contrary responses from members though: when on November 24<sup>th</sup> 1954 the company staged readings of poems by William Alfred<sup>18</sup> and Salem Slobodkin<sup>19</sup>, Bunny Lang's words of praise immediately after the reading earned the response "Fuck you, you snake" from Slobodkin.<sup>20</sup>

This collegiate management structure and the public nature of these early gatherings consigned the group to a problematic structure from the outset, setting the tone for the very thing that would eventually bring about the demise of the group. Phelps remarked they were "like little dogs sniffing each other, you know, and they said, 'you take the lamp post and I'll take the building, but we won't take anything together'".<sup>21</sup> Phelps also noted that at the meeting of The Poets' Theatre things were very rarely agreed. It is odd that Manning's experience of the Abbey and Gate companies did not caution her of the dangers of such a management structure. The

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<sup>17</sup> "Discussion between Lyon Phelps, Mary Manning and Jack Rogers Concerning the History of The Poets' Theatre," typescript carbon transcript, 1958, 7.MS Thr 833 (567), Houghton Library, Harvard University, 18.

<sup>18</sup> William Alfred was a playwright and professor of English at Harvard University. He wrote three plays *Agamemnon*, *Hogan's Goat* and *The Curse of an Aching Heart*. His musical adaptation of *Hogan's Goat* renamed *Cry for Us All* was nominated for two Tony Awards in 1970.

<sup>19</sup> Salem Slobodkin (1923 – 1964) published her only book of poetry the year after her death in 1965.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Davison, *The Fading Smile*, 28.

<sup>21</sup> Discussion between Lyon Phelps, Mary Manning and Jack Rogers Concerning the History of The Poets' Theatre," typescript carbon transcript, 1958, 7.MS Thr 833 (567), Houghton Library, Harvard University. 25

most successful literary theatre companies of the twentieth century shared key features that the Poets' Theatre failed to achieve, namely strong central artistic leadership and the ability to maintain the services of its key writers. Dublin's Abbey Theatre had W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory at the helm and a key motivating aesthetic gave them a stronger ability to hold onto, nurture and develop talents like Synge and O'Casey. Equally, the Moscow Arts Theatre led by Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko provided a stable platform to nourish writers of the calibre of Anton Chekhov and Maxim Gorky.<sup>22</sup> Even the Gate Theatre, though more of a director's theatre than a literary theatre, had the central inspiring concept of the European avant-garde and the core leadership of Hilton Edwards and Micheál Mac Liammóir. Nevertheless, the members produced manuscripts and plans were put in place for the initial performances.

The first attempt at staged performances occurred at the Christ Church Parish hall on February 26<sup>th</sup>, 1951 with work by John Ashbury, Richard Eberhart, Frank O'Hara and Lyon Phelps. The emphasis was wholly on the experimental in both form

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<sup>22</sup> Konstantin Sergeievich Stanislavski (1863-1938) was a seminal Russian theatre practitioner. He devised the famous 'system' of actor training, preparation, and rehearsal technique. In 1898 he co-founded the Moscow Arts Theatre. Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (23 December 1858 – 25 April 1943), was a Russian and Soviet theatre director, writer, playwright, producer and theatre administrator, who co-founded the Moscow Art Theatre. Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860-1904) was a Russian playwright, short-story writer and medical doctor who is considered to be among the greatest writers of short fiction in history. His career as a playwright was closely associated with the Moscow Arts Theatre. Alexei Maximovich Peshkov (1868-1936), primarily known as Maxim Gorky, was a Russian and Soviet writer, a founder of the socialist realism literary method, and a political activist. He was also a five-time nominee for the Nobel Prize in Literature.



and realisation.<sup>23</sup> The attempt at avant-garde staging of the work can be seen in a collection of direction and design notes accompanied by the production sketches of Edward Gorey.<sup>24</sup> O'Hara outlined the stage requirements for his play *Try Try*: "Upon a pale grey drop at the back of the stage was hung a white shade which was painted a window, a calendar and a large black spider. There was only one light, an electric bulb shaded by a tin can hung centre stage...The direction of this play was extremely subtle and serious, with carefully worked out styled gestures adopted from the Noh to the contemporary situation the play revealed."<sup>25</sup> Design and direction notes for Eberharts's *The Apparition*, directed by Manning, demanded: "The simplest possible presentation: partial lighting, use of dimout to introduce play within a play or 'dream', lights up on bare stage, man on bed right."<sup>26</sup> Phelps along with O'Hara cited a heavy Noh influence on his piece and included the oriental convention of the stage manager as dramatic figure within the actual production. Phelps provided similar production notes for the staging of his play: "Experimental setting: a very large gold picture frame demarcated the area of action. 2 ladies (spectators in the framework of the play) set on

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<sup>23</sup> John Ashbury (1927-2017) was an American poet and art critic. He was awarded the 1976 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry and in 1995 he received the Robert Frost medal. Frank O'Hara (1926-1966) was an American writer, poet, musician, painter and art critic. Tragically killed in a traffic accident he was posthumously awarded the National Book Award for Poetry in 1972.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Gorey (1925-2000) was an American artist, poet and writer. He was Frank O'Hara's roommate at Harvard and is credited as being a founding member of Poets' Theatre.

<sup>25</sup> Frank O'Hara, program note, Feb 1951, from Poets' Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Eberhart, program note with sketch, Feb 1951, from Poets' Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

left apron; on right apron an 'artist' came out from time to time to change the placards in a large easel. Behind the frame 3 actors and a desk – and at the climax, a large pendulum swung behind the 3rd remaining actor.”<sup>27</sup> By all accounts, the evening was very lively; the tiny basement theatre packed to capacity with friends and sympathisers squeezed in alongside many leading figures in the Harvard literary community.

The opening production of O’Hara’s *Try Try* was the success of the evening. The play combined a rich mix of poetic form with a French Cinematic love triangle trope: telling the tale of a love affair between Violet and John, interrupted by the return of Violet’s husband, Jack, from the serving in the Pacific in World War II.<sup>28</sup> Brad Gooch, in his biography of O’Hara, *City Poet*, described the event:

The whole production was crackling with animation as the curtain rose – after two measures of an Offenbach waltz – on Edward Gorey’s stage set, which was starkly confined to an ironing board illuminated by a circle of light, a window painted on a shade hanging at the back with a February calendar and a spider sketched on its panes, and a wind up Victrola...At the play’s conclusion, the audience, which had been erupting in shrieks throughout, responded enthusiastically, calling for an extra curtain call.<sup>29</sup>

Lang, who directed the production and played the role of Violet immediately wrote to O’Hara who was unable to attend the performance due to teaching commitments

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<sup>27</sup> Lyon Phelps, program note with sketch, February 1951, from Poets’ Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>28</sup> O’Hara himself served in the Pacific theatre as a Navy gunner.

<sup>29</sup> Brad Gooch, *City Poet* 180.

in Ann Arbor: "Please write more plays. MUST you write a novel? I don't think you should."<sup>30</sup>

Thornton Wilder, who had been requested by Phelps to take a collection from the audience to recoup the \$39 production costs, proceeded to castigate the attendees as to what he felt was a lack of gravitas offered to the event.<sup>31</sup> Manning later noted: "He got absolutely furious. Absolutely furious. As if this was the most sacred and solemn moment in American literature.... [He said] 'This is one of the great moments in American theatre. The beginning of The Poets' Theatre'."<sup>32</sup> Paige Reynolds has compared Wilder's action to Yeats and noted that Manning was in the audience for the 1926 performance of *The Plough and the Stars* when that raucous crowd received a similar chiding.<sup>33</sup> O'Hara's play was followed by Lyon Phelps' *Three Words in No Time*, John Ashbury's *Everyman* and Richard Eberhardt's *The Apparition* directed by Manning. The evening appears to have been a success with a review published by Daniel Ellsberg in the *Harvard Crimson* praising their efforts and singling out O'Hara's

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<sup>30</sup> Letter Bunny Lang to O'Hara.

<sup>31</sup> Thornton Wilder was a visiting professor at Harvard University at that time, where he served for a year as the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry. Wilder won three Pulitzer Prizes—for the novel *The Bridge Luis Rey* of San (1927), and for the plays *Our Town* (1938) and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942). He won a U.S. National Book Award for the novel *The Eighth Day* (1967). Although his impact at the theatre's initial meeting was dramatic - Manning in the interview wryly noted that this was his singular contribution to the Poet's Theatre.

<sup>32</sup> Discussion between Lyon Phelps, Mary Manning and Jack Rogers Concerning the History of The Poets' Theatre," typescript carbon transcript, 1958, 7.MS Thr 833 (567), Houghton Library, Harvard University. 18.

<sup>33</sup> Paige Reynolds, 'The Avant-Garde Doyenne: Mary Manning, the Poets' Theatre, and the Staging of Finnegan's Wake', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Volume 39, Number 2(2016), 109.

play: "The play earned the most appreciative reception of the evening."<sup>34</sup> The group, bolstered by the success of the evening, resolved to continue their efforts for further seasons.



O'Hara's sketch and outline design for *Try Try*. From the Poets Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

The next two years saw serious tensions begin to emerge in the Poets' Theatre, largely due to issues surrounding the production of two plays by Lang which she self-directed, *At Battle's End* and *Fire Exit*. The former play, heavily influenced in form and narrative by O'Hara's earlier *Try! Try!* employed the Noh device of stage manager and narrator directly addressing and occasionally chastising the audience. Manning in particular felt this device particularly showy and untheatrical preferring the

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<sup>34</sup> Daniel Ellsberg, 'The Playgoer: Poets' Theatre, At Christ Church Parish House', *Harvard Crimson* (March 1, 1951), 2. Daniel Ellsberg achieved notoriety in 1971 when he shared confidential documents relating to US Government policy in Vietnam to the *New York Times* and was subsequently tried and acquitted of espionage.

illusory element, however others felt it to be part of a wider and more significant trend within the American avant-garde performance Poetry scene.<sup>35</sup> As Heidi R. Bean notes:

Lang's use of the Stage Manager to chastise the audience into greater discipline and responsibility was part of a larger emphasis on the role of the audience playing out in the poetry world. This was, after all, the era of Donald Allen's 'New American Poetry,' and performance poetics had taken hold across the nation. Emerging from multiple locations, including Berkeley, San Francisco, Boston, New York and Black Mountain, the 'New American Poetry' challenged academic verse with a living practice that reached audiences directly through performance. Beat readings were infamously participatory, with poets either heckling one another or simply drowning each other out.<sup>36</sup>

The following year the Poets' decided to produce Lang's second play *Fire Exit*. Once again employing the stage manager and narrator device, this reimagining of the Eurydice and Orpheus myth was based on Lang's experience working as a chorus girl at Boston's Old Howard club. However, it was the manner in which Lang organised the production of the play that caused great tension within the group. Without consulting the other members, Lang booked Cambridge's two hundred-seat Brattle Theatre for a three-week run of performances (Poets' productions largely ran for one or two performances, the exception being Lang's *At Battle's End*, which ran for four performances). A meeting was convened at Manning's house where it was decided the play should run for four performances at the Brattle. The marketing and running costs of the production placed the company several hundred dollars in debt.

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<sup>35</sup> Discussion between Lyon Phelps, Mary Manning and Jack Rogers Concerning the History of The Poets' Theatre," typescript carbon transcript, 1958, 7.MS Thr 833 (567), Houghton Library, Harvard University. 12

<sup>36</sup> Heidi. R. Bean, 'Bunny Lang and the Cambridge Poets' Theatre in the 1950s', in D.R. Geis (ed.), *Beat Drama: Playwrights and Performances of the 'Howl' Generation*. (London, New York: Bloomsbury), 142.

Nevertheless, the play was a critical success. *The Harvard Crimson* thought the play “thoroughly entertaining” and suggested it offered new hope for the Poets’ Theatre.<sup>37</sup> A hint of the divisions behind the scenes can be grasped from a letter Hugh Amory wrote to Lang’s husband Bradley Philips in 1956: “Without laboring the point, I don’t know has she ever regarded the Poets’ Theatre as her friend, in the sense that I think they were opposed too much of what she believed in, and still are. The big battle of course was over *Fire Exit*, on which the Poets’ Theatre has since meanly claimed the credit. All I can say is that she conveyed a sense of honor even in returning to a theatre which had none.”<sup>38</sup>

Facing potential bankruptcy after *Fire Exit* the Poets’ decided to produce only three plays that year: *Agamemnon* by William Alfred and two plays by Archibald MacLeish *This Music Crept by Me upon the Waters* and *The Trojan Horse* with Manning directing all three productions. The company also established a headquarters, finding premises at Palmer Street, off Harvard Square, with just enough space for a tiny theatre. Peter Davison, who arrived there for an audition in September 1955, described the theatre space: “it lay at the top of a steep flight of stairs. The theatre was a high, dark space, ridiculously small even with the curtain raised, holding seven rows of six, and one row of five, folding chairs on the same level as the stage area, with two more chairs, on sell out nights, held in reserve to balance on planks atop the sink at the rear,

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<sup>37</sup> M. Maccoby, ‘The Playgoer: Fire Exit at the Brattle’, *Harvard Crimson* (2 December 1952).

<sup>38</sup> Hugh Amory, Letter to Bradley Philips, 15 October 1956, Folder 92, V.R. Lang Papers (MS Am 1951), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

where the set designers washed their paintbrushes.”<sup>39</sup> The group also saw its stock rising in academic spheres that year with the initiation of Harvard University Press’s Poets Theatre series, which was to annually publish the best work. The group was further bolstered by a successful bid for a Rockefeller grant for an artist’s residency with a financial stipend, but a darker cloud was looming for the Poets’ Theatre. The lack of completed or production quality submissions provoked a central polarising debate on policy and output. On the one side there were the purists who felt that the company should only consider and produce Cambridge or Boston based poets and writers, whereas members on the other side wanted to open the repertoire to other writers of quality in other countries and living and dead writers. Phelps described the debate: “on the executive board of Poets’ Theatre, in the corporation actually, we had a knock-down-drag-out fight as to whether Poets’ Theatre would be kept as in-group or whether it would entertain the interests of poets and writers of tastes in excellence from outside Cambridge and Boston.”<sup>40</sup> The pragmatic and experienced Manning realised that a theatre needs to capture and maintain an audience and favoured expanding the repertoire. Following this fight some of the most important figures in the Poets’ Theatre, including Frank O’Hara and John Ashbury began to drift away to other cities, academic institutions and writing forms, and many of them never again offered a submission to the theatre.

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<sup>39</sup> Peter Davison, *The Fading Smile*, 40.

<sup>40</sup> “Discussion between Lyon Phelps, Mary Manning and Jack Rogers Concerning the History of The Poets’ Theatre,” typescript carbon transcript, 1958, 7.MS Thr 833 (567), Houghton Library, Harvard University, 11.

Manning's key motivating objective in expanding the theatre's repertoire was the inclusion of Irish work in the program. She consistently pointed to the Abbey Theatre as the shining example of a poetic literary theatre. Initiating an Irish theme, the company staged in December 1953 a double bill of Yeats's *Purgatory* and *The Player Queen*. The following year in a summer workshop they staged *The Cat and the Moon*, *On Baile's Strand*, *The Only Jealousy of Emer* and *The Dreaming of the Bones*. Critically praising the surreal elements, the productions were described as having "great appeal for the young."<sup>41</sup> These successes prompted a further production of Yeats' *The Countess Cathleen* in 1957, which became both a critical and commercial success with one critic noting the theatre "wasn't really large enough to hold the crowd."<sup>42</sup> This was presented along with a new play by W.S. Merwin, *Favour Island*, who at the time was Poet-in-Residence at the Poet's Theatre.<sup>43</sup> The 1957-58 season saw two new productions of Yeats' plays, *The Words Upon the Window pane* and *The King of the Great Clock Tower* in November. March 1958 saw the American Premiere of *The Scythe and The Sunset* by another Irish writer, Denis Johnston, continuing the collaboration they had begun in Dublin two decades earlier. Manning also explored an Irish-American

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<sup>41</sup> Elinor Hughes, "The Theatre: Poets' Theater Workshop, Four Plays by W.B. Yeats," Boston Herald, July 9, 1954. MS Thr 833, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>42</sup> Elinor Hughes, "Poets Theater Worth A Visit," Boston Herald, July 9, 1954. MS Thr 833, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>43</sup> William Stanley Merwin (1927 -2019) was an American poet who wrote more than fifty books of poetry and prose. Merwin received many honours, including the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1971 and 2009; the National Book Award for Poetry in 2005, and the Tanning Prize. In 2010, the Library of Congress named him the 17th United States Poet Laureate.



aspect through the Rockefeller award the Poets' offered to Frank O'Hara, who was of Irish descent.

If one were to consider the positive and negative elements of the Poets' Theatre, one should look no further than their relationship with Frank O'Hara. Having demonstrated tremendous musical and literary potential as a young man, he initially had ambitions to be a concert pianist. However, his college education was interrupted by the onset of war and O'Hara went into battle in the Pacific with a copy of Joyce's *Ulysses* among his possessions.<sup>44</sup> After the war, he benefitted from the G.I. Bill and initially studied music at Harvard subsequently changing to literature. His talent was soon recognized, John Caridi wrote: "His talent was obvious, even when he was a freshman, he seemed to have such unlimited prospects."<sup>45</sup> As discussed earlier in this chapter his debut play *Try Try* was the undoubted success of the first performance evening of the Poets' Theatre. O'Hara, twenty-five at the time of the event, was a complete advocate of everything the Poets' Theatre were trying to achieve. Gooch described his enthusiasm for the initiation venture as: "a Yeatsian project he had often dreamed about at his table at Cronin's."<sup>46</sup> However, the Poets' failed to capitalize on the success of *Try! Try!*, instead allowing O'Hara to seek development support elsewhere and eventually seeing a second performance at New York's Artists' Theatre

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<sup>44</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet among Painters*, (New York: G. Braziller, 1977), 82.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

<sup>46</sup> Brad Gooch, *City Poet*, 180.

in February 1953.<sup>47</sup> In his programme notes for the new production O'Hara acknowledged the first Cambridge production but was also careful to point out the extent to which he had developed the work: "The present play is not a second version but an almost completely new play written for the New York cast and for the décor of Larry Rivers."<sup>48</sup> O'Hara maintained a tenuous link with the group over the next few years mainly through his friendships with existing members. When the Poets' successfully achieved the support of the Rockefeller association in creating an award for a writer-in-residence post for the group, the six-month foundation grant was awarded jointly to O'Hara and Lang, the idea being that O'Hara take residency in Cambridge from January 1956 to peruse his writing and help with the general endeavors of the group.

O'Hara would have seemed the perfect choice for the post: the vibrant young Harvard graduate, blooded by the Poets' in their opening season, was generating an exciting reputation in New York within both literary and artistic circles. This new initiative from the Poets' was both a practical and aesthetic coup: providing creative encouragement and a platform to present work served the young artists well, and the Rockefeller award was both prestigious and provided a welcome stipend. O'Hara initially had a measure of enthusiasm for the residency, he wrote to his friend George Montgomery: "It would be lots of fun to be back in Cambridge for a while with you

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<sup>47</sup> *Try! Try!* received a subsequent production at the Artists' Theatre, in New York City in February, 1953 – directed by Herbert Machiz, with setting designed by Larry Rivers. In his program note O'Hara described the second version as '...an almost completely new play.

<sup>48</sup> FOH program note *Try*, 18.

and Bunny both there, though I do love the skyscrapers and gutters of New York.”<sup>49</sup> Whereas the strong social element and collegiate atmosphere of the Poets theatre lent a certain romance and frivolity to proceedings, as a platform for the development of serious writing talent it proved to be an impediment, a factor soon recognized by O’Hara. It was the asperity at the core of the group that he found particularly irritating, writing to his roommate and friend Joe LeSeuer the day after he arrived to take up his residency he noted: “They are all intense about the theatre and have little battles and factions going on, which I intend to stay out of, partly to save time, partly because it seems dull, partly because it would take a year to catch up on what’s already happened.”<sup>50</sup>

O’Hara initially stayed at Manning’s house – and his darkening mood quickly became evident. The Journalist Leo Lerman,<sup>51</sup> who was writing an article about the Poets’ Theatre for *Mademoiselle*, first observed O’Hara one evening standing outside Manning’s House: “There was a great snowfall, one of those extraordinary snowfalls we don’t seem to have anymore. It was probably close to midnight. At a certain moment I looked out and saw a young man standing reading from an open book. I

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<sup>49</sup> Brad Gooch, *City Poet*, 274.

<sup>50</sup> Letter from Frank O’Hara to LeSueur, 5<sup>th</sup> January 1956. Quoted in *City Poet*, 274.

<sup>51</sup> Leo Lerman (1914-1994) was an American writer and editor who worked for Condé Nast Publications for more than 50 years. Lerman also wrote for the *New York Herald Tribune*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Dance Magazine*, and *Vogue* and was the editor of *Playbill*.

said, 'Who's that?' One of the family said, 'He's Frank O'Hara. He stays here.'"<sup>52</sup> It seems O'Hara missed the vibrancy and excitement of the life he had created over the preceding years in New York – the very thing that had given him so much inspiration. After two weeks, O'Hara moved from Manning's house into Lyon Phelps' apartment who had gone to New York to work for six months. Depression, heavy drinking and writer's block soon followed. He wrote to his friend Joan Mitchell: "Sometimes it seems to me that I am operating by remote control from a broom closet in the Empire State Building, but I guess I really am here."<sup>53</sup> He soon grew tired of Cambridge and began bolting back to New York at every opportunity. LeSeuer recalled: "When he could manage it, he stormed back to New York, drank more than I ever saw him drink, and talked about how provincial and boring Cambridge was."<sup>54</sup>

This was undoubtedly an unhappy time for O'Hara and it was not helped by Manning's misreading of him. Following a reading he gave in his first week in Cambridge Manning commented to Bunny Lang with her usual candor: "Frank is the real thing, all right, but he has the terrible affliction of the Irish – he doesn't trust his heart."<sup>55</sup> Gooch goes on to note, "Such subtle deprecations from Howe and others

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<sup>52</sup> Brad Gooch, *City Poet* 275.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid* 277.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*: 276.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid* 275.

seemed to plague O'Hara during his entire tenure."<sup>56</sup> O'Hara failed to produce any significant work during his time as writer-in-residence with the Poets'. What is unfortunate about this relationship is that they failed to find a method of happily working together. O'Hara continued to experiment with verse drama for the rest of his career and published six books of his poetry. Influential in the New York art world, he was appointed curator at the Museum of Modern Art in 1960 and oversaw eighteen exhibitions by many leading contemporary artists including Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell and Reuben Nakian.<sup>57</sup> O'Hara's story (like Bunny Lang) had a tragic conclusion. In the early morning of July 24<sup>th</sup> 1966, he was struck by a beach buggy after a taxi carrying him and a group of friends had broken down after a party at art patron Morris Golde's beach house in Water Island.<sup>58</sup> He died in hospital the following evening. Recognizing his lost potential, the Village Voice wrote soon after his death: "He was at the center of an extraordinary poetic era, which gives his poetry its sense of historic monumentality. He entwined purely personal life into the high art of composition, marking the return of all authority back to person. His style is actually

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid* 275.

<sup>57</sup> Jackson Pollock (1912 – 1956) was an American painter and a major figure in the abstract expressionist movement and a close friend of Frank O'Hara. Robert Motherwell (1915 – 1991) was an American abstract expressionist painter, printmaker, writer and editor. He was considered among the most articulate of the abstract expressionist movement. Reuben Nakian (1897 – 1986) was an American sculptor and teacher of Armenian extraction. His works' recurring themes are from Greek and Roman mythology.

<sup>58</sup> Morris Golde (1920 – 2001) was an American Businessman and patron of the arts. The many arts institutions he supported included Juilliard, Harlem School of the Arts, Greenwich House Music School, the Lincoln Center and the Poetry Project of St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery. He was also an active campaigner for AIDS charities.

in line with the tradition that begins with independence and runs through Thoreau and Whitman, here composed in Metropolitan space age architecture environment... His reluctance to be bothered with the literary renown bespeaks the confidence of a man who knew he had it coming."<sup>59</sup> The measure of his popularity and esteem in which his friends held him and colleagues can be seen in *Homage To Frank O'Hara*, a moving collection of writings and reminiscences edited by Bill Brekson and Joe LeSueur. In a poignant account, J.J. Mitchell described the day after O'Hara's funeral finding a journal in the overnight bag he had been carrying at the time of the accident. The journal had a single entry: "Oedipus Rex – He falls; but even in falling he is higher than those who fly into the ordinary sun. 4/7/66."<sup>60</sup>

1955 saw the most successful production from the Poets' Theatre, Manning's free adaptation of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which ran for two weeks in April/May directed by Manning herself, and then a second production directed by Edward Thommen<sup>61</sup> in November/December of that year, which opened in Cambridge and then transferred for a two-night run to the Poetry Center in Manhattan. It would appear that through her reading of the *Wake* Manning had discovered an aesthetic

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<sup>59</sup> *The Village Voice*, August 11, 1966.

<sup>60</sup> Joan Mitchell, *Homage To Frank O'Hara*, ed, Bill Berkson and Joe LeSueur (Bolinas, Calif.: Big Sky, 1978), 146.

<sup>61</sup> Thommen was an actor and director for Poets' Theatre from 1953-58, and then in a later incarnation of the company in the 1980s. He was also resident direct on the Provincetown Playhouse as well as teaching at Bennington, Boston University and Tufts University. *New York Times* Obituary (February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1977), 32.

renaissance. As her daughter, Fanny Howe observed: "As a writer she didn't have the subjectivity that you would need. Her best work for me was *Finnegans Wake*...she loved working with another writer's material, so in other words she was a better director and translator of work than an originator."<sup>62</sup> In the acknowledgements for the adaptation Manning thanked Harvard Professors Harry Levin and John V Kelleher for their "wise counsel and generous help"<sup>63</sup>, both men were leading Joyce scholars, so she would have had the benefit of some expert advice when approaching the herculean task. It might be argued that much of the power of Joyce's work is lost in adaptation and to truly appreciate the puns it is essential to consider the author's original spelling. For example, at the beginning of Act one the SECOND DUBLINER states that "all the guenneses had met their exodus", this is a reference to the book of Genesis and Guinness, and that the spoken word only offers one of these options. And in the same scene Joyce's use of 'hoyth' likely stands for Howth and height. Manning's choice to have Shem, and later both brothers, sing The Ballad of Persse O'Reilly is at odds with Joyce's intention. The point is that this is meant to be sung by the madding crowd who have been castigating and ostracising Earwicker. Likewise for the boat carrying Tristan and Isolde to Cornwall, the twins Shem and Shaun are accompanying it, whereas in the text this is done (and the observation of the Tristian and Isolde seduction scene) by the four old men. These, too, have very important roles to play in

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<sup>62</sup> Interview Fanny Howe, Cambridge, Mass., 18<sup>th</sup> July 2018.

<sup>63</sup> Mary Manning, *The Voice Of Shem, Passages from Finnegans Wake by James Joyce* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955), 73.

the wake as a whole. Manning also takes license with some of Joyce's characters. One can see some point in Anna Livia merging into Iseult, and later into her daughter Isobel, and characters do merge and interchange in the novel, but when Anna is herself she is very much a maternal figure (almost an earth-mother), and when Isobel is herself she is a precocious adolescent/young woman on whom her father and brothers have designs.<sup>64</sup> However, the very fact that Manning attempted to stage the intellectually revered *Wake*, coupled with the adaptation and directorial elements was in itself an elaborate critique of the contemporary American cognoscenti. As Reynolds notes:

Manning's *Finnegans Wake* cannily repudiated the conservative cultural mores pervading America in the 1950s, suggesting that even purportedly hidebound Bostonians were game for outrageous cultural critique. An aggressively experimental work adapted for the stage, the play undermines long-standing misconceptions about the relationship of high modernism to its audiences. Traditionally modernism has been defined for its disregard, even its disdain, for audiences.<sup>65</sup>

The emphasis within the adaptation was on the spoken word – in his introduction, Denis Johnston wrote: “We must also remember that Joyce was a man already half blind when writing the *Wake*, but with a wonderful ear for music. Consequently, large sections are not intended for the eye at all, but for the ear. It has a rhythm, and sometimes even a rhyme that demands to be read aloud.”<sup>66</sup> In addition, Johnston

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<sup>64</sup> I am indebted to my colleague Donal Manning for his thoughts and impressions on Manning's text.

<sup>65</sup> Paige Reynolds, 124.

<sup>66</sup> Denis Johnston, 'Introduction', in Mary Manning, *The Voice Of Shem*, vii.



acknowledged the addition of Manning's characteristic wit and humor to the adaptation: "Another thing that Miss Manning seems to try to do is to bring out an element that is seldom touched upon, the fact that the *Wake* is a very funny book. Joyce was not often given the credit of being a humorist, a fact that he was heard to deplore on more than one occasion."<sup>67</sup> And as Manning herself explained in her Production Note: "The words are the things indeed and the words should be sacred. Perfect audibility is required and the most loving training of the choral passages. Joyce wrote to be heard. Any production of *Finnegan* should be paced so that the audience has time to hear. If not, the subtle imagery, adroit punning, and the essential meaning will be lost in a verbal shuffle. True, we have used ballet, but here again the words dominate the dancers."<sup>68</sup> Fanny Howe suggests an influence of Beckett with this concept: "That was Beckett's idea. He always said, 'listen to Joyce, he's a musical writer', don't read it on the page."<sup>69</sup> However, what Manning was attempting to do was to make a difficult text accessible to a wider audience.

She began the project many years before when teaching drama at Radcliffe College where she gave students short sections from both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, X.

<sup>68</sup> Mary Manning, *The Voice Of Shem*, 71.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Fanny Howe, Cambridge Mass., 18<sup>th</sup> July 2018.

and tasked them to dramatise the pieces.<sup>70</sup> Manning's adaptation did not demand from the audience an intricate knowledge of Joyce's novel: with minimal props and a sparse staging, the key emphasis of the adaptation is the importance placed on spoken word and the sounds within the text enhanced with lighting, music, chanting, choreographed movement and dance elements. Manning imbued the adaptation with her typical wry humor and vaudevillian elements, this along with the stage direction: "The actors change the props; in fact the changes form part of the action"<sup>71</sup>. This gave the entire production an almost music hall effect, making it more associable for the audience. This sat very well with contemporary critics who, expecting to see a high-brow and opaque rendering of Joyce's work, were instead surprised and delighted by the humour and accessibility of the piece. One critic observed that it: "turned out to be an entertaining and meaningful evening with no homework required."<sup>72</sup> Whereas another critic noted: "The Poets' Theatre has done for Joyce what scholarship tries and – except for scholars perhaps – seldom succeeds in doing: it has made a 'difficult' work of art come alive."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Joyce Wilson, 'The Poet's Theatre: Alive Again – The Enduring Spirit of Molly Howe', *Boston Globe* (August-September 1988). Mary Manning Papers. Howard Gotlib Archival Research Center, Boston University.

<sup>71</sup> Mary Manning, *The Voice Of Shem*, 8.

<sup>72</sup> Henry Hewes, 'Two Masterpieces in Search of an Audience', *Saturday Review* (December 31, 1955), 25.

<sup>73</sup> Kevin Sullivan, 'Finnegans Wake', *Village Voice* (December 14, 1955), 10.

Sandwiching these two productions of *Finnegans Wake* was another very successful production: Richard Wilbur's adaptation of Moliere's poetic comedy *The Misanthrope*. In September 1947, Wilbur began to get recognition as a poet through his first book, *The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems*, published to critical praise while he was a student at Harvard. This was followed three years later by *Ceremony and Other Poems*, which established Wilbur as a leading poet of his generation. As Davison notes: "It would have been nearly impossible for an eastern undergraduate of literary inclinations to have got through college in the late 1940s or early 1950s without becoming aware of the poetry of Richard Wilbur."<sup>74</sup> A leading member of the Poets' Theatre, Wilbur was elected to the board and was ever present at the initial gatherings. In 1953 Wilbur decided to attempt to translate and adapt a version of *The Misanthrope* for the Poets' and received a Guggenheim fellowship to assist him with the project. The play was staged on 31st October 1955 and was produced by Mary Manning.

As with O'Hara's *Try! Try!* The Poets' yet again failed to follow up on a potentially successful relationship with both a play and an artist. February 1956 saw a revival of *The Misanthrope* that ran at the Winter Garden Theatre that was both critically and commercially successful. That same year Wilbur was approached by Leonard Bernstein and Lillian Hellman to write the book for the musical *Candide* (inspired by the novel of the same name by Voltaire). Although the production, directed by Tyrone Guthrie, was not a commercial success it received positive reviews

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<sup>74</sup> Peter Davison, *The Fading Smile*, 59.

and was nominated for five Tony awards in 1957, and later revivals of the musical did prove successful on Broadway and in the West End.<sup>75</sup> Despite the fact that Wilbur never again submitted to the Poets' Theatre, it is clear that his involvement with the group had significant long-term implications for, not only his aesthetic development, but for the rest of his career. Wilbur's choice to create a rhymed English version of *The Misanthrope* initiated one of the greatest literary translation projects in American literature. Over the next forty years he translated and popularized versions of all of Molière's major comedies - *Tartuffe* (1963), *The School for Wives* (1971), *The Learned Ladies* (1978), *The School for Husbands* (1992), *Sganarelle or The Imaginary Cuckold* (1993), and *Amphitryon* (1995) as well as two neo-classical verse tragedies by Racine – *Andromache* (1982) and *Phaedre* (1986). Wilbur's versions not only helped create an interest in Molière across North America, but the royalties from this work and subsequent productions of *Candide* offered an element of financial security that enabled the poet to teach only part time.

By this stage the Poets' theatre had fully entered what Lurie has described as their third 'social' stage. The pressure of running a now established theatre company with an expected annual production rota, and maintaining a performance space meant there was an extra emphasis on fundraising. Consequently, the company began to look to the more well-heeled elements of Cambridge society for audience and financial support. The driving force behind the fundraising element was of course Manning.

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<sup>75</sup> Wilbur received the 1983 Drama Desk Special Award for a revival of *The Misanthrope* and the PEN Translation Prize for his adaptation.

Well-schooled from her days at the Gate, she had a clear understanding of the value and importance of sponsors and patronage. Where the Gate initially relied almost completely on the generosity of Lord Longford, and the Abbey Edward Martyn and then Annie Horniman, the Poets' never benefited from the generosity of a single benefactor who maintained a vested interest in the success of the venue. Manning initiated a sponsorship program with graduating levels of support on offer. A husband-and-wife team could have Co-Sponsor status which offered two season passes to all productions and events and free publications of all materials for a \$35 annual subscription – whereas a single Sponsor could receive all these benefits for \$25. Membership involved a season pass to all productions for \$12 with student membership available for \$9. Again, utilizing her experience from Dublin, Manning helped organize fundraising evenings, gala events and reading evenings – reaching out to names not only in the literary world but also star actors that were guaranteed to provide audience and publicity opportunities. Yet again an Irish element featured heavily in this regard. Siobhan McKenna, fresh from her 1956 Tony award nomination for *St Joan*, and whose face graced the cover of *Life* magazine read Irish work at the Poets' in 1957.<sup>76</sup>

Manning was also very proactive in her attempts to enroll other star actors for readings and events. In a letter to William Morris Hunt, the treasurer of Poets'

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<sup>76</sup> Siobhan McKenna (1923-1986) was an Irish stage and screen actress. *Life Magazine*, September 10, 1956 – Siobhan McKenna see <https://www.oldlifemagazines.com/september-10-1956-life-magazine.html> Elinor Hughes, "Poets Theater Worth A Visit," *Boston Herald*, July 9, 1954. MS Thr 833, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Theatre, outlining a wish list of names who Manning hoped to enroll, Harry Fine wrote: "Mary Manning Howe will have told you that she commissioned me on behalf of the Poets' Theatre to line up for Sunday night dramatic readings any English stage stars who might be playing in New York this coming season. Consequently I have approached the following, all of whom are interested but naturally will not commit themselves to any definite outside project until they have accomplished the primary objectives of their visits."<sup>77</sup> The names included Michael Redgrave, Joyce Grenfell, Rex Harrison, Leo Genn, Catherine Lacy, Laurence Harvey and Alec Guinness. In a letter to Anthony Quayle addressed to his New York Hotel on February 13<sup>th</sup>, 1956 Manning wrote: "Would you consider a visit to Cambridge under the auspices of The Poets' Theatre? We would very much like to present you in a dramatic reading of verse, or material chosen by yourself, on a Sunday evening, either March 25<sup>th</sup> or April 8<sup>th</sup>, in Harvard's Sanders Theatre. The fee we offer is \$500.00 plus expenses."<sup>78</sup>

The services of literary figures were also sought and attained. In 1955, Osbert and Edith Sitwell were invited to read at the Sanders Theatre at Harvard.<sup>79</sup> That same year the Poets' had a significant success by hosting two successive readings by Dylan

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<sup>77</sup> Letter from Harry Fine to William Morris Hunt, 7<sup>th</sup> September 1955. Mary Manning Papers. Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University.

<sup>78</sup> Letter from Manning to Anthony Quayle, Mary Manning Papers. Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University. Anthony Quayle at that time was starring in *Tamburlaine* on Broadway. It is interesting to note that Manning wrote directly to Quayle whereas it would be industry practice to approach the actor through their agent or representation.

<sup>79</sup> Sir Francis Osbert Saxeveverell Sitwell, 5th Baronet (1892-1969) was an English poet and writer. Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell, DBE (1887-1964) was a British poet and critic and the eldest of the three literary Sitwells.

Thomas, including the premiere reading of his play *Under Milk Wood* read by the author. Thomas' biographer John Malcom Brinnin described the momentous event as follows:

Under Milk Wood's first public hearing was scheduled for the next evening, Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> May, with the Poet's [sic] Theatre again serving as sponsor. Dylan was to read the still unfinished play in a solo performance. He worked on revisions and additions from late morning until late afternoon, but when six o'clock came around he was ready for a party that had been arranged in his honour at the home of a Cambridge portrait-painter. There he drank moderately, chatted politely with a score of Cantabrigians, and was obviously mindful of the challenge of the evening still to come. He refused my offer of supper between the party and the reading, and we were at the Fogg Museum lecture hall well before the scheduled hour. His reading that night was again one of his memorable performances. As a solo piece, *Under Milk Wood* afforded him every opportunity to demonstrate his skill as a reader and, to the surprise of a great part of his audience, his ingenuity as an actor. He was continually interrupted by extended bursts of laughter, and the play proceeded in an atmosphere of crackling excitement from its first solemn moments to its later passages of zany comedy and its final mellow embrace of a whole village of the living and the dead.<sup>80</sup>

Manning had different recollections of the evening though, recalling later that Thomas arrived at Cambridge 'very drunk'<sup>81</sup> but nevertheless managed to pull together a fine reading. This new direction the theatre was taking, coupled with the success of the Thomas reading, marked the beginning of a shift in the artistic policy of the Poets'. The edgy and avant-garde experimentalist chic was replaced with a more gentrified and bourgeois atmosphere, with interest and support emerging from the more conservative sections of Cambridge society.

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<sup>80</sup> John Malcom Brinnin, *Dylan Thomas in America* (Boston: Atlantic – Little, Brown, 1955), 200.

<sup>81</sup> See 'Let's be Dublin, A Conversation between Mary Manning and Mary Rose Callaghan', *Journal of Irish Literature*, 15, no. 3 (1986), 3-16.

At this point Manning recognized that the future of the Poets' Theatre was in jeopardy and clearly identified the inability to source and maintain writing talent as the fundamental flaw within the organisation: "I think the theatre's facing danger, considerable danger. I think we will have to go back to being a writer's theatre. We've lost that. Because we lost the writers. The writers who lived with us. It's the writers that lived with us are the ones that we really need, who will be a year or two with us, something emerges from Harvard that's a good playwright. That's what we need, terribly, terribly. That's what we haven't had for four or five years."<sup>82</sup> Throughout this later period Manning continued to deliver the odd coup-de-theatre for the Poets', including most notably the American Premiere of Beckett's radio play *All That Fall*, which saw the author described by one Boston critic as "the gloomiest Irishman alive."<sup>83</sup> Manning was correct in her foreboding and a sense of aesthetic and practical enervation crept into the organization, which was reflected in the enthusiasm of the audience until the theatre imploded, as Davison noted: "By April 29, 1959, the theatre had achieved a deficit, the fire department was complaining, not without reason, of innumerable violations, there were no new plays to be found, and the executive committee voted to dissolve the corporation. Shortly afterwards the Poets' Theatre building on Palmer Street went up in flames, hopelessly gutting the little theatre

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<sup>82</sup> 'Discussion between Lyon Phelps, Mary Manning and Jack Rogers Concerning the History of The Poets' Theatre', carbon transcript, 1958, 7.MS Thr 833 (567), Houghton Library, Harvard University, 37.

<sup>83</sup> Elliot Norton, "Beckett's Newest Drama Stirs Feelings of Pity," *Boston Independent*, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1958. MS THR 833 (386), Houghton Library, Harvard University.



which had stanchly kept open since 1954.”<sup>84</sup> A valiant attempt was made by Manning to rally and keep the theatre alive, including a Poets’ Theatre hosted reading from Brendan Behan at Kresge Auditorium at M.I.T. in November the following year introduced by Denis Johnston; but to no avail, the spark had gone out at Cambridge.<sup>85</sup>

It was not the destruction of the building that dealt the fatal blow for the Poets’ Theatre. The organization, which was born in an atmosphere of energetic poetic fervor and optimism, had become ordinary and formulaic with innovative talent replaced with gala evenings and respectability. It seemed that even Manning lost her enthusiasm for the project she helped create and nurture. Manning’s daughter Susan Howe who performed in several Poets’ theatre plays, witnessed its inception and development and was present for the highs and lows, best surmises Manning’s increasing malaise towards the organization: “The Poets’ Theatre became really dull, she just threw it away, just threw it away.”<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, the Poets’ Theatre was an exceptional achievement. For an unfunded and unsupported organization, generated through a living room intellectual forum, to have such an impact and to exist for so long is nothing short of remarkable. It is impossible to ignore the substantial influence of the Poets’ Theatre in the development American poetry, literature and theatre. The

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<sup>84</sup> Peter Davison, *The Fading Smile*, 30.

<sup>85</sup> See playbill held in Poets’ Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Susan Howe, 22nd July, 2018, New Haven, CT. Susan Howe b. 1937 is an American poet, scholar, essayist and critic, who has been closely associated with the Language poets, among other poetry movements. Howe is the recipient of the 2017 Robert Frost Medal awarded by the Poetry Society of America, the recipient of the 2011 Bollingen Prize in American Poetry, and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

group, which for a time was a hotbed of ideas and avant-garde expression, nurtured the creativity and provided a platform for many artists who would continue to lofty heights in American letters. Many of its members continued to forge formidable careers and establish or contribute to venerable institutions. At the core of the group with an Irish sensibility and an infectious devotion to words and language drawn from her love of Joyce, Synge, Shaw and Sheridan was Mary Manning. Her daughter Susan can best describe Manning's legacy. When asked about what she felt she owed her mother for her personal development as a poet: she remarked "Everything. Everything. I just can't describe to you how much. She ground into me from the age of nine or ten something about reading aloud - words. About the beauty of words read aloud. She coached me, she established a reading contest and coached me how to read the end of *Wuthering Heights*. I remember that being the greatest experience."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with Susan Howe, 22<sup>nd</sup> July, 2018, New Haven, CT.

## Assessing the American Dream – *Lovely People* (1953)

“I speak my own sins; I cannot judge another. I have no tongue for it.”

Author Miller, *The Crucible*, Act 4.

In the early fifties, whilst the Poets' Theatre was in its creative and avant-garde heyday, Manning returned to the novel form that she had first experimented with upon her arrival in the United States. Her second novel, *Lovely People*, was published in 1953 by Houghton Mifflin, the same publishing house that released her first, *Mount Venus*.<sup>1</sup> Although there are many stylistic features shared by these two works, such as the colourful and eccentric characters typical of Manning, *Lovely People* lacks the politically intense, lacerating style of her debut work. To truly understand why this was the case, one needs to consider the social and political backdrop to the novel, especially existing attitudes towards women in both the contemporary literary world and wider American society. Although bound by restrictive social mores, Manning nevertheless managed to produce an incisive and biting satire on contemporary American life.

The role of women in the United States underwent a dramatic change during World War II, notably via their key role in various war time industries. As Susan Ware observes, “The dramatic increase in defence production quickly absorbed all the

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<sup>1</sup> This title is very rare – a copy is held at The Samuel Beckett Research Centre - University of Reading.

unemployment left over from the 1930s and necessitated the recruitment of a new workforce – the nation’s women – now that the nation’s men were off at war. This wartime climate was especially liberating for single women, who seized the opportunity for increased autonomy and independence in their work and personal lives.”<sup>2</sup> Their contributions to the war effort and indispensability in the workplace offered women a new confidence. However, George Hutchinson considers women’s empowerment through wartime work to have had an emphatic impact on the psyche of the American male, which was consequently reflected in contemporary fiction:

Women’s temporary and very partial empowerment caused men to respond in fear. We have seen literary reflections on or of this fear in male authored war novels. Anxiety about what women might do in the sexually chaotic years of the war, especially while men were away, took on outsized proportions, following on the blows to male potency of the great depression.<sup>3</sup>

The numbers that participated in the war effort were vast. Howard Zinn considered the Second World War to be “the most popular war the United States had ever fought. Never had a greater proportion of the country participated in a war: 18 million served in the armed forces, 10 million overseas; 25 million workers gave of their pay envelope regularly for war bonds.”<sup>4</sup> Victory in the Pacific saw thousands of young men returning to America expecting to be reintegrated into both society and a workplace

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Ware, *American women’s history: a very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 95.

<sup>3</sup> George Hutchinson, *Facing the abyss: American literature and culture in the 1940s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 195.

<sup>4</sup> Howard Zinn, *A people’s history of the United States* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 416.

largely dominated by women. Inevitably women's centrality in the workforce was replaced by men and they were once more encouraged to follow a more domestic pathway. As Eugenia Kaledin notes: "In a world where few competitive opportunities existed for women because the best jobs and training were given to war veterans, the family provided many women with a sense of importance by offering both a sense of responsibility and the satisfaction of intimate companionship."<sup>5</sup> At the time America had a population essentially traumatised by war but this transitional period was equally challenging for women. The differing post-war gender expectations was a common feature in the literature and popular culture of the period and generally favoured the male perspective. As Hutchinson observes:

The gender bias of fiction speaks to the problematic place of women in the cultural sphere at that time, but also links to one of the recurring figures in 1950s films: the returning World War II veteran and his often-frustrated attempt to reintegrate into post war society. But, while moving from national service to civilian life was a difficult transition for many male veterans, it posed considerable challenges too for women. Elaine Tyler May estimates that the employment of women had risen by 60 per cent during the war, but soon after 1945 many found themselves embracing domesticity again with a spate of young marriages, a climbing birth rate, and GIs on the job market.<sup>6</sup>

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar recognised a change in female writing with ideas and perspectives moving towards a more darkly comedic outlook: "the blitz on women during World War II contributed to the formation of a female literary tradition which

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<sup>5</sup> Eugenia Kaledin, *Mothers and more: American women in the 1950s* (Twayne Publishers, 1984), 17-18.

<sup>6</sup> Hutchinson, *Facing the abyss*, 61.

mourns the demise of Herland even as it documents female artistic survival behind a mask, a survival achieved only with the rictus of a grin set in place.”<sup>7</sup> Manning can be placed firmly within this tradition, weaving a cynical and satirical narrative while at the same time conducting a serious examination of the place of woman within American society at that time.

At the very heart of this novel is an elaborate exploration of the gender imbalance that existed in America at that time, shifting gender roles and male perceptions of the female social station set against the backdrop of a new, middle class, utopian America. *Lovely People* is set seven years after the end of the Second World War, and we learn that most of the male characters had some involvement in the war effort. The central male protagonist George Mallon is a lawyer advising senior Army Officers in the Pentagon. It is interesting to note that Manning’s husband Mark De Wolfe Howe held a similar position during the war even participating in the Nuremberg trials. Other characters saw active duty, for example the sexually aggressive Gordon Taylor served as a fighter pilot. The inequality among the genders is manifest in the employment status of the main protagonists: the male characters all have respectable employment or are of sufficient means to be self-sufficient. This is in direct contrast to the major female characters, none of whom are employed, and are all dependent on men for their survival.

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<sup>7</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man’s Land, the place of the woman writer in the twentieth century Vol.3, Letters from the Front* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1994), 65.

Manning's debut novel *Mount Venus*, published in 1938, is unequivocally political with a profoundly pro left-wing sentiment at its core. One might have expected this message to continue in her work. However, when considering *Lovely People* against her debut work, the dilution of any significant political message is striking. Although Manning's disapproval of the prevailing anti-communist sentiment in America at that time is evident in the novel, she is careful to present this subtly. To fully understand why this was the case, it is important to consider the shift in the social and political climate between the 1930s and 1950s, and its impact on artists and writers.

In the 1930s, there was a small yet influential left-wing presence in American culture and society. This was particularly prevalent in the powerful trade union movements and within the intellectual and artistic communities. The post World War American establishment were quick to recognise the necessity of subjugating the left.

As Zinn notes:

The left had become very influential in the hard times of the thirties, and during the war against fascism. The actual membership of the Communist party was not large – fewer than 100,000 probably – but it was a potent force in trade unions numbering millions of members, in the arts, and among countless Americans who may have been led by the failure of the capitalist system in the thirties to look favourably on Communism and Socialism. Thus, if the Establishment, after World War II, was to make Capitalism more secure in the country, it had to weaken and isolate the left.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Zinn, *A people's history of the United States*, 420.

Zinn believes the anti-communist fear and hysteria was purposefully manufactured by the American establishment a deliberate attempt to inflate the military budget and stimulate the economy with war related orders: "In a series of moves abroad and at home it established a climate of fear – a hysteria about communism – which would deeply escalate the military budget and stimulate the economy with war related orders. This combination of policies would permit more aggressive actions abroad, more repressive actions at home. Revolutionary movements in Europe and Asia were described to the American public as examples of Soviet expansionism."<sup>9</sup> This 'Red Scare', as it became known, created a suitable social environment to justify to the American people inflated military spending and therefore ensuring economic prosperity: "It was an atmosphere in which the government could get mass support for a policy of rearmament. The system, so shaken by the thirties, had learned that war production could bring stability and high profits."<sup>10</sup> This trend is clearly evident in government military spending in the 1950s, at the start of 1950, the total US budget was about \$40 billion, and the military part was about \$12 billion. But by 1955 the military part alone was about \$40 billion out of a total of about \$62 billion.<sup>11</sup> This new wealth had a trickle-down effect and established the foundation for a new and wealthy suburban middle class.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 417.

<sup>10</sup> Howard Zinn, 428.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 428



The inflation of the military budget also created the means by which the government could exercise greater authority over the American people. Manufacturing a quasi-war scenario in the minds of the American people through the expansionist communist boogie man, Zinn asserts, was an age-old ploy from the executive playbook. In an effort to unify the nation under an anti-left banner in the post war years, the Truman and then Eisenhower administrations created loyalty oaths for public office, passed anti-communist legislation and the Justice Department conducted several high-profile prosecutions, culminating in the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for treason in 1953. This sentiment filtered down into the mainstream media. Between 1948 and 1954, more than forty anti-Communist films came out of Hollywood. At that time, the House Un-American Activities Committee [HUAC] led by Senator Joseph McCarthy was in its heyday, cross-examining Americans from all walks of life as to their communist sympathies and encouraging people to betray others. Kaledin considers McCarthyism, as it became known, as the logical by-product of a post war generation: "Conditioned to the pursuit of happiness, we often have a hard time coming to terms with the flaws that remain in our society and have been quick to look for outside conspirators when things go wrong. McCarthy offered an easy explanation to everything in the world that was causing us problems. Ridding our country of communists at home seemed a panacea."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kaledin, *Mothers and more*, 5.

When Manning was composing *Lovely People*, the hysteria of McCarthyism was at its zenith. It was only the previous year that the theatre director Elia Kazan had appeared before the Committee and denounced seven members of his company as being members of the Communist party. Mere suspicion of sympathy to any left-wing group could have disastrous consequences for artists. Deep rooted fear prevailed in the artistic community. As Kaledin reflects, "Many talented writers and artists lost their jobs; and the shame of people denouncing each other for survival or for 'patriotic' reasons became a shameful moment in our history."<sup>13</sup> It prompted Norman Mailer to comment later that this was a decade in which "a stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life, and we suffer from a collective failure of nerve."<sup>14</sup> The prevailing political climate encouraged an atmosphere of self-censorship among many within the writing community. As Halliwell notes: "Writers at the time might have shared Mailer's anxieties, but most were less ready to adopt a stance of outright social and political rebellion. A sense of unease was often modulated by social promise and critiques were guarded or lacked real clarity."<sup>15</sup> In fact Gordon Hunter believes that after the war a general sterility prevailed in American writing with serious work being supplanted by populist paperback pulp fiction:

Following the war, American readers waited vainly for a new generation of novelists to spell out contemporary cultural terms. In the face of that failure to establish a newly lost generation came an array of middlebrow novels ultimately

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (London: HarperCollins 1961), 291.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Halliwell, *American culture in the 1950s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 57.

too paltry to create a literary tradition that could stand up either to a comparison with the generation that came after the first world war or to the onslaughts that popular culture was making on national taste, especially through television and the movies.<sup>16</sup>

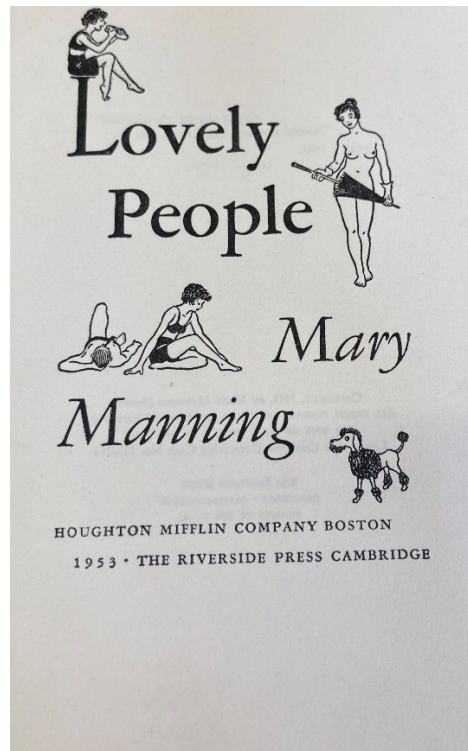
This necessity for self-censorship is exactly the case with Manning and *Lovely People*. With her debut novel and her earlier work with *Motley* she had been unrelenting in her critique of social and political maladies, however with her new piece she felt the necessity to veil her true feelings and present her social anxieties in a more subtle form. With such a challenging and fearful atmosphere, it would be unsurprising if a measure of self-censorship came into play with Manning. Nevertheless, she managed to weave a subtle critique of the anti-communist feeling into the work, which will be further explored later in this chapter.

*Lovely People* shares a similar structure with *Mount Venus*. Chapters are subdivided into numbered subsections, each following a different character. Epistolary sections help rapidly progress the narrative. There also exists a significant love-triangle subplot, a feature shared with the earlier work. Of note is the deliberate decision to portray an image of a naked woman in a suggestive pose on the inside title page. Producing this work in the same year that the men's magazine *Playboy* was launched it signalled her intent to put the contemporary American woman at the centre of the novel. The image also gives a hint to some nudist beach scenes later in

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<sup>16</sup> Gordon Hunter, *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel, 1920-1960* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 269-270.

the novel and is sure to have raised a few eyebrows amongst its contemporary readerships. Manning displays her maturity with the craft of the novel form, presenting a more succinct and tighter narrative configuration, engaging characterisation and some wonderfully evocative descriptive passages.



Lovely People inside title page - The Samuel Beckett Research Centre - University of Reading

A remarkable feature of the novel is the profound sense of place: by embedding the action within the regional New England locale, Manning lends it a sense of authenticity and pays homage to contemporary authors such as Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Wetly. As Kaledin comments, "Many writers of the 1950s turned inward more than the generation preceding them and the polemicists that followed; there is no question that they exploited their regional backgrounds as

representative reality."<sup>17</sup> Manning is at her most adept in her presentation of the New England landscapes:

The sun was bright, but it was chilly, the New England spring, brittle, frustrating. Dead leaves from the fall cracked under one's feet and the branches were still naked against the high, clear, deceitful sky. It was sparse, this spring, miserly of its wealth until the first green buds tipped the trees, until the apple blossoms burst into floral loveliness, until the gentle west wind rustled through the parched grasses.<sup>18</sup>

Like *Mount Venus* one can detect the influence of Elizabeth Bowen in *Lovely People*. In the opening sequences of many of the chapters Manning offers vivid descriptions of the weather and the landscape setting the scene and providing the reader with vibrant images. For example, chapter three of the middle section of the novel opens thus:

A shimmering, baking July settled down upon the eastern seaboard; day followed day of breathless heat. The lawns turned from a fresh green to a parched yellow; the ponds sank, leaving rims of jaundiced mud; the exhausted trees stood limply still against the relentless pale blue skies; and, needless to add, the farmers everywhere screamed for rain.<sup>19</sup>

As with *Mount Venus*, Manning gives the reader an indication of the impending havoc through a weather metaphor: "The very evening of the day George made such a spectacular appearance on the Donegan's beach the weather suffered a change for the worse. A three-day northeaster roared over the cape. The den dwellers battened down

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<sup>17</sup> Kaledin, *Mothers and more*, 21.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Manning, *Lovely People* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1953), 20.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Manning, *Lovely People*, 150.

their hatches and read, ate, and slept, moved restlessly from room to room, scolded each other, and all but committed murder.”<sup>20</sup>

The narrative opens at the home of wealthy and eccentric Mr Abel Winslow, an elderly Harvard academic and resident of Longfellow Mall in the heart of Cambridge. His long-time private secretary Miss Mings is in conversation with his Doctor Brown, and we learn that Abel is terminally ill. Manning’s typically humorous and mildly caustic character descriptions continue in her new novel from its outset. Miss Miggs is described as, “a dumpy little woman with round innocent blue eyes in a round yellow face. Gray kinky hair was tied up in a knot on top of her head, exposing large pointed ears. Her clothes were woolly, gray and beige; she resembled an exceptionally intelligent hamster.”<sup>21</sup> Dr Brown enquires of Abel’s next of kin. We learn he has two nieces and a nephew, Countess Anna Costello who lives in Ireland, Mr Roger Winslow who resides in Mexico and Janet Mallon who lives in Gorham, a fictitious suburb of Boston, with her husband George. Abel had an equally eccentric mother, “a druidess who conducted a most interesting little circle in her lovely home in Milton” and who would sacrifice the occasional sheep.<sup>22</sup> We learn Abel’s mother raised the children after their parents died in an epidemic of typhoid. Although ill, he is nevertheless determined to spend another summer at Pike’s Point, his holiday home in the fictionalised resort of Casset. Having established the context of Abel Winslow’s

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

terminal illness, the action of the novel moves next to the Mallons. Modelled on a typical 1950s middle-class suburban nuclear family, this household is less eccentric than the one presided over by the Doña in *Mount Venus* yet displays similar frustrations and dysfunction. Through her focus on the Mallons, Manning puts the concept of the new American family at the very centre of her novel, adhering to a literary trope of the post-World War II American novel termed by Gordon Hunter 'middle-class realism.'<sup>23</sup>

Post war economic prosperity, coupled with government intervention, successfully created an explosion within the middle classes and fundamentally changed the structure of American family life. Kaledin points out that for the first time in history more Americans owned their own homes than lived in rented premises with over 1.4 million houses built in 1950. The sheer scale of the building projects was astonishing and property magnates were lionised. With the help of government supported mortgages for veterans, and subsidies for the roads leading to suburban areas, the numbers of homeowners increased during the decade by over nine million, reaching an incredible 32.8 million by 1960.<sup>24</sup> At that time the family was the centre piece of much of popular American fiction but also prevalent in the newest American mainstream media, Television. Shows like *I Love Lucy* (1951) and *Aussie and Harriet* (1952), which centred around the traditional family unit, were tremendously popular,

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<sup>23</sup> For a more detailed discussion see Gordon Hunter, *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel, 1920-1960* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> For a more detailed discussion see Kaledin, *Mothers and more*.

drawing large audiences. Halliwell believes popular culture to be in-part to blame for this discrepancy in the gender roles in the fiction of that time: "One major cause of the gender rift stemmed from the heart of suburban life. Glossy adverts and new magazines such as *Redbook* were promoting suburbia as the bright new future for young adults and a safe place to raise young children."<sup>25</sup>

It had been conditioned into the American psyche that the pursuit of happiness was centred around the stable middle class family. Susan Ware describes the new American family unit in the 1950s:

Like the 1920s, the decade of the 1950s is recalled as an age of affluence. Despite fears of a return to depression conditions when World War II ended, the economy entered a period of extended growth and social and economic mobility to a wider swath of the American population. With jobs plentiful and wages good couples could marry earlier: by 1951 a third of all the American women were married by the age of nineteen. In a total aberration from long-term trends, the birth-rate shot up in what demographers call the "baby boom," peaking in 1957. Now the average woman was having close to four children. Selling consumer goods to these growing families fuelled the economy and produced a major expansion of the nation's education system.<sup>26</sup>

Manning's view, however, is more cynical and her portrayal of the cracks and eventual dissolution of the Mallon family can be viewed as a satire of the gender roles within this new American middle-class family unit. Moris Dickstein believes this was a common feature in American literature at that time: "If we read 1950s fiction as a direct reflection of gender roles, then it would seem that both sexes were

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<sup>25</sup> Martin Halliwell, *American culture in the 1950s*, 62.

<sup>26</sup> Susan Ware, *American women's history: a very short introduction*, 100.



uncomfortable with middle-class suburban life; it is just that male characters protested their comfort more vocally.”<sup>27</sup> The central male protagonist George Mallon is a self-made, successful lawyer, materialistic and pompous in his attitudes. Dominant and alpha male, he is the undoubted master of the house with everyone in trepidation of him: “George, as the saying goes, had come up from nothing. He had been bred in the sternest, the simplest middle-class atmosphere, and consequently, now he had achieved wealth and success entirely by his own efforts, he was madly in love with luxury and magnificence. Nothing was too good for him.”<sup>28</sup> Manning allows the reader insights into George’s mind and the disappointment in his marriage with wife Janet is soon made obvious: “She had been a pretty dark-haired girl when he married her, but now she sagged. Her hair was always untidy; she bulged around the middle; and then, most heinous of all, she had borne him two girls though he expressly demanded boys.” What prevents George from breaking up the family is concern for his reputation: “There were times when he secretly considered divorce, but as no reputable doctor would give him definite assurance that he would have male children by another woman, he did not dare take the risk; his respectability was prodigious.”<sup>29</sup> The author’s portrayal of this family is pessimistic from the very outset of the novel

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<sup>27</sup> Moris Dickstein, *Leopards in the temple: the transformation of American fiction, 1945-1970* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 61-62.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Manning, *Lovely People*, 12.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

and we detect the imperfection of the family ideal and are offered the impression of its likely deterioration.

Janet views of George suggests a textbook submissive suburban middle-class wife:

He was a sandy-haired stocky man, full of energy and prejudices. He was, however, an admirable character. No denying it; really, he never stopped working. He was an immensely successful lawyer and he had so many outside commitments. He was an active member of the bar association, a great hustler in the Chamber of Commerce, an ardent worker on the Community Fund Council, a furious and highly vocal personality in the Taxpayers Association. He also helped run the affairs of the Gorham Country Club.<sup>30</sup>

It becomes apparent that Janet is powerless in the relationship, with George controlling all financial matters and creating a sense of fear within the household. He is portrayed as overbearing and tyrannical. After Janet decides to rent a cottage for the family in Casset for the summer, she takes several days to summon the courage to ask permission from her husband to proceed.

Twenty-year-old Thea, the eldest Mallon daughter, is dark haired, swarthy and pretty yet flighty and idealistic. Like the Desmond character in *Youths the Season-?* She yearns to go away to the big city to study design but feels trapped at home. Thea is dating twenty-seven-year-old Edward Goodwin, admired by George because he “did brilliantly at law school”, despite George’s concerns that Ed’s family is “a little too

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

liberal for my taste.”<sup>31</sup> When Thea is invited to dinner at the Goodwins, his family is depicted as the exact opposite of the Mallons; functional and Brahmin with the lady of the house very much in control over the silent husband. Thea is impressed by their large house where “portraits of sour looking Puritan Goodwins glared balefully at one from the walls.”<sup>32</sup> It is interesting to note that every member of the Goodwin family belongs to a different organised religion. Manning, along with her customary critique of the catholic church makes a cynical gibe about the growth of organised religion, which was a key feature of the decade, which Kaledin believes is a reflection of the angst in America at that time:

The tremendous turn to organised religion in the 1950s reflected both spiritual need and underlying anxiety. Not only did we perceive our national mission to be a spiritual leader vying with the godless communist world, but we also felt driven towards personal religious aspiration. Norman Vincent Peale, Billy Graham and Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen dominated the decade; Joshua Loth Liebman, author of *Peace of Mind*, found thousands of readers outside the Jewish community. By the late 1950s, over 63% of the population were officially enrolled in churches.<sup>33</sup>

During dinner at the Goodwins, the unexpected appearance of Ed’s friend Gordon Taylor initiates a love triangle for Thea, which becomes the major subplot of *Lovely People*. Taylor, a figure undoubtedly modelled on a young Samuel Beckett, is recruiting for people to help him with a season of Elizabethan plays he is producing for the summer theatre in Casset: “All of a sudden a strange young man walked into

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Mary Manning, *Lovely People*, 57.

<sup>33</sup> Eugina Kaledin, *Mothers and more*, 12.

the room. She knew at once he was not a Goodwin – he was much too unhealthy. He was a tall, thin haggard young man wearing a shabby tweed suit and dirty white sneakers. He had stringy brown hair falling into his eyes and a shy hunted expression.”<sup>34</sup> Thea is immediately taken with the young man and decides to go to Casset that summer. The attraction is reciprocated: “Taylor stole another look at Thea. A very pretty thing, he thought, wonderful colouring and, above all, healthy-looking. He revered health.”<sup>35</sup> The Mallon family is completed by youngest daughter Tibby. Although only eleven, she is presented as canny and materialistic. Enquiring about the possibility of Abel’s legacy, she “Twined her arm around her mother affectionately. The old lady’s value was going up.”<sup>36</sup> The family reside in Appletree, a large well-maintained house which, although inherited by Janet, is controlled by hard-working George. Each member of the household is ostensibly assigned their accepted role and on the surface they should be the typical middle-class American family.

The plot of *Lovely People* takes a significantly new direction when a telegram arrives from Janet’s sister, the Countess Anna Costello, who we learn is flying from Ireland with her stepdaughter Maria. Much to Janet’s horror, she invites herself to stay at Appletree. Manning inserts another veiled reference to Samuel Beckett in the guise of the Countess’ address which we learn is “Cooldrinagh Abbey, Ballyvore, County

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Galway.”<sup>37</sup> ‘Cooldrinagh’ is the name of Beckett’s childhood home in Foxrock County, Dublin. The Countess is a typically eccentric Manning character and shares some similar features to the Doña in *Mount Venus*. In order to facilitate her journey to America the Countess has smuggled some of her husband’s antiques and silverware to pawn. She admits she is penniless and appears very opportunistic, yet there is an enigmatic quality about her:

For outdoor occasions the Countess always clothed herself from head to toe in deep, mysterious black, as if about to have an audience with His Holiness. Indoors, however, an intriguing little visit from Mephistopheles would seem to be indicated, what with the tight-fitting black dress cut daringly low, the aroma of expensive perfume, the red rose thrust in the bosom, and the flashy, though somewhat raddled, good looks.<sup>38</sup>

Their arrival is closely followed by a telegram from Janet’s brother Roger, announcing his impending arrival from Mexico. Manning gives him her customary scathing description: “Roger was a big fat man with the face of a humorous sheep; there was also the feint look of the prelate about him, an eighteenth-century prelate with many outside interests.”<sup>39</sup>

The siblings meet for lunch the following day to strategize how they should approach the issue of their uncle’s imminent passing. Even though he is refusing to see any of the family, the Countess pays Abel an unexpected visit to inform him of her

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>38</sup> Mary Manning, *Lovely People*, 35.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

hardship: "I am compelled to lead a frugal life, Uncle Abel. There is no paint needed in the rigid seclusion to which I have condemned myself. Yes, I have had much sorry."<sup>40</sup> Abel leaves the Countess with no doubts that he feels the siblings are responsible for their own misfortunes: "You all went off like crazy things because you thought there would be money behind you eventually."<sup>41</sup> Abel accurately senses the true purpose behind the Countess' visit and forthrightly notifies her of his intentions: "My mind was made up and when I die you'll know all. Be sure you'll get what you deserve. Be sure of that. I have my new England conscience."<sup>42</sup> The siblings soon realise the futility of trying to reason with their uncle and instead descend on Abel's customary summer vacation resort and "perch around Pike's Point like buzzards waiting."<sup>43</sup>

By placing gender issues at the centre of the novel and masking it through comedy and satire, Manning was continuing a tradition prevalent among women's writing in the 1940s. As Gilbert and Gubar explain: "Some of the best writing by women in the 1940s, a serious and male-centred decade if there ever was one, took the form of dark humour and satirical invective often aimed at the scripts of gender in an era of total war. Yet dark-comic endings short-circuited the humour with ingenious

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

twists indicating the limits of women's power."<sup>44</sup> Manning portrays all the major male characters in *Lovely People* as deeply flawed. At a family dinner, early in the novel, George's rampant misogyny quickly becomes apparent: "I don't know what sort of world we're living in now, when women sit around feeling confused.' He laughed sarcastically and took up his fork. 'When they can neither sew, cook, or look after their children, only talk, talk, talk. Higher education? What about lower education? That's what I ask. What about cooking and sewing and bringing up children."<sup>45</sup> Fear and insecurity towards women was a common feature in the American novel of the 1940s and 1950s. Hutchinson believes this is a reflection of the shifting gender emplacement following World War II: "As in so many novels of the 1940s, women's independence over men both financially and sexually inspires male insecurity and misogyny, overshadowing the intensive effort to move women out of "male" occupations, to reconstitute and buttress the middle-class ideal of a nuclear family with a male breadwinner and a woman at home."<sup>46</sup> Manning reinforces George's sexism through giving us insight into his opinions about his daughter's education and social standing: "George smiled fondly at her. He was proud of that girl. She was pretty, an outstanding social success; looked like marrying well and early. Mercifully, he reflected, not much brains, no need of going through that farce of a college

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<sup>44</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, 304.

<sup>45</sup> Mary Manning, *Lovely People*, 15.

<sup>46</sup> George Hutchinson, *Facing the abyss: American literature and culture in the 1940s*, 303.

education."<sup>47</sup> In a stark contrast to his views on Ed, George's expectations for Thea are not directed towards a college education or a career. Manning depicts George as reflecting pervading social attitudes of the times. Kaledin explains: "During the 1950s young women who wanted families were actively discouraged by institutional and attitudinal barriers for playing professional roles and actively competing with men for better jobs. Although technology made the world more systematic, few efforts were made to disguise the discrimination against women."<sup>48</sup>

Although wealthy and successful, George is deeply flawed, with hints of psychological aberrations offered through several oedipal references to his late mother. Recalling her domesticity he describes her as, "the most wonderful person I'd ever know."<sup>49</sup> It is this simple, home loving quality that is prevalent in the Countess' stepdaughter Maria which reminds George of his mother and causes him to gradually become infatuated with her. George notices Maria: "A sweet girl, he thought, a fit helpmeet for any man. A contrast to Thea, who threw her clothes around anywhere, couldn't even scramble an egg, and was always out."<sup>50</sup> When the Countess notices the energy developing between her stepdaughter and brother-in-law she immediately begins treacherously scheming: "The Countess sat very silent. An idea had occurred to her, an idea so monstrous, so overwhelming, and yet so delightfully reasonable, it

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<sup>47</sup> Mary Manning, *Lovely People*, 54.

<sup>48</sup> Eugina Kaledin, *Mothers and more*, 15.

<sup>49</sup> Mary Manning, *Lovely People*, 81.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.



sent shivers down her spine, caused that ever busy brain to whirl.”<sup>51</sup> She immediately begins encouraging an affair between George and Maria, with the objective of securing her own financial security. As the novel progresses, George’s enchantment with young Maria deepens, and her passive aggressive response is encouraged by her stepmother. Maria admires George’s assertive masculinity and the power he wields within the family home. George’s sexual boredom with Janet and his infatuation with the youthful Maria is a common trope of the American novel at that time. As Hutchinson explains, “The power of these men, in turn, depends on an institutionalised performance of a WASP ethnicity, haut-bourgeois class identity, and virile masculinity. Male sexual desire is relatively simple, a matter of lust for youthful attractive women; female desire because of male domination, is rarely so authentic or direct because of its elaborate subordination to phallogentric power.”<sup>52</sup> Manning’s depiction of George is cynical and remorseless, on the one hand he is replete with middle-class posturing, judgmental and opinionated while falling for a girl half his age – an act certain to ensure his downfall from respectability.

Gordon Taylor is the only character in the novel that Manning refers to consistently by his second name. It is through this character that we are offered an insight into a more brutal and toxic masculinity. Although wealthy, having inherited an estate from his dead parents, he is portrayed as shabby and unkempt. He is self-

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>52</sup> Mary Manning, *Lovely People*, 309.

centred and his mind does not remain on people or projects for very long. He is attracted to Thea and appoints her as his assistant in order to spend more time in her company, but she quickly assumes the role of his part-time therapist, offering him unrequited emotional support: "They were allegedly going over cuts in the script; they were also going over Mr Taylor's life without cuts. He was stretched out on a deck chair sipping vegetable juice and she was seated at his feet chewing a pencil."<sup>53</sup> Recognising Thea's infatuation with him, he objectifies her and toys with her emotionally. Their first sexual encounter following a disastrous opening night at the theatre is unromantic and coercive:

"We don't have to serious, do we?" said Taylor in a low voice. The sense of revulsion in his voice could not penetrate her inexperience.

"This is August already," she babbled on nervously. "We have five weeks to go, but don't lets think of it. I'm so happy. What will I do when it's all over?"

"Shut up," said Taylor suddenly. He grabbed her arms roughly and pulled her towards him. "Stop talking. Let's make love – time is moving on."<sup>54</sup>

Their relationship has progressed from unevenness to sexual aggression and through this act Manning is suggesting the need for men to subjugate women sexually as well as professionally and socially. Hutchinson believes this is a feature common in 1950s fiction, "the power of women's sexuality is ultimately used against them, in this case

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

because its power over men that incites their need to dominate and possess, and the woman has no access to power except through her relationship to men.”<sup>55</sup>

The affair is hopelessly one sided and many of the other characters, including Abel, warn Thea of the fecklessness and emotional unreliability of Taylor. Although she continues the relationship always awaiting, “the blow she dreaded and feared” to arrive from him.<sup>56</sup> When the theatrical venture fails and Taylor cancels the season, he also brutally terminates his relationship with Thea. Initially intending to slip away without saying goodbye, she waits for him by his car, guessing that this was the action he would follow. Manning is clear he had been in this position many times before, “He dreaded the interview with her. He had been through it all before with the others.”<sup>57</sup> We are offered an insight into his thought process, and his emotional sterility is clear: “How bitterly now he regretted this boring entanglement. Why did he have to do it? It was always this way – Edel, Corrine, Enid, Louise, pallid little ghosts floating past him in the night looking down at him reproachfully from the drifting clouds.”<sup>58</sup> He leaves abruptly, promising to write to her, but the letters never come.

The third significant male character is Ed Goodwin. Although he is assertive and confident, both professionally and socially, and is admired in the community, he

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<sup>55</sup> George Hutchinson, *Facing the Abyss*, 315.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 201-202.

<sup>58</sup> Mary Manning, *Lovely People*, 202.

is indecisive in his courtship of Thea. This causes her to drift towards the aggressive Taylor. Manning highlights this contrast in how both men treat Thea. On the eve of her departure for Casset, Ed takes Thea for a romantic picnic on Haydock Hill. Although undoubtedly attracted to Thea, he lacks assertion despite knowing it is the only action that could prevent her going to Casset and the awaiting Taylor: "Ed was torturing himself wondering if he should pull her down in the grass beside him, kiss that silky black hair, the red mouth. Deep in his well-regulated heart he knew that he was in love. He knew that he had never been so much in love before. He had never desired anyone in the good hearty carnal way he desired Thea, but he was not yet absolutely sure that he wanted to marry her."<sup>59</sup> As he walked Thea to the car, he "congratulated himself on his self-control, his tact. It was better, he thought, to let nature take its course."<sup>60</sup> At the evening's conclusion Ed once again misses the opportunity to propose: "It was on the tip of his tongue then to blurt out, Thea, I love you, I want you, lets get married, but chance would have it that the wretched little Tibby and her friend Mimi bounced out the front steps giggling and eating huge sandwiches."<sup>61</sup> The opportunity fails to arise again and the following day Thea departs for Casset and the inevitable liaison with Taylor. Some weeks later Ed visits Thea in Casset and proposes to her but is rebuffed. His reaction is rash and out of character savagely yelling at her and storming away much to Thea's surprise. Manning infers

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

that had he behaved more assertively earlier in the novel the outcome would have been different.

Manning is acutely aware of the commercialism which was a key feature of American society in the 1950s. Kaledin believes this new consumerism became the sacred prerogative of the middle-classes and had a tranquilising effect for the middle class towards social issues:

The credit card, the fiscal invention of the 1950s, permitted more extensive spending on home embellishment as well as on personal needs. What this greater freedom to spend plastic money meant to the whole economy was not yet clear; it seemed easier for Americans to believe at the time that buying things produced jobs. Consumerism was no longer the prerogative of the rich, nor was indifference to the powerless and the destitute. Urban poverty could be ignored in suburban prosperity.<sup>62</sup>

Most of the characters in the novel are highly avaricious, valuing possessions and property as emblematic of their standing in society. This commercialism is a theme that runs through the novel. In her descriptions of the Mallon family home, their dining room is described thus:

a large oval room massively and magnificently furnished. Shining silver candelabra decorated the table which was laid for the evening meal in the manner of *Home Gracious*. The expensive wallpaper represented cure hunting scenes in bygone Bavaria: tropical plants, tenderly nurtured by Janet, filled up the bow windows; and an agreeable odour of rich foods floated in from the kitchen regions every time the swing door opened.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Eugina Kaledin, *Mothers and more*, 12.

<sup>63</sup> Mary Manning, *Lovely People*, 12.

And the guest room is described thus:

There was a huge colonial bed with a canopy. Everything in the room was massive, shining, new, monogrammed, and personalised to the hilt. The bathroom was all green, spotless, warm, and luxurious. The writing table was fully equipped with personalised writing materials. There was a large vase of personalised spring flowers on the dressing table and the bedside tables were stacked with best sellers, Reader's Digest, Vogues, and Harper's Bazaars. Through the two large windows one saw the misty brown outlines of Gorham Woods and the river winding through meadows fringed with weeping willows.<sup>64</sup>

In the world of *Lovely People*, families are defined by their background, the husband's profession, what clubs he belongs to and where the family holidays. It is in the middle section of the novel that the main action moves to the Casset resort. Here the family await news of Abel's condition in nearby Pike's Point while away the long summer days, "on the beach sun bathing, swimming, or just lying in a tupor [sic] listening to the waves."<sup>65</sup> At the same time left alone with Maria back in Gorham, George's infatuation develops into something more serious which will shatter the family.

The family rent a cottage in Pinelands which we discover has the special feature of a private nudist beach where bathing suits are "considered very middle class and stuffy."<sup>66</sup> Manning populates the resort with her characteristic band of eccentric academics and artists. Whilst Thea undertakes her role at the theatre and commences

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<sup>64</sup> Mary Manning, *Lovely People*, 27.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

her fling with Taylor, Janet, the Countess, and Tilly spend lazy days together, eventually being drawn into attending social gatherings at the nudist beach. These episodes offer Manning plentiful opportunities for humour and inuendo. Meeting their highly eccentric neighbour Professor Jubb at the beach Janet notices: "Everything about his physical makeup was disappointingly flaccid."<sup>67</sup> Activities and sports and recreation are commonplace on the beach much to Janet's horror: "There was, Janet thought, something frightening about a naked man, six foot three in height, standing on his head in broad daylight."<sup>68</sup> The sense of propriety and guilt so long instilled in Janet through her marriage with George endures: "Looking nervously towards the dunes, Janet imagined she could see the black figures of the Calvinists outlined against the sky, watching them, planning to pounce and carry everyone off to the county jail."<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless the sense of liberty and abandonment proves too great and eventually the family join the nudists.

It is at one of these gathering that George decides to pay the family an unexpected visit with his friend from the country club, Hal Gardinier. When they realise his approach, Janet immediately shirks in embarrassment, however the Countess reacts to the contrary, openly celebrating her nakedness. George's reaction

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

of shock and fear to Anna's sexually liberated display is typical of male stereotyping of women in the 1950s – he is intimidated by her display of sexual freedom:

Boldly, splendidly, goddess like, she walked towards her brother-in-law, followed by the shrinking Janet. George's face, as she approached, was a study in mixed emotions. Astonishment, horror, disgust, and fear struggled for mastery. Hal stood behind him rooted to the spot. He and George were wearing Hawaiian shirts and white shorts. They looked what indeed they were – upstanding members of any severely restricted country club.<sup>70</sup>

There existed a profound contradiction in American society in the 1950s. Although ostensibly encouraged to depart the workplace and adopt the role of conservative middle-class homemakers, women were highly sexualised both in fiction and popular culture. The first edition of the Men's magazine *Playboy* was published in 1953. The post World War II veterans had highly fetishised women, as Anatole Broyard commented: "She was more naked than any woman before had ever been. The men of my generation had thought obsessively about her body, had been elaborately prepared for it, led up to it by the great curve of civilization. Her body was on the tip of our minds. We'd carried it like a gun throughout the war."<sup>71</sup> George's extreme reaction to the beach scene is typical of this dichotomy: "He was humiliated, astounded, revolted by such a scene. To think he had brought his friend Hal Gardinier, a man who couldn't keep his mouth shut, to witness such a gathering. Janet, his wife, dancing around naked with a lot of disgusting bohemians. Why they should be

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>71</sup> Anatole Broyard, *Kafka was the rage: a Greenwich village memoir* (New York: Carol Southern Books 1993), 85.



prosecuted, and if convicted, fined, possibly imprisoned.”<sup>72</sup> Hiding behind this guise of middle-class propriety, George’s hypocrisy is heightened when one considers he is in the midst of an affair with the youthful Maria.

It is at a family dinner early in the novel that the first mention of communism appears which becomes a major extended metaphor throughout the novel. George, while praising Ed, has a swipe at the liberalism of some of Thea’s other friends: “He’s certainly better than those Harvard pinks, those intellectuals you brought home the other day. Good God, what specimens!”<sup>73</sup> Harvard in the 1950s was perceived by some to harbour communist sympathisers. Although Manning was clever enough not to overtly critique the Government’s anti-left stance – one can detect her disapproval throughout the novel. George’s overt anti-communism is rapidly established in the dinner episode after the arrival of the Countess: “At dinner, the mention of Socialism sets George off: George held forth on the evils of socialism all through dinner, aided and abetted by the Countess.”<sup>74</sup> Manning directly addresses the House Un-American Activities Committee. At the dinner there is a discussion about a Stephen Rank who abandoned Communism for Catholicism: “His evidence resulted in most of his friends committing suicide or going to jail. I believe his wife got ten years.”<sup>75</sup> This is a veiled reference to Manning’s friend, the American writer and scholar F.O. Matthiessen, who

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<sup>72</sup> Mary Manning, *Lovely People*, 171.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>74</sup> Mary Manning, *Lovely People*, 36.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

was due to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee and committed suicide by jumping from a hotel window in Boston in April 1950. The nastiest characters Manning creates in the novel are the 'tweedies', a group of ladies gathered around Averil Gardiner who owns the tweed shop on Gorham high street. Presented as cruel, spiteful and malevolent, these characters share an anti-liberal and anti-communist sentiment. Manning consistently employs metaphors from Macbeth and refers to them as the "witches" and describes Averil as "a veritable Hecate."<sup>76</sup>

The tweed shop, "becomes a blasted heath where the local witches meet for tea and gossip."<sup>77</sup> They are brutally lampooned with no redeeming qualities presented to the reader. They are also portrayed as racist and antisemitic. The common feature shared between the least sympathetic characters in the novel is anti-communism and a fear and suspicion of liberalism. In a slight aimed at the Countess, Averil denounces a former employee from Austria: "the very word Vienna makes me spit. I'm convinced she was a Red. She looked very Jewish you know. After all, you can be a Red baroness."<sup>78</sup> To which her friend Miss Dawnay replies: "Too much God-darned Socialism in Europe, don't you think?"<sup>79</sup> Manning leaves us in no doubt about their sensibilities after Janet and the Countess leave the tea party. Averil speculates on the

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<sup>76</sup> Mary Manning, *Lovely People*, 70.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-73.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

sibling's ethnicity asserting, "I wonder if there isn't a touch of the tarbrush" about the sisters.<sup>80</sup> Miss Dawney replies, "Janet's daughter Thea might easily be coloured."<sup>81</sup> Another of the Tweedies, Miss Canter admits: "I can't help it. I do have some race prejudice."<sup>82</sup> Describing Ed, Miss Dawney considers him "very liberal, pinkish almost."<sup>83</sup> In a later episode, when George is hosting a cocktail party, we learn that to be liberal is frowned upon in the Mallon family. When Janet expresses her concern that Ed might be very liberal, even left wing: "She lowered her voice discreetly. It was almost like accusing someone of a tendency to rape."<sup>84</sup> The "Tweedies" arrive almost in a uniform devoted to commercialism, "flowered silk dresses, flowered hats, diamond pins, diamond rings, diamond wrist watches, and strings of pearls."<sup>85</sup> Manning continues the Macbeth references, describing how they "loomed out of the smoke and flame to surround the Countess."<sup>86</sup> At the cocktail party they are once again exposed as racist:

"Ed Godwin, how nice to see you!" Miss Canter blew gin in his face. "Isn't this a mob? Have you met the black countess?" She laughed.

"No cousin Lucy. Who do you mean?" He frowned.

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 75

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

“Costello.” She came closer. “We think there’s a touch of the tarbrush. That black hair. Even little Thea has it. They say the mother was a Portuguese girl but – “She laughed again. The other ladies giggled and disappeared into the smoke. Ed shook his head disgustedly.<sup>87</sup>

In her presentation of these profoundly unattractive characters Manning clearly links racism and small-mindedness with anti-communist sentiment.

Manning’s other female characters are also portrayed as flawed. Janet is consistently portrayed as weak and easily dominated, living in fear of her husband, but on discovering his affair she spends the remainder of the novel assessing her matriarchal role within the family and seeking a more wholesome definition, cynical of the American dream. Through this character, Manning attempts an excavation of the middle age, middle class female American psyche. Through the circumstances of the novel Janet becomes disillusioned with the societal gender role imposed upon her. As the novel progresses Janet undergoes a steady transformation, moving to a modest duplex and considering her future: “[she] would take a smaller apartment, probably near Thea’s family, and she would have occasional moments of feeling useful or that she might be an active participant of life.”<sup>88</sup> She questions her societal placement and consequently rejects her wealthy and titled suitor Gerald’s offer of marriage and a return to an acceptable familial norm and middle-class utopia, resolving instead to continue alone. Through this action Janet comes full circle in the narrative and snubs

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

the suburban American dream, preferring the role of outsider. With Janet abandoning the security of a conventional relationship and expressing her singularity and independence, Manning is following a literary trope common in American writing at that time, as Kaledin explains: “James Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son*, William Styron’s *Lie Down in Darkness*, Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man*, Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*, Saul Bellow’s *Seize the Day*, Vladimir Nabakov’s *Lolita*, Norman Mailer’s *Advertisement for Myself*, and J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* were all books of the 1950s-strong assertion of individuality in an organization world.”<sup>89</sup>

The Countess is portrayed as canny and self-centred, consistently seeking opportunities to elevate her status. The manipulation of her daughter to initiate an affair with George is motivated by selfishness. When Maria protests about his age and the fact that he has a family and reputation in the community, the Countess frames her rationale to Maria in terms of Catholic salvation: “Think of what you can do for George. Saint Rita helps with the conversion of hardened sinners, of those who have led disputed lives, of infidels.”<sup>90</sup> In the final irony of the novel Maria removes her from the house. Maria although initially portrayed as unobtrusive and domestic is aware of her sexuality and is prepared to use it to manipulate George: “You see Mr Mallon’ – she leaned forward and gave him the full blast of those beautiful eyes – ‘you are very masterful. Maybe it makes them nervous. They’re afraid to tell you things!”<sup>91</sup> Even the

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<sup>89</sup> Kaledin, *Mothers and more*, 13.

<sup>90</sup> Mary Manning, *Lovely People*, 178.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

youngest sister Tibby is flawed, monetising Janet when she discovers the dying Abel's wealth and declaring at the end of the novel she would prefer money over love. Perhaps through this character Manning was expressing her fear for the younger generation, mesmerised by commercialism where a desire for affluence supersedes more traditional pleasures.

The female character to emerge with the greatest integrity is Thea who appears to be the only member of the family who is not interested in Abel's money. When she visits him at Pike's Point it is not to flatter him for an inheritance but to seek an endorsement for the theatrical venture in Casset. After she is cruelly rejected by Taylor Thea decides to visit Abel again. It is this visit that prompts Abel to make an alteration to his will – he knew about the ending of the affair with Taylor and advises her to have children and bring them up with “understanding, perception, compassion.”<sup>92</sup> He heeds his own advice and requests Miggs to summon the lawyer upon their return to Cambridge.

In the final section of the novel the Countess's husband Nicky arrives from Ireland, we learn he is virtually destitute and equally as opportunistic as his wife: “And where, oh where did he raise the money for the journey? There was no one in the length and breadth of Ireland who would lend him money, there was nothing he could steal, and there were no available funds he could embezzle. He couldn't even

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<sup>92</sup> Mary Manning, *Lovely People*, 117

pass a bad cheque – he was too well known for that.”<sup>93</sup> The Countess and her husband move into George’s house as chaperone awaiting the annulment of his marriage to Janet and to ensure the wedding to Maria will proceed according to plan. Whilst there the Count makes regular visits in an attempt to ingratiate himself upon Abel until he refuses him entry. Middle-class society in *Lovely People* is brutal and unforgiving if you break conformity. George’s punishment for the affair and divorce is to be transformed into a social pariah: “His friends, if they had not exactly cut him, certainly avoided him, and there had been a definite hint that he should resign from one or two clubs. Lately he had avoided the country club.”<sup>94</sup> Reeling from her affair with Taylor, an emotionally volatile Thea rekindles her courtship with Ed and then breaks it on the eve of their wedding. Several weeks later he is hospitalised due to a car accident, she realises his value and the couple are reunited.

We learn of Abel’s death through a telephone conversation Tibby has with her friend Dotty and instead of expressing grief she speculates on his fortune and wonders what her share will be. The action then moves to the reading of the will. Early in the novel Manning alluded to the fact that Abel cared more about animals than he did about people. This indeed proves to be the case as he bequeaths two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, the bulk of his fortune, for the establishment of a training home for dogs for suitable owners. Abel leaves ten thousand dollars for his chauffeur and

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 184-185.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

gardener Francis James Reilly and ten thousand for his housekeeper Annie McManus. His house in Casset is inherited by Janet in trust for her life to be passed onto Thea. In a final twist Abel leaves his house and the remaining assets to Miss Miggs, whom it emerges he adopted forty-five years earlier. As expected, the Countess and Roger are outraged and resolve to contest the will. In the final irony of the novel the Countess' idyll is shattered when Maria demands she leave George's house and along with their brother share their intention to return penniless to Ireland.

*Lovely People* marks the development of Manning's literary prowess by the creation of a capable, succinct and highly entertaining novel which also serves as a shrewd examination of America in the 1950s. Within its pages lie a highly adept social commentary masked within the framework of humour and high satire. She casts an insightful eye on post war society, with its rampant consumerism, and makes a pertinent statement as to the place women occupied within that society, casting a despairing look at the direction the country was moving with its anti-communist hysteria. The merits of the novel were also recognised by the critics as it received an excellent response. Douglas Wood Gibson in the *New York Times* praised the dialogue as "witty, even satirical", admiring Manning's characters, "both good and bad are triumphantly lovely."<sup>95</sup> Promising the novel would "Lift Boston's literary brows", Katherine Denlap in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* proclaimed it, "a story which combines a

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<sup>95</sup> Douglas Wood Gibson, 'Holiday Pastiche', *New York Times*, December 27<sup>th</sup> 1953, 8.



touch of George Bernard Shaw satire with the unpredictable nonsense of a Mad Hatter.”<sup>96</sup> The critic from *The News Chronicle* also recognised the perceptive quality of the piece: “From the tweed and smog of Cambridge to the waving dune glass and summer life of Cape Cod, Mary Manning’s novel flies with the grace of a sea gull and settles to look around with the sharp eye of a parakeet.”<sup>97</sup> Manning demonstrates deft skill combining an intriguing narrative with witty characterisation and her customary blazing humour. *Lovely People* marks a significant contribution to her literary oeuvre.

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<sup>96</sup> Katherine Dunlap, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1953, 109.

<sup>97</sup> D.L., *News Chronicle*, Pennsylvania, November 20<sup>th</sup> 1953, 18.

## Swansong in Dublin: O'Connor at the Abbey, flirting with commercialism and a return to the avant-garde

It's a queer world, God knows, but the best we have to be going on with.

Brendan Behan, *Borstal Boy*

Following the death of her husband on 28 February 1967, Manning shocked her family and friends in Cambridge by deciding to leave Boston, which had been her home for over thirty years, and move back to Dublin. During the decade she spent in her native city she became re-involved in Irish theatre and literary criticism, contributing to both *The Hibernia* and *Irish Times*, but she also produced one theatrical adaptation of a novel by Frank O'Connor and two original pieces for the theatre. In this chapter I will examine this output, with a particular focus on the adaptation, examining the impact of these pieces and considering the merits and flaws of this work and the creative development of Manning in this period.

At first glance the decision by the Abbey Theatre to produce Mary Manning's 1968 adaptation of Frank O'Connor's novel *The Saint and Mary Kate* seems like an odd one. The novel had been out of print in Ireland for many years, and copies of the published text were so rare in Dublin at that time that the actor playing the leading role, Frank Grimes, had to travel to the National Library after rehearsals to read the

piece.<sup>1</sup> Additionally the choice of Manning as adapter seems a curious one, as she was best known in Ireland at that time for her adaptation of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and for her successes in *The Gate* in the 1930s. In this essay I will examine this production and consider the reasoning as to its choice by the Abbey, the processes and influences evident in the text and a key aesthetic flaw in Manning's adaptation that, coupled with sheer bad luck in the timing of its programming, led to the failure of the work in production.

There were three key factors at play in the initial choice of the novel as an Abbey Theatre production. Firstly, O'Connor had a history with the theatre having sat on its board for three years at the invitation of W.B. Yeats and Lennox Robinson. Secondly O'Connor's death three years earlier, coupled with the departure from the theatre of Ernest Blythe as Managing Director, would have removed a potential impediment for O'Connor's work being seen on the National Theatre's main stage. And, most importantly, the tremendous success the Abbey enjoyed the previous year with Frank McMahon's adaptation of Brendan Behan's *Borstal Boy* meant that they were on the lookout for more dramatic adaptations of earlier Irish fictional classics.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Grimes b. 1947 is an Irish actor and writer. He was a member of the Abbey players for seven years where he was nominated for a Tony Award for his role as Young Behan in *Borstal Boy*. In Britain he worked at the Royal Court, Young Vic and National Theatre and collaborated many times with director Lindsey Anderson. Film appearances include *A Bridge Too Far* directed by Richard Attenborough. I conducted an interview with Frank Grimes, on July 30<sup>th</sup> 2020 which I will refer to in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Frank McMahon (1919-1984) was an American-Irish playwright and broadcasting executive. He won a Tony award in 1971 for his adaptation of Brendan Behan's *Borstal Boy*.

*The Saint and Mary Kate* was Frank O'Connor's first novel, published in 1932, the year after he enjoyed notable critical and popular success with his collection of short stories, *Guests of the Nation*. Set mainly in 'The Doll's House', a largely female populated tenement building in the author's native Cork, the novel concerns the relationship between the titular Saint, Phil Dinan, and his closest friend Mary Kate McCormack, the love child of a prostitute. The central narrative thread involves the awakening sexuality of these two characters, their differing responses to these feelings and the emotional confusion and miscommunication that pervades the relationship. The protagonists grow close when Mary Kate helps Phil care for his ailing mother, whose death produces a cathartic religious zeal in the young man. Expressive and inquisitive Mary Kate is more open to a relationship, whereas Phil's feelings are hampered by his religious devotions, or as Mary Kate terms it 'The fidgets'. Nevertheless, she helps him cope with his loss by accompanying him to regular morning mass. Frustrated by the lack of emotional response from Phil and the claustrophobia of living with her mother, aunt and siblings, Mary Kate takes up an offer to live with her father in Dublin and work as a housekeeper. Her letters to Phil are replete with tales of decadence, cigarette smoking and visiting boys, but it is only when Phil discovers that Mr McCormack is not, in fact, Mary Kate's biological father that he goes to Dublin to rescue her. In a violent scene Phil confronts Nick McCormack, exposes his secret and reluctantly the distraught Mary Kate agrees to accompany him back to Cork. On the return journey they spend a night together in a barn where intimacy is a fraction away, encounter a dead body, meet several colourful

characters including a woman who we later learn had killed her newborn, and an itinerant former irregular IRA volunteer reliant on a cheque from a Republican sympathiser in America. The latter accompanies the pair on the remainder of the journey, and, discovering his financial support has ceased, drowns himself in despair. The novel is left open ended as Phil disappears, but it is believed that he has left Cork and is walking the roads of Ireland leading a saintly life.

*The Saint and Mary Kate* is a finely drawn portrait of sexual confusion and emotional austerity, the central characters locked in a quiet purgatory of emotional angst and torment, a result of their inability to accurately acknowledge or communicate their true feelings. O'Connor develops the relationship with great delicacy and simplicity: the emotional hesitancy and immaturity both characters feel is matched by their maturing sexuality which O'Connor encapsulates perfectly in an inferred masturbation scene. As their physical attraction deepens, Phil admits to Mary Kate that he could never marry a woman that was unlike his mother. Later that evening when they are in their respective beds, O'Connor describes Phil recalling the conversation: "He shivered with longing, and twice that night he had to get up and kneel in prayer to bring his vagrom imaginations under control."<sup>3</sup> Whereas with Mary Kate, the acceptance of sexual desire could not be more different: "So she returned to bed, and surrendered herself to imaginary arms and lips with disappointing celerity

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<sup>3</sup> Frank O'Connor, *The Saint and Mary Kate* (Edinburgh: Macmillan and Co Ltd, 1932), 130.

launched her into oblivion.”<sup>4</sup> The contrast between genders is further evaluated through the author’s portrayal of the other very colourful characters that populate the novel. The women have limited self-regard and expectations: the solicitous Babe who ‘walks with sailors’<sup>5</sup>, the fantasist mimic Aunt Dinah, Mrs Vaughan and Mrs Versegoyle who are knowingly in relationships with unfaithful men, the religious zealot Dona Nobis with a fondness for romantic novels and Mrs Diann, the char woman who worked herself to death. The men in the novel – ineffective, drunken, unreliable, unfaithful or incompetent – present a poor foil to their feminine counterparts.

When it was published in 1932, *The Saint and Mary Kate* was met with a mixed response – *The Irish Times* regarded it as too vague in structure and conclusion and an unworthy follow up to *Guests of the Nation*: “...the book is a fine and polished picture of two exceptional characters – but one would hesitate in calling it a novel.”<sup>6</sup> *The New York Times* however was more positive in its response: “The story of their adolescent love might easily have stepped over into Freudian fringes, but it is instead a straightforward, realistic narrative told in a lively style, spiced with wit, that makes the book hard to relinquish to someone else in the family reading it at the same time.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>5</sup> Frank O’Connor, *The Saint and Mary Kate*, 86.

<sup>6</sup> *Irish Times* review, Apr 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1932.

<sup>7</sup> *New York Times* review, September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1932.

The dramatic potential of the characters and narrative was not lost on W.B. Yeats who, while O'Connor was writing the novel, suggested he should submit it as a play. In his memoir *My Father's Son*, O'Connor recalled:

Once when I was talking with Yeats about *The Saint and Mary Kate*, which I was writing at the time, he said wistfully, 'I wish you would write that as a play for me...My dear boy, that is a play, not a novel. Now the first date available is November 10th, which means that we have to start rehearsals no later than October 15th, so if you can let me have a script within the next month, I can guarantee you a production.'<sup>8</sup>

O'Connor was invited by Yeats to join the board of the Abbey in 1936 and served as managing director for a period from August 1937. In *My Father's Son*, he wryly notes the factionalism and toxicity that existed on the board at that time. O'Connor principally pressed for new, home-grown Irish work, while others on the board were anxious to mimic the audacity and success of the Edwards and Mac Liammóir adventure with European Classics at The Gate. Although there is no record of a planned Abbey adaptation of *The Saint and Mary Kate* in their board minutes book, there would appear to have been some interest in a potential production, even at this early stage, and Manning's name was connected with the project. Soon after O'Connor's appointment to the board the *Irish Times* reported: "There is a possibility that a play by Miss Manning will be produced at the Abbey Theatre in the coming

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<sup>8</sup> Frank O'Connor, *My Father's Son* (London: Macmillan and Co Ltd, 1968), 142.

season. This is a dramatization of Mr Frank O'Connor's novel "The Saint and Mary Kate."<sup>9</sup>

O'Connor wrote two plays for the Abbey in collaboration with director Hugh Hunt, *The Invincibles* and *Moses Rock*. Similar to Denis Johnson's *The Old Lady Says No!* and Lennox Robinson's *The Lost Leader*, both plays drew their inspiration from historical figures and events in eighteenth-century Ireland. *The Invincibles*, based on the events surrounding the assassinations of the Chief Secretary Lord Cavendish and the Permanent Under Secretary Mr. Thomas Burke in Phoenix Park in 1882, was mildly controversial and led to a rift with Lennox Robinson and the Abbey board that eventually saw O'Connor's resignation shortly after Yeats' death in 1939.<sup>10</sup> Robinson, despite voting in favor of O'Connor's play and offering him dramaturgical advice, later dramatically reversed his stance. O'Connor indignantly recalled in his memoir: "Robinson went to a debate at the rival theatre across the road and denounced Hunt and me bitterly for having dramatized a subject that was bound to cause pain to the relatives of the men that had been hanged by the British fifty years earlier."<sup>11</sup> His departure left the path open for Ernest Blythe to take over as Managing director of

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<sup>9</sup> Quidnunc, *An Irishman's Diary*, *The Irish Times*, July 11<sup>th</sup>, 1936.

<sup>10</sup> O'Connor describes in *My Father's Son* how various left-wing groups threatened to disrupt performances and the opening night was attended by Maud Gonne in anticipation of disturbances that did not materialise.

<sup>11</sup> Frank O'Connor, *My Father's Son*, 166.



the Abbey Theatre, a position he held until August 1967. Explaining his regret at leaving the theatre, O'Connor later wrote:

I knew then, as I know now, that this kind of in-fighting and intrigue was something I could not carry on alone. Their terms were those of the Nationalist-Catholic establishment – Christmas pantomimes in Gaelic guying the ancient sagas that Yeats had restored and enlivened with Blythe's Gaelic versions of popular songs and vulgar farces. One by one they lost their great actors and replaced them with Irish speakers; one by one, as members of the board died or resigned, they replaced these with civil servants and lesser party officials.<sup>12</sup>

O'Connor completely severed his links with the Abbey, shunned several of his former colleagues, and never wrote for the theatre again.

The two years prior to the staging of *The Saint and Mary Kate* in 1968 saw a period of great transition for the Abbey Theatre. The company had moved from The Queen's Theatre to its new premises on Lower Abbey Street in July 1966, the following year saw both the departure of Blythe and the most artistic and commercially successful production the Abbey had enjoyed since *The Plough and the Stars* over forty years earlier, with Frank McMahon's adaptation of Brendan Behan's *Borstal Boy*.<sup>13</sup> Directed by Tomás Mac Anna, with a large cast and staged with his hallmark invention and Brechtian techniques, the production was the sensation of that year's Dublin Theatre Festival. *The Irish Times* wrote enthusiastically of the production: "The

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 187.

<sup>13</sup> *Borstal Boy*, first produced October 10<sup>th</sup> 1967, is a play adapted by Frank McMahon from the 1958 autobiographical novel of Irish nationalist Brendan Behan of the same title. The play debuted in 1967; McMahon won a New York Drama Critics' Circle Award in 1970 and Tony Award in 1970 for his adaptation.

dramatization has all the pulsating life of the original, as, indeed, Niall Toibin's uncanny characterization had every look, gesture and inflexion of the original author down to the last hesitancy of speech."<sup>14</sup> Desmond Rush of the *Irish Independent* proclaimed the production "Three hours of brilliant theatre."<sup>15</sup> Theatre managements have an understandable tendency towards repetition of a successful formula, so the artistic team at the Abbey became naturally interested in exploring further stage adaptations of novels for theatrical production.

Playwright Patrick Marber described adapting novels for the stage as "a form of plunder, you ransack the old play and turn it into the new one...you have to make radical cuts and do terrible bits of surgery."<sup>16</sup> What is apparent from the outset of this particular adaptation is that Mary Manning was very liberal in her revisions of Frank O'Connor's text. Dramatic episodes were shuffled, dialogue shifted between characters and the narrative compressed within a specific timeline. Employing her favoured three-act structure, Manning's adaptation opens halfway through the novel just prior to Mary Kate's departure to Dublin. The lengthy Act One establishes The Doll's House tenement and the relationship between the central characters and introduces the audience to the colourful minor characters of Babe, Dona Nobis and

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<sup>14</sup> *Irish Times* review, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1967.

<sup>15</sup> *Irish Independent* review, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1967.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Albert Crispin Marber b. 1964 is an English comedian, playwright, director, actor, and screenwriter. He won the Olivier Award in 1997 for his play *Closer*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzRef3MpkeQ>. Adapting novels for the stage. National Theatre. Sept 1<sup>st</sup> 2015.

Grog McMahon. Act Two sees Mary Kate's journey to Dublin, soon followed by Phil and the violent confrontation with her father, and Act Three is the return to Cork. One can detect the classical influence of Shakespeare along with more contemporary echoes of Tennessee Williams<sup>17</sup> and Brian Friel. Similar to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the inciting incident of the play is the death of a parent prior to the opening of the action, there are also significant structural influences with a Choral narrator and soliloquy in Manning's adaptation. Friel's two early plays *Philadelphia, Here I come!* (1964), and *The Loves of Cass Maguire* (1966), who Manning greatly admired, also make significant use of narration and soliloquy, which will be discussed later.<sup>18</sup>

The play begins with an expeditionary device similar to Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* with a dimly lit narrator downstage from the main setting establishing a convention of the memory play. Whereas Tom Williams merges into the main action of Williams' play to emerge again as narrator at the end, the function of Manning's narrator, named The Ould Fella, is to bookend each act, fill in narrative gaps, comment on character detail, with some attempts at a colloquialized humor with

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Lanier Williams III (1911-1983), known by his pen name Tennessee Williams, was an American playwright. Along with contemporaries Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller, he is considered among the three foremost playwrights of 20th-century American drama.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Manning, 'I remember it Well - Some Bits of Autobiography', *The Journal of Irish Literature*, Vol. XV, No.1, ed. Robert Hogan, Gordon Henderson & Kathleen Danaher, p. 34. Manning expressed her admiration for playwright Brian Friel. *Philadelphia Here I Come*, premiered at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin on September 28, 1964, directed by Hilton Edwards, transferred to Broadway in 1966, where it ran for 326 performances, and received several Tony Award nominations, including for Best Play and Best Director. *The Loves of Cass Maguire*, premiered at The Helen Hayes Theatre on Broadway, on October 6 1966, directed by Hilton Edwards, it closed after 21 performances following mixed reviews.

lines attempting to engage members of the audience. With this attempt at characterizing The Auld Fella, Manning ventured too far in inventing unnecessary detail and meandering cliché, it is also much too long. An explanation of this device is offered in the introduction to the published text:

A great deal of O'Connor's narration is taken over in the play by a character called The Ould Fella who serves as both a collective consciousness for the entire drama and a link between chapters and events. This Our Town narrative device, while hardly novel or exciting or even very realistic, does allow for considerable condensation of O'Connor's bulk of material and tightens the structure.<sup>19</sup>

Like Chekhov and Synge, playwrights writing for companies compose with specific actors in mind, and with the famed raconteur and storyteller Eamon Kelly opening the play as The Ould Fella, Dublin audiences would have instantly felt a sense of familiarity and ease. However, I would argue that this device is one of the biggest flaws in the adaptation. Whereas the Chorus in Shakespeare is either deployed singly, as in the case of Romeo and Juliet appearing only once to establish context, or incidentally as in Henry V to rapidly move the action forward, the narrator in this adaptation is moved more to the centre of the piece. In total, Manning's narrator has eight long speeches; the first is over two pages in length (most of which is personal reminiscence) and the only piece of relevant detail offered is his description of Babe McCormack as "...a sort of a half whore."<sup>20</sup> The character engaging with the audience

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<sup>19</sup> Mary Manning, *Frank O'Connor's The Saint and Mary Kate, A Tragi-Comedy Adapted for the stage by Mary Manning*, (Delaware, Proscenium Press, 1970), 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

is also very pedestrian. Act Two, for example, opens with The Ould Fella offering quips to the audience such as “Soft day, thanks be to God! Good morning Sargent. Tis younger you’re getting. How do you manage it man? Yes, the sun does be good for the bones. Good morrow to you ma’am. Sit down. Sit down.”<sup>21</sup> Manning would have been better served keeping the narration brief and relevant and employing the character sparingly, a fact not lost on later Abbey Theatre playwrights who – also influenced by Tennessee Williams - employed the device to greater success, most notably Frank McGuinness in *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, and Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa*.<sup>22</sup>

During the initial narration in both *The Glass Menagerie* and *The Saint and Mary Kate*, other main characters are frozen in blackout; lights pick them out during the narrations and then come to life at the conclusion of the monologue. Manning also borrows the Brechtian<sup>23</sup> concept of Gestus<sup>24</sup> where each actor’s initial actions to perform a physical activity signify an element of their character: “Mary Kate turns smiling towards Phil, who looks at her. Babe starts taking out the curlers when

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

<sup>22</sup> McGuinness has his narrator, Old Pyper, opening and closing the play. Friel’s narrator, Michael, opens the play but closes the piece in two connected narrations at the end of Act Two. Both playwrights acknowledge the influence of Tennessee Williams in their work.

<sup>23</sup> Eugen Berthold Friedrich Brecht (1898-1956), known professionally as Bertolt Brecht, was a German theatre practitioner, playwright and poet. Immersed in Marxist thought during this period, he wrote didactic Lehrstücke and became a leading theoretician of epic theatre (which he later preferred to call “dialectical theatre”) and the verfremdungseffekt, or V-effect.

<sup>24</sup> Gestus, is a Brechtian acting technique where a clear character gesture or movement used by the actor captures a moment or attitude rather than delving into emotion.

Shandon chimes the Angelus. Six o'clock. Phil turns from Mary Kate and crosses himself."<sup>25</sup> Reminiscent of Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Manning attempts to establish the rough vibrancy of the tenement by the use of off-stage singing and sound effects. In the opening minutes, and at various points during the play, we have the off-stage singing of children and locals and Church bells to signify time or a call to prayer. When the action shifts to Mary Kate's supposed father's house in Dublin, American gramophone music is employed as a motif for freedom and decadence.<sup>26</sup> This similar cacophony of noise and music Williams defined as his 'Blue Piano' in *A Streetcar Named Desire* which "...expresses the spirit of life that goes on here [New Orleans]".<sup>27</sup> There are echoes of Williams' *Mexican Woman* with the "Coronas para los muertos" and the old Woman harbinger of death in Act Three.<sup>28</sup> Another similarity to Williams' plays is in the design specified by Manning in the text: "This play should be staged with the most artful simplicity. Imaginative lighting and sound effects are all that it needs. Different levels and some sort of central structure that might suggest stairs are, however, necessary for the action."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Mary Manning, *Frank O'Connor's The Saint and Mary Kate*, 14.

<sup>26</sup> Mary Manning, 'Frank O'Connor's The Saint and Mary Kate', 40. An interesting fact from my interview with Frank Grimes is that no score for the play was composed or sourced – only the off-stage music and singing.

<sup>27</sup> Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (New York, Penguin Books, 1959), 115.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 206.

<sup>29</sup> Frank O'Connor, *The Saint and Mary Kate*, 11.

Williams described his stage setting for *A Streetcar Named Desire* as follows: “The building contains two flats, upstairs and down. Faded white stairs ascend to the entrances of both. It is the first dark of an evening early in May.”<sup>30</sup> And the stairs of the fire escape are featured in the initial stage directions of *The Glass Menagerie*: “The apartment faces an alley and is entered by a fire escape...The fire escape is included in the set – that is the landing of it and steps descending from it.”<sup>31</sup> The new Abbey Theatre included a modern backstage lift – a feature put to good use in the design of the production. Frank Grimes, who played the leading role of Phil, noted that one of the most remarkable features of the production was the set design:

The extraordinary set – the tenement house in Cork was rendered by a skeleton with an upper floor with big posts that would either [mechanically] go up or down - the lifts would go down and therefore you’d be in a different room. It was quite spectacular showing the new Abbey...it was a new way of showing off the theatre – the mechanics and the lifts.<sup>32</sup>

The action of the play begins with a raucous scene with *Dona Nobis* confronting a coal man she observes being cruel to a horse, much to the delight of the offstage spectators. In O’Connor’s original text this is an early episode which occurs not outside *The Doll’s House* but at Wyse’s Hill – in addition Manning allows the coalman to hurl insults not at *Donna Nobis* as in the original text but at Babe: “cast

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<sup>30</sup> Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 115.

<sup>31</sup> Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, 233.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Frank Grimes, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020.

one lingering glance at that thing of hell in the winder there.”<sup>33</sup> This is an attempt at merging a lively dramatic comic opening with establishing the character of Babe as someone frowned upon by members of the community. Mary Kate has a horrified reaction, and she appeals to Phil to “send him away”.<sup>34</sup> What follows is a touching scene between Phil and Mary Kate where Manning utilises too much exposition. We discover the age, education, employment, aspirations, parental relationships and religious views of the two central protagonists in less than three pages of text. We are also introduced to the sharp contrast between their respective mothers, with Phil’s mother who “killed herself dead, working for me” juxtapositioned with Mary Kate’s “scarlet trollop”.<sup>35</sup>

The action then follows Mary Kate to her upstairs room in the tenement, showing the audience the squalor and frustrations of her home life. Throughout Act One and Act Three the action shifts from various areas of the stage on several levels, indicated mainly by lighting changes. There are eighty-seven separate lighting design instructions offered in the published text. As argued in earlier chapters Manning was strongly influenced by German Expressionist cinema, which was clearly indicated in her work in early Irish Cinema and in the production of her first play, *Youths the Season-?*. The adaptation is sprinkled with episodes either invented or altered by

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<sup>33</sup> Mary Manning, Frank O’Connor’s *The Saint and Mary Kate*, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Frank O’Connor, *The Saint and Mary Kate*, 14.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 18.



Manning to give a particular slant, offer an opinion, or extract a reaction from the audience. In an episode created by Manning, Babe is seen initially lying in bed, with Manning composing the following stage directions for her: “[She rises from the bed. Though still in her night dress she’s wearing high-heeled shoes and silk stockings rolled around her ankles. She totters over to the cracked mirror and peers into it.]”<sup>36</sup> This again is an attempt from Manning to merge a character element with humour and, in view of what we’ve learned from the narrator and coalman exchange, too laboured and unnecessary.

The toxicity of the relationship between mother and daughter is contrasted with Mary Kate’s idealised image of her Father; throughout the scene they swap insults and Babe occasionally physically lashes out – however the hope arrives in the form of a letter from Dublin and the possibility of work, independence and escape: “He says he has a lovely little house, off the South Circular Road with three fine bedrooms, parlour, kitchen and bath. O Ma, a bathroom. O Ma, could you ask for more.”<sup>37</sup> The following scene brings the two most pious characters in the play alone together for the first time, and again Manning has been liberal with O’Connor’s text. Phil arrives at Donna Nobis’ room to bring her a gift of a romantic novel which is a secret guilty habit of hers. The talk of love and relationships inevitably moves to

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<sup>36</sup> Mary Manning, *Frank O’Connor’s The Saint and Mary Kate*, 20.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

religion and Phil's recently deceased mother. In an extraordinary exchange, and again invented by Manning, Phil almost fetishizes her in an episode of religious fervour:

[Intensely; he puts his hand to his head]: Oh God, Miss Daly, when I think of my Mother, when I think of her life and the way she died, I feel like I'm losing my senses. I can see her now Miss Daly, sitting near the window, her hands folded in her lap, tired out after a long day scrubbing floors for a shilling. One shilling! When she was ironing my shirts Miss Daly, she'd sing songs like you. Not hymns, songs. Thomas Moore was her favourite.<sup>38</sup>

This intercession is followed by another long speech where Phil passionately describes the death of his mother which is then followed by two further pages of text mainly about Catholicism, interrupted by the arrival of Mary Kate.

The devotion to faith is undoubtedly a central theme of O'Connor's novel and a major motivating factor in the character of Phil, but Manning, through this exchange and similar more intense episodes in the play has put religious ardour at the very centre of the play and accentuated its importance. Frank Grimes shares a similar opinion of the character of Phil Dinan:

He was suffering from religious mania. His mother had died and he would count the footsteps from his bed to his chapel for mass he was so obsessed with making each moment of his day an act of grace. I found it a very difficult character to comprehend but of course he was passionately – he wouldn't admit that he was in love with Mary Kate, but they were firm friends and when she goes to Dublin he has to strike out and try and save her soul from the wickedness of Dublin.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>39</sup> Interview Frank Grimes.

Manning personally made no secret of her dislike for religion in general and Catholicism in particular. Her daughter, Susan Howe, offered this opinion of her mother's feelings towards the Church: "Not good. She felt the Catholic Church - and censorship - ruined Ireland."<sup>40</sup> It is clear that a central motivating objective in Manning's adaptation was a critique of the Catholic Church, but her determination to accentuate the religiosity of the piece created an imbalance in the play and deviated significantly from O'Connor's original narrative.

Act One continues with Manning introducing us to Phil's employer Grog McMahon – a carpenter who cannot make a stool – and presents a slightly more exaggerated character than the original describing him as having "[His eyes fixed on the whiskey bottle]"<sup>41</sup>, and giving him her customary Dublin gag: "Dublin? What would anyone want to go to Dublin for, a dirty low disreputable little town!"<sup>42</sup> The latter quote is a reference to Mary Kate's recent departure to Dublin to live with her father in the scene where Grog tells Phil that Nick McCormack is not her biological father. Manning gives the scene where Phil and Mary Kate say farewell at the train station and her subsequent letters about boys and brandy to the narrator which, given their dramatic potential, is a curious choice. Indeed, there are many worthy characters, events and comedic lines in the first half of the novel that are ignored in the adaptation

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<sup>40</sup> Interview Susan Howe.

<sup>41</sup> Mary Manning, *Frank O'Connor's The Saint and Mary Kate*, 30.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

that may have worked brilliantly onstage. In particular Mary Kate's experiments dating other boys, including the feckless Doyler and his comical efforts to kiss despite his onion breath, the character of Mrs Verschoye who O'Connor gives a considerable voice and presence but Manning leaves as an unseen presence, and Groggs and his bizarre philosophy on marriage: "Women is a weir, and I'm a salmon."<sup>43</sup>

The action of Act Two is shifted to McCormack's house in Dublin with American music on the gramophone and readily available alcohol and cigarettes. In her presentation of McCormack, Manning makes a very curious character choice. In the novel prior to Phil's arrival, Mary Kate is portrayed as being very happy and growing close to her father:

She liked her father more and more. He came into her room regularly to kiss her good night, sat on the edge of her bed and talked to her, then covered her up and quenched the light. She got into leaving one shoulder uncovered so as to give him something to do.<sup>44</sup>

In Manning's adaptation, when we meet Nick he immediately slips his arm around Mary Kate, offers Phil whiskey and a cigarette, ridicules his religious beliefs and then "[He squeezes Mary Kate's shoulder. Phil watches in silent horror.]"<sup>45</sup> An audience would infer through this intervention that McCormack is less than scrupulous and has an ulterior motive in his guardianship of the young girl. In the confrontation scene

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<sup>43</sup> Frank O'Connor, *The Saint and Mary Kate*, 126.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

<sup>45</sup> Mary Manning, *Frank O'Connor's The Saint and Mary Kate*, 41.

when Phil reveals the secret, McCormack behaves in a more brutish and threatening fashion. This darkening of the father character is once again contrary to the original where Phil is met courteously by McCormack and offered tea – he’s shown as a caring father figure offering the pair money for the train to Cork despite the fact he was violently attacked.

Another narration from *The Ould Fella* covers the time and scene change to the road to Cork the following day and we meet in rapid sporadic succession The Driver who brings them part of the way to Cork; the old woman Nodge Colohan who is the harbinger of death; and the former IRA irregular Peter John Cross who resolves to accompany them on the remainder of their voyage. A noteworthy exclusion from the adaptation is the episode when the dead body of an old man is dragged into the barn where the pair are sleeping. Phil presents a morbid fascination with the body, repeatedly lights matches to examine the corpse and then says the Rosary over the body. This is a very dramatic scene and could have worked very well onstage. Perhaps Manning did not want to present a compassionate side to Phil’s beliefs and distract from her idea of his fanaticism. Manning also chooses to omit that in the novel Phil regularly performs good deeds and freely donates most of his earnings to the poor.

Act Three opens with another superfluous monologue from *The Ould Fella*, as the action would have worked just as well with the act opening immediately following the speech: a dramatic scene with Mary Kate arriving at The Dolls House upon her return to Cork and confronting Babe about her father. We then see Phil “twisted in the

chair. His head in his arms"<sup>46</sup>, and learn he had a visitation from his dead mother. From this point Manning's narrative ceases to follow the novel as she attempts to resolve the story and loop the ending to give the play a more convincing conclusion. In the novel's final four chapters Phil is hallucinating due to a fever and is nursed by Donna Nobis and Mary Kate, recovering the following day. The couple then take a brisk and happy walk together; this is the happiest scene the couple share, appearing mature and more in congress with the feelings they share: it appears to the reader a romantic union is inevitable between them. However, they return to Donna Nobis' apartment to be met by Peter, whom the narrative then follows to an inferred catastrophe. The final chapter is an unnamed letter to Phil, presumably from Donna Nobis, where we learn of Peter's drowning and the disappearance of Phil, assumed to be walking the roads of Ireland saving souls.

Manning handles the ending somewhat differently and in doing so completely alters the narrative trajectory of the entire original piece. Creating an extraordinary one-and-a-half-page soliloquy, Phil experiences what can be best described as a religious breakdown:

Phil [Lights a candle still talking feverishly to himself.] Yes, tis me, thinking too much of the world; that's what it is. All the sinful lusts of the flesh I must renounce them....[He writes in anguish.] Temptations, yes that's what they are! I must not listen. Our Father, who art in Heaven, help me, help me, a miserable sinner. [There is a pause. We can still hear the drum.] What's that? What are you saying? [He jumps up.] No, mother, mother, no. [He whines

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

like little boy.] Oh Ma, leave me alone. I know you're there Ma, but this time I'm not looking.<sup>47</sup>

The scene continues in this vein giving the audience the impression of a psychotically enraptured Phil with vague hints of a potential suicide. The play is concluded by the narrator explaining some of the salient facts of the story to tie things up for the audience.

The use of monologue and soliloquy was a significant feature in Friel's early work, but this narrative feature is reminiscent of the repeated use of soliloquy in *The Loves of Cass Maguire*:

Cass ...(Laughs gently) The night he caught Connie Crowley guzzling the hell outa me below the crooked bridge! 'You bastard' he sez – well, mebbe he didn't use that word – 'Are you comfortable in your sinning?' And poor Connie, Jeeze I could feel the knees going, he sez, 'Please, no, Father. The grass is damp.' Anyways, I saved up and gathered the passage money and left a note for Momma and one for Connie...and off I blew...(looks around the room) and back I come home to my old people – and they have this big solemn meeting – and decide to kick me out!<sup>48</sup>

Although Friel's play was widely seen as a failure when it was first staged on Broadway in 1966, a failure largely attributed to the casting of Ruth Gordon in the lead - it was successfully produced the following year on the Abbey main stage, directed by Thomas MacAnna and with Siobhan McKenna in the title role. The themes of

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 73-4.

<sup>48</sup> Brian Friel, *The Loves of Cass Maguire* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1984), 23-24.

displacement and regret of an Irish émigré returning after decades in New York would have held particular significance for Manning.

The key things that went wrong with Manning's adaptation of *The Saint and Mary Kate* were the length of the piece and the exaggeration of the religious element of the novel as a veiled critique of contemporary Ireland. Grimes recalled that when director Frank Dermody's insisted that the script was too long, his pleas were met with Manning's refusal to make any cuts. This inevitably led to tension between the adaptor and director: "He thought it was too long – long winded - Dermody didn't have much delicacy."<sup>49</sup> The disparity between the two did not go unnoticed by the company, as Grimes recalled: "She gave a very nice party at her home. A very nice party for the cast and crew, strangely enough I can't remember Frank Dermody being there."<sup>50</sup>

Unfortunately, the production was met with a lukewarm response from the critics: Henry Kelly in *The Irish Times*, whilst praising the performances, felt Manning's adaptation was "in parts excellent, in parts both weak and of little consequence. This is not a great night's theatre but it is entertaining to a degree that it makes the faults easier to forget."<sup>51</sup> Grimes summed up the mood of the company as follows: "After

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with Frank Grimes, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Henry Kelly, 'Play Based on O'Connor Novel', *The Irish Times*, March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1968.



*Borstal Boy* everyone was deflated. All the talk was of a Broadway transfer.”<sup>52</sup> It was also unfortunate that the production ran simultaneously with a new play by Tom Murphy at The Peacock, *Famine*. Directed by Tomas Mac Anna and featuring a cast of over thirty, Henry Kelly in *The Irish Times* hailed it as “probably the most powerful and brilliant work the Dublin stage has had for years.”<sup>53</sup> It would seem Manning herself recognized the shortcomings of the production: “If I was pushed I would say she gave me the impression – and this is totally intuitive - that she wasn’t happy with the production, I don’t think it was fulfilled in her estimation, or what she wanted.”<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, Manning would have further opportunities to present new work on the Dublin stage.

Three years after *The Saint and Mary Kate* saw the production of the first original stage work by Manning on the Irish Stage since *Happy Family* in 1934.<sup>55</sup> The brainchild of impresario Brendan Smith, *Ah Well, It Won’t Be Long Now!* premiered at the Olympia Theatre on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1971 as the theatre’s main staple for that year’s Dublin Theatre

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with Frank Grimes, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Review, *The Irish Times*, Mar 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1968.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Frank Grimes, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020.

<sup>55</sup> *Happy Family*, produced by The Gate Theatre, opened 24<sup>th</sup> April 1934 directed by Denis Johnston (credited under his pseudonym of E. W. Tocher) and featuring Micheál Mac Liammóir, Ria Mooney and Betty Chancellor. It is described in its program notes as: “An amusing character comedy which gathers a family of eccentrics together in the same setting so that they can yabber [sic] on about their individual obsessions of communism, adventuring, mysticism, automobiles and etiquette.”

Festival.<sup>56</sup> As is so often the case in the theatre world, projects are frequently dependent on timing, availability of actors, suitable scripts and venues. An unashamed vehicle for Milo O'Shea, the enterprise had half an eye on the American market again flowing in the commercial and critical backwash of *Borstal Boy* which had triumphed at the Tony Awards earlier that month and whetting the appetite of enterprising Irish theatre producers. The previous festivals had seen many American and international producers trawling the venues looking for interesting material. On paper the prospects seemed promising: Milo O'Shea's populist stock undoubtedly on the rise following recent success on film with *Ulysses* and on television with *Me Mammy* was matched with critical theatrical kudos on the back of his Tony Award nomination for *Staircase* in 1968.<sup>57</sup> Manning was a good choice of playwright, with a solid grounding in satire and background at the Abbey and Gate Theatre complimenting her established connections with the American theatre and literary cognoscenti.

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<sup>56</sup> Brendan Smith d. 1989 was an Irish theatre producer and impresario. He ran the Olympia Theatre, the Brendan Smith Academy of Acting, and also founded the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1957. His company Brendan Smith Productions was founded in 1941.

<sup>57</sup> *Ulysses* (1967) was directed by Joseph Strick and although it received mixed reviews the film earned Strick BAFTA, Golden Globe and Oscar nominations for Best Adapted Screenplay. O'Shea played Leopold Bloom in the film and was nominated for a BAFTA for Most Promising Newcomer. The film was banned in Ireland. *Me Mammy* was a British Sitcom, written by Hugh Leonard, that aired on BBC1 from 14th June 1968-11th June 1971 in three seasons. O'Shea played the leading role of Benjamin 'Bunjy' Kennefick. *Staircase* is a two-character play by Charles Dyer first produced by the Royal Shakespeare company in 1966. The play opened at the Biltmore Theatre on 10th January 1968 and ran for seventy-three performances.

Smith was also imaginative in his choice of director, Roland Jaquarello.<sup>58</sup> Former assistant director to Lindsay Anderson at the Royal Court, Jaquarello directed the Irish Premiere of two plays by Joe Orton, *Loot* and *What The Butler Saw*, as well as the successful Irish production of *It's a 2'6" Above The Ground World* by Kevin Laffan, a comedy about birth control, which ran for over a year.<sup>59</sup> Although the text of *Ah Well, It Won't Be Long Now* was not published and is now lost, Jaquarello in an interview described the narrative as follows:

The themes of the play about a professor with a disintegrating Georgian Gothic house that needed extensive repair which he couldn't afford as he was running out of money. But he did have important academic papers as he had very strong literary connections with famous people. Therefore two academics come down and they hopefully are going to bid a lot of money for these papers which will solve his problems but nobody can find the papers because the professor is ninety years old and most of the time its rushing about trying to discover where they are. Intermingled with a lot of subplot and various interesting and rather broad-brushed supporting characters that were quite entertaining. It was an old Anglo-Irish House play of a rather stock nature and then at the end he's sitting on the papers which were in his commode.<sup>60</sup>

He was, however, initially sceptical about the project but the commercial and financial lure was inviting: "At first I was hesitant as the play wasn't very well written and the subject matter deeply conventional. However, after further consideration, I realised I

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<sup>58</sup> Roland Jaquarello b. 1945 is a British theatre director and radio producer/director. He started his career in the Dublin Theatre Festival after graduating from Trinity College, Dublin in 1968. In 1972 he was appointed director of the Abbey Theatre, and was Artistic Director of the Lyric Theatre, Belfast and Live Theatre, Newcastle. In 1996 he was appointed Senior Radio Producer at the BBC in Belfast.

<sup>59</sup> Kevin Laffan (1922–2003) was a British playwright, screenwriter, author, actor and stage director. Laffan is best known for creating the ITV soap opera *Emmerdale Farm*. These productions were staged by Associated Artists at the Eblana Theatre in Dublin between 1968-1971.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Roland Jaquarello, via Zoom, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

needed to have the experience of working in bigger spaces. What's more, the leading part was going to be played by Milo O'Shea, an Irish Star, which would present another new challenge. Consequently I decided to accept the offer, especially as the fee was good and I hadn't much money."<sup>61</sup> It is unfortunate that Jaquarello was not involved in the project earlier and tasked with working with Manning on script development; his background in new writing at the Royal Court, coupled with his experience working with farce could have enabled some interesting dramaturgical interventions: "It all happened quite quickly. I was asked to do the play and then it wasn't so long after that I was in rehearsals. I don't remember working with her in detail on it because I've a feeling there wasn't time. I've got a feeling that this idea came fairly late in the day [for Smith], it was sort of 'ah, she's given me this script, I can see a part for Milo, it could fill the Olympia'...there wasn't time for a re-jig."<sup>62</sup>

It would appear that years of outspoken theatre criticism had earned Manning many enemies in the Dublin theatre world, and she commenced her tenure at *Hibernia* explosively. She was never shy of name-checking actors for critical savagery, reserved special disapproval for the Abbey and occasionally offered social commentary and needled the Catholic Church. In her first review she complained about the "dismal goings on at the Abbey" and taking particular umbrage to actress Deirdre O'Connell's

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<sup>61</sup> Roland Jaquarello, *Memories Of Development, My Times In Irish Theatre And Broadcasting* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2016), 23.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Roland Jaquarello, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

portrayal of Hedda Gabler speculating: "If ever any actress needed a strong masterful hard-hitting director it is Miss O'Connell, someone indeed, who might occasionally slap her."<sup>63</sup> In the same review she praised Kevin Laffan's controversial play about contraception *It's Two Foot Six Inches Above the Ground World* directed by Roland Jaquarello, offering to, "finance bus tours of seminarians from all parts of the country to see it; I'd keep the two seats down front for the Bishop of Galway and have one reserved for all the young ladies contemplating the sisterhood."<sup>64</sup> Reviewing her old friend Hilton Edward's production of *The Seagull*, later that year and his debut at the Abbey, Manning bemoaned the acting company's inability to speak classical text, "After years of suffocating nationalism and bring-on-required-Irish the company is unable to perform except in peasant dialect or as is now, city-peasant dialogue."<sup>65</sup> While praising Michael MacLiammóir's costumes she complained about the technical ability of the actors that wore them: "Unfortunately the Abbey actresses have not been trained to swish around in them." Once again she was particularly cutting to the acting company describing Angela Newman as "quite out of her element as Arkadina" and comparing Vincent Dowling to the invisible man "[who] moved dimly around as if suffering from an unexplained and incurable malady." The issues of *Hibernia* between 1970 and 1972 are peppered with examples of vitriolic criticism of plays, individuals and institutions and certainly antagonised many people in the

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<sup>63</sup> Mary Manning, *At The Focus And Eblana*, June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1970, 18.

<sup>64</sup> Mary Manning, *At The Focus And Eblana*, June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1970, 18.

<sup>65</sup> Mary Manning, *The Seagull*, *Hibernia*, November 6<sup>th</sup> 1970, 21.

Dublin theatre world., as Jaquarello explained: “The problem was Mary was writing for *Hibernia*, and she wrote very vitriolic reviews, and at the time she wrote quite some venomous reviews, and she had a reputation for being caustic, and she wasn’t popular in the theatre world because of this. So when people saw the play wasn’t great they didn’t waste time knocking - so it got pretty bad reviews.”<sup>66</sup>

When Manning’s play premiered, the critics circled her play ready to feast on it. Matters were not helped though, as with the Abbey production, Manning could not resist weaponizing her work, principally taking aim at Dublin and American Academia and literati, and in the process provoking an acerbic response from the critics. David Nowlan, in an *Irish Times* review seemed determined to undermine Manning:

Unfortunately, Miss Manning, too, uses cliches almost incessantly and they are relaxing almost to the point of being soporific...Her despair seems genuine and her cliches may well have been carefully seeded either to enrage pretentious critics or lull anxious audiences. But dramatically they and the play go thudding on in dissipatory [sic] and old-hat nineteen-thirtyism into the mist, gale and rain which, we are so often told, are raging outside the green velveteen curtains of Castlerochford.<sup>67</sup>

Equally negative but slightly less acrid, the *Irish Independent’s* Mary MacGoris wrote: “After the first 15 minutes or so of ‘Ah Well, It Won’t Be Long Now!’ at the Olympia, one starts depending on the promise of the title. It’s a false hope alas – though the play

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with Roland Jaquarello, via Zoom, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

<sup>67</sup> *Manning Play At Olympia*, David Nowlan, *Irish Times*, March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1971.

isn't really long, it seems to take aeons...mainly due to Mary Manning's poorly-constructed comedy has little plot and less comedy."<sup>68</sup> The *Sunday Independent's* critic, Gus Smith, labelled the play "the biggest disappointment" of the first week of the festival, adding: "The final scene was predictable and smacked of another era in drama, though the whole cast tried manfully to save the whole piece from total extinction."<sup>69</sup>

This rejection would have undoubtedly been a chastening experience, but the responsibility cannot exclusively be hoisted onto the playwright. The project was entirely a commercially orientated star vehicle, hastily assembled and with scant regard for artistic merit. As with *The Saint and Mary Kate*, what Manning needed with this project was some solid dramaturgical support and guidance. New plays normally go through a process of development and frequently several drafts and workshops, and a director of the calibre of Jaquarello would undoubtedly have steered the piece in a more imaginative direction and filleted the cliché – but unfortunately this was not possible due to the time constraints. Nevertheless, despite the dismal reviews the production played to packed houses was an undoubted financial success.

It was only with a shift away from mainstream theatre towards younger, less established, alternative venues and producers that Manning found a happier working

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<sup>68</sup> *Slow pace in ill-made play*, Mary Mac Goris, *Irish Independent*, March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1971.

<sup>69</sup> Gus Smith, *Gaiety Drums Beat Loudest*, *Sunday Independent*, March 14<sup>th</sup> 1971.

medium and a more satisfying final Swansong on the Dublin stage. Along with this perhaps an element of the dramaturgical input Manning's work required at the time arrived with director Seamus Newham, who took charge of her final original work for the Irish stage at the Project Arts Centre in April 1976.<sup>70</sup> Having recently moved to new premises in East Essex Street in Temple Bar, the venue was also having a change of leadership with Alan Stanford handing over to Peter and Jim Sheridan. Inspired by radical and avant-garde practitioners like playwright John Arden and John McGrath, and with a solid agit-prop agenda at the core of their programming ethos, the younger Sheridan brother defined their philosophy:

It is for this shift in tradition alone that the rather grandiose title 'alternative' is deserved. It was this that differentiated political from established theatre, and it was in this rejection of the established *modus operandi* that the 'alternative' made its most profound political statement. Not only did it turn its back on tradition but there was an implicit assumption in its philosophy that its new found audience would prove the agents of political change that decades of middle-class theatre goers had failed to effect.<sup>71</sup>

It may have seemed odd to have Manning, then in her seventies, in edgy Temple Bar with twentysomething radicals and revolutionaries, but perhaps her vitriolic criticism, aimed mainly at the establishment and established theatre in particular, made her an alluring prospect to the younger practitioners. Nevertheless,

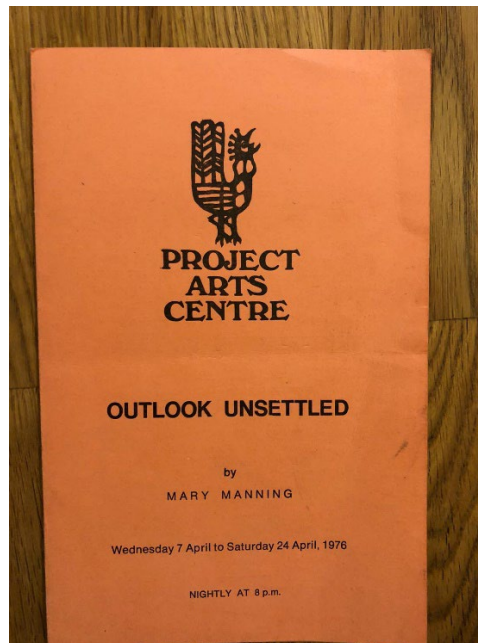
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<sup>70</sup> Seamus Newham b. 1944 is an Irish actor and director. He trained at the Abbey School of Acting and was an Abbey player between 1967-1972. He directed several productions at the Project Arts Centre between 1974-1977. In the 1980s he moved to London.

<sup>71</sup> Peter Sheridan, 'The Theatre and Politics', *The Crane Bag*, Vol 1. No.1 Art and Politics (Spring 1977), 70.



her play was produced in a spring season of new plays alongside a new play by Peter Sheridan about a homeless family who take illegal possession of a room in a tenement entitled *No Entry*, directed by Jim Sheridan.



Original program for *Outlook Unsettled*. Seamus Newman private collection.

The semi-autobiographical *Outlook Unsettled* again adopts Manning's favoured three Act structure, following four key protagonists over a sixteen-year period, threaded together through the character of Tiny/Tina/Tasha, likely based on Manning. Beginning with *The Music Lesson* (1920) and set against a backdrop of the War of Independence, we are introduced to a group of very young people taking a piano lesson with some eccentric older teachers in a drawing room in Trafalgar Square in Monkstown. The playwright was unable to resist writing a precocious and irritating youthful Samuel Beckett into the play as a character in this Act and then as an off-

stage presence in the proceeding Acts. In what was undoubtedly the gag of the evening the young Sam is terrorised by the authoritarian Miss Beatrice Hepworth:

Miss B: Try it again Sam and put more feeling into it. Your technique is excellent but you lack – well – soul. Don't you feel deeply about anything Sam dear. Feel it here? (She taps her heart).

Sam: (As if dragged out of him) I suppose so....if I eat too much.

Miss B: But you must have higher aspirations. What do you want to do when you grow up Sam dear?

Sam: (After a short pause) Play for Ireland.

Miss B: (Clapping her hands) Ah music...the piano!

Sam: (Dreadfully matter of fact) No. Cricket.

Miss B: (Wearily) Play it again Sam, don't bother about the feeling.<sup>72</sup>

The second Act, *Drama Class* (1925), sees the action move to the stage of the Abbey with a protracted acting class under the direction of Sarah Allgood – the author herself was a pupil of the Abbey school, so this section is a somewhat wry critique of the establishment. In the final Act, *On Tour* (1936), we meet the four key characters over a decade later in a boarding house touring Shakespeare in an Anew McMaster style fit-up company.<sup>73</sup> One of the troupe, Charley, preparing to depart the following day to fight in the Spanish civil war, shifts readily between half-hearted seduction attempts

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<sup>72</sup> Mary Manning, *Outlook Unsettled*. The text of the play is unpublished, the typescript quoted (page 8) I discovered in the Manning Archive held at the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Centre, Boston University.

<sup>73</sup> Anew McMaster (1891-1962) was an Anglo-Irish actor-manager, who during his nearly 45 year acting career extensively toured Ireland, Britain, Australia and the United States. Notable actors who toured with McMaster include Hilton Edwards, Micheál Mac Liammóir, Milo O'Shea, T.P. McKenna and Harold Pinter.

of the Tasha character and spouting feverish polemic which would undoubtedly suited the Project's political perspective:

(Rising in his excitement and addressing an unseen audience) Any Irish political left wing movement, such as ours, is immediately stamped as communist. Look what we've suffered already. Egged on by the priests raising the battlecry of antigod we've been beaten up and almost lynched wherever we held our meetings. But we're not interested in Marxism, we have received neither money or advice from Moscow. Our cause, our objectives, are still those which were spelled out for us by James Connolly. No, it's our anti-clericalism which has unsheathed the naked swords of the Fascist forces against us. We have dared to defy the Holy Roman hierarchy, the same hierarchy who in the days of the Famine told the people to starve maybe, but in any case, in any case, pay their rents.

It would appear Manning benefited from a more secure and lengthy rehearsal process and with having her work entrusted to a sympathetic and conscientious director. Newham from the outset was aware of her outspoken nature from his time as an actor in the Abbey, in an interview he explained exactly how she was regarded: "Manning was feared as a critic. I mean if you were an actor in a half-decent part in the Abbey, you were genuinely concerned about what she might write."<sup>74</sup> Newham had the good sense to advise cuts and the dilution of certain elements of the text and in particular Manning venting her spleen: "I told her to tone it down. Especially the stuff in Act Two. The Abbey at that time was a very successful theatre [the 1920s]. I thought she had sour grapes."<sup>75</sup> This proved to be an excellent intervention as the

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<sup>74</sup> Interview with Seamus Newham, April 9<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

production received a very good response from the critics with Kane Archer writing in the *Irish Times*:

One who has withdrawn from criticism 'mainly because of fears of assassination' may still choose to live dangerously as Mary Manning demonstrates in her new play 'Outlook Unsettled' at the Project by having the youthful Sam Beckett's music teacher address him with a line long since immortalised by Humphrey Bogart. Such constant irreverence and the peals of laughter that it evokes goes hand in hand throughout the play with something that passes from regret for lost, happier times to a flat, questioning despair for time to come...Here is laughter, much laughter but a Dante's vision. Beckett's characters, surprisingly reassure us with their tenacious grip on life. With Miss Manning's leave, I hope my instinct is to side with Bogart.<sup>76</sup>

Desmond Forristal in *The Furrow*, noting the dearth of new Irish writing that year admired both Project productions and chided the Abbey for their apparent rejection of the work:

Like the Sheridan play it is all rather episodic, at times perilously so, but it never loses interest. Some of the scenes are very funny and the whole is a useful reminder of a tradition in Irish Theatre and in Irish Life which Catholics too easily overlook. Both of these plays were, as I said, rejected by the Abbey. The Project is to be commended for giving them an airing, and doing them proud on pathetically small resources. But what is one to say of the National Theatre, which has not produced a new Irish play in six months? Neither of the two plays under review was a dazzling masterpiece but each had enough merit to deserve something better than a rejection slip.<sup>77</sup>

It is commendable that Forristal praises the budgetary restrictions the Project contended with in mounting the two productions, as it would appear Manning at least

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<sup>76</sup> Kane Archer, 'Outlook Unsettled at the Project', *The Irish Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> April 1976.

<sup>77</sup> Desmond Forristal, 'Stage and Screen', *The Furrow* 27, no. 5 (1976): 298-300.

part-funded the production. Two pieces of correspondence pertaining to the rehearsal process survive in the private collection of Newham, both pieces indicate a very positive and constructive relationship between playwright and director - they also reveal that she had provided finance for the piece. In a note at the early stage of the rehearsal process she wrote:

I was so pleased to have that quiet hour with you and even more pleased that I feel a great deal of confidence in your handling of my plays. I know you will do a good job and I know you understand which is the most important factor of all...I think one thing we must do is vinegar up things a good deal in [acts] two and three. That we can do in rehearsal. On 15<sup>th</sup> March I'm leaving for Paris for five days. I'll see Beckett there and of course my daughter and her husband. So I'll be out of your hair. Anyway I always stay out of the directors hair. Now if you want some money fast let me know.

In a note she sent the director some weeks later she wrote:

I'm perfectly satisfied with what you are doing with the first act. Vail, the little boy, Aggie are very good indeed. Tina is pitching her voice too high and being idiotic rather than childish. If she played it with perfect simplicity, it would be better. I know she is a good actress and will get there. Maise is overdoing it and taking too long to pick up her cues. Alan Stanford is simply not bothering. Too grand...I think I'll have to develop a better and more bitter curtain line for Act Two and certainly revise the curtain line for Act Three. What we need in all three plays is pace. I wonder how you can cover the changes without the audience being bored...Here is a cheque towards the moving. I'd like to talk to whoever is in charge of costumes. Also you and I must get together next week. What about lunch next Monday in the Zodiac pub off Chatham Street?<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Mary Manning, note to Seamus Newham, undated.

One must admire Manning for the conviction in her work and the determination to see it staged that she was prepared to invest (and no doubt lose) some of her own finances into a production. This demonstrates that her motivation for the piece was purely aesthetic. Smaller, less established theatre venues had a very small return, and with everyone involved in the project working for expenses, Manning would have been very aware that she was unlikely to make any profit from staging the work.<sup>79</sup> But being the person she was, she could not resist a final poke at her detractors. Writing her biography in the production program she quipped: “I was drama critic for *The Hibernia* for three years and mainly for fears of assassination withdrew from drama criticism. I am now an innocuous reviewer of books for the *Irish Times* and I love it. Much safer.”<sup>80</sup>



Manning in her seventies. Picture copyright Howard Gotlieb Research Center, Boston University.

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<sup>79</sup> In my interview with Seamus Newham, he explained elements of the financing of Project productions at that time.

<sup>80</sup> Program notes, *Outlook Unsettled*, Project Arts Centre, Seamus Newham private collection.

Manning continued to write book reviews for the *Irish Times* and led a comparatively quiet life until 1979 when she became romantically involved with her family lawyer Faneuill Adams, who persuaded her to return to Cambridge. The couple took up residence together in Mt. Auburn Street, Cambridge, where they remained together for two happy years, as she explained in a later interview: “He was widowed. Very lonely. He suggested I go back and live in sin with him...I didn’t want to be married, but I did want to be near my children, so I sold my house in Dublin and came over and lived in sin with Fan Adams – for about a year, then we thought it more convenient to be married.”<sup>81</sup> Manning, now known as Mary Manning Howe Adams, found great happiness in her new relationship although that sadly did not last long, as the following year Adams died of a heart attack: “He was a dear. I had wonderful fun with him. For two years of my life I was rich. We travelled first class.”<sup>82</sup> Manning rekindled her relationship the Poets’ Theatre, which was at this time sporadically mounting readings and small-scale productions. She wrote a new three act comedy play, *The Saving Pause*, described as “A Beckett scholar is brought back to life by the love of a bad woman.”<sup>83</sup> The play was given a staged reading at the Boston Athenaeum

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<sup>81</sup> Manning, Mary, and Doris Abramson. “Go, Lovely Rose.” *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 30, no. 4, 1989, pp. 645–60. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25090123>, 659.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Publicity playbill, Manning Collection, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University.

on November 24<sup>th</sup> 1985 and then again the following year at the Second Stage Theatre off-Broadway on February 25<sup>th</sup> 1986 directed by Robert Rees Evans.<sup>84</sup>

Soon after the death of her husband there was a misunderstanding that threatened her lifelong friendship with Beckett. Financial problems and an impending surgical procedure compelled Manning to approach the Harry Ramson Research Center at the University of Texas and enquired if they would be interested in purchasing the correspondence she held along with Beckett's letters to her mother Susan.<sup>85</sup> When he heard of this Beckett wrote to Manning's daughter, Susan Howe, on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1981: "I am sorry to hear that my private letters to Susan and Mary will now be available to the curious."<sup>86</sup> The situation was alleviated when Fanny Howe wrote to Beckett on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1982 explaining her mother's medical and financial situation. Beckett replied to Fanny Howe the same day: "When I replied to Susan regretting cession of my letters I did not realise that this was in order to help Mary financially. Knowing this now I regret my regrets and urge you to go ahead with the

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<sup>84</sup> Original playbill, *The Saving Pause*, Poets' Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University. The Boston Athenaeum is one of the oldest independent libraries in the United States. The institution was founded in 1807 by the Anthology Club of Boston, Massachusetts. Second Stage Theatre was founded in 1979 and moved into the 108-seat capacity McGinn/Cazale Theatre in 1984. From 2002 onwards, the Upper West Side venue was primarily used to host the Second Stage Theatre Uptown Series, designed to give younger playwrights the opportunity to stage off-Broadway productions.

<sup>85</sup> The Harry Ransom Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, hosts a major archive of Beckett's works including drafts of *Waiting for Godot* (1952) in the original French and the English translation, *All That Fall* (1956), *Watt* (1953), and *Whoroscope* (1930).

<sup>86</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The letters of Samuel Beckett*, edited by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck; associate editors, George Craig, Dan Gunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009-2016), 575.



sale.”<sup>87</sup> Beckett’s subsequent letter to Manning illustrated the warmth and affection between the two childhood friends that had sustained the test of time:

Dear Mary, Thanks for yr. letter of Jan 5<sup>th</sup> and your telegram. I am grieved to hear of your ordeal. I had no idea things were so bad. When I replied to Susan about the letters I did not know you needed the money. I thought of you as very well off. If you need the money by all means sell them. Get them back from John & sell them. So many of my letters are now public property that those to you & Susan may as well join them. No question of you ever losing my friendship. I think of you often and with all my heart wish for you for better days. Much love, Sam.<sup>88</sup>

The pair kept in contact for the remainder of Beckett’s life with his old friend being one of the final people he wrote to in the months before his death: “Dear Mary, Thanks for yrs. Of April 30 with good news of Boston readings. Yes. Warrilow...great friend. I kick myself out morning & afternoon, briefly. Have tried with stick but no help. I hope words have now failed me. Much love dear Mary. Sam”<sup>89</sup>

Manning lived out the remainder of her years in Cambridge, maintaining her involvement with the Poets’ theatre and scripting one final piece of work, *Go, Lovely Rose*.<sup>90</sup> Manning died peacefully at the age of 93 on the 27<sup>th</sup> June, 1999 at the Mt Auburn hospital in Cambridge, surrounded by her family.

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Letter Samuel Beckett to Mary Manning, 13<sup>th</sup> January 1982.

<sup>89</sup> Letter Samuel Beckett to Mary Manning, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1989. David Warrilow (1934 –1995) was an English actor and was well known as an interpreter of Beckett’s work. At Warrilow’s request, Beckett wrote *A Piece of Monologue* for him in 1979. Warrilow had given an evening of readings on April 26<sup>th</sup> at Boston Museum of Fine Arts with the Poets’ Theatre.

<sup>90</sup> I will discuss this play further in the epilogue section of this thesis.

## Conclusion: Who was Mary Manning?

So, who was Mary Manning? I hope it is evident in the pages of this thesis the extent to which this remarkable woman contributed to the various fields that she was active in during her lifetime. In the course of my research, I have sought to compile an accurate account of Manning's life and work. I chose to compose the thesis in chronological order to offer the fullest and most coherent possible picture to the reader. Manning, a minor figure in Dublin critical circles, became involved in the Gate theatre scene in its heyday, and produced *Youth's the Season-?*, a unique theatrical work which served as both an analysis and sophisticated critique of the postcolonial Ascendency class. Audience and critics immediately recognised the startling originality of her debut play and welcomed the perspectives she brought to the Dublin stage. A measure of the esteem the play was held in by the theatre's management can be gauged by the fact it had two revivals in the following six years. The Gate debuted the work of many hitherto unproduced playwrights, some would continue to produce successful work – others less so. Manning's output in her early career was prolific, the next two offerings saw the critically acclaimed *Storm Over Wicklow* (1933) and the less well received *Happy Family* (1934). During these years Manning's contributions to the Gate Theatre's literary periodical *Motley* cannot be ignored. She was the motivating energy behind the magazine, and it is obvious that she was a truly innovative editor, offering shrewd social commentary along with supporting a platform for developing literary talent. She should be viewed as a great enabler: from the beginning she

championed fresh voices, tirelessly seeking new submissions and no doubt reading dozens of manuscripts looking for that glimmer of prospector's gold. *Motley* bridged an important gap between *The Irish Statesman* and later publications *Ireland To-Day* and *The Bell* and served as crucial inspiration for Seán Ó Faoláin's editorship of the latter.

Manning was also beginning to generate a reputation in the UK. In 1935 she sold the performance rights for *Storm Over Wicklow* to The Westminster Theatre but it was never produced, and 1936 saw the UK premiere of *Youth's the Season-?*. It is not unreasonable to assume that had she remained in Ireland her work would have continued to be produced by the Gate, and indeed other venues in Ireland and the UK, and she would have further developed her skills as a writer. Manning was not afraid to work in other media forms and experimental film projects, teaming up with pioneer film maker Norris Davidson with work that directly led to a landmark moment in the history of Irish cinema, Denis Johnston's film *Guests of the Nation*. The infrastructure in Ireland for the generation and execution of such projects did not exist and her involvement in such ventures is a testament to Manning's imagination and determination. When she first arrived in America she was Samuel Beckett's principal advocate, promoting his texts around various publishers in Boston and New York: "Mary neé Manning, touting for Houghton Mifflin, writes for more copies of my

works, and urges me to put in for lectures at Harvard, where her father-in-law is a mugwump.”<sup>1</sup>

Manning was also an excellent novelist with her finger on the current political pulse. Through her debut novel, *Mount Venus*, she not only presented an astute evaluation of the Irish post-revolution political system but by adopting a strong anti-fascist and pro-democracy stance she joined the ranks of a growing international literary movement inspired by the Spanish Civil War which served as harbingers of the mounting dangers in Europe. Her second novel, *Lovely People*, marks the development of Manning’s literary prowess by the creation of a capable, succinct, and highly entertaining work which also serves as a shrewd examination of America in the 1950s. Within its pages lie a highly adept social commentary masked within the framework of humour and high satire. She casts an insightful eye on post war American society, with its rampant consumerism, and makes a pertinent statement as to the place women occupied, casting a despairing look at the direction the country was moving with its anti-communist hysteria.

Manning’s achievements with the Poets’ Theatre, where she was co-founder and principle motivating energy, were equally remarkable. This hotbed of ideas and avant garde expression provided a platform and cradled the aspirations of many writers and artists that would advance to formidable heights in post-World War II American letters. As Paige Reynolds accurately notes: “In this particular instance,

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Samuel Beckett to Thomas McGreevy, 25<sup>th</sup> March 1936.

literary history reveals the striking truth that an Irish woman writer was absolutely central to the achievements of a remarkable American cultural institution and its endeavours to inspire twentieth-century audiences with experimental literature and innovative performance.”<sup>2</sup>

This thesis is the first comprehensive study of Mary Manning that attempts to assess, in detail, all elements of her work at every significant stage in her life, and in that respect it bridges a gap in knowledge. I feel the implications of this research should be to accompany and compliment the work of the Gate Theatre Research Network and other scholars anxious to put the Gate’s work closer to the centre of academic debate regarding twentieth-century Irish theatre. My work uncovers further important research questions such as a fuller examination of the merit of Manning’s work with the Poets’ Theatre and its position in the American Literary canon. Another avenue of research that should be explored is a further examination of Manning’s Abbey Theatre 1968 production of *The Saint and Mary Kate*, with access to prompt scripts, lighting plans, stage management records and budget sheets with a specific objective of obtaining a clearer picture of the nature of the production, how it was assembled and its aesthetic value.

My other major focus throughout this thesis was to consider Manning’s place in the Irish literary and artistic movement from 1924, when she first became active, to

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<sup>2</sup> Paige Reynolds, ‘The Avant-Garde Doyenne: Mary Manning, the Poets’ Theatre, and the Staging of *Finnegans Wake*’, *Éire-Ireland: a journal of Irish studies*, vol. 44; no. 3/4 (2009).

her death in 1999. Manning had many roles in her long career: actress, journalist, filmmaker, playwright, editor, screenwriter, author, producer, commissioning editor, novelist, co-artistic director, adapter and co-funder of her final project. She is, it is all too clear, a quintessential neglected female Irish writer. In the course of my research I came across references that I found both unwarranted and unfair. Feargal McGarry, in the section of his book where he speculates on a homosexual affair between Eoin O'Duffy and Micheál Mac Liammóir, cited his source as Manning, describing her as a "Minor literary figure."<sup>3</sup> I believe Manning's position is more accurately summarised by Christopher Fitz-Simon: "Mary Manning faded from the Dublin literary scene in 1980 like some late Beckettian heroine, so that even the intellectual footfalls are scarcely heard nowadays along that thin strip which is the Dublin literary scene. She was a far better writer than she has yet been given credit for."<sup>4</sup>

That Manning bestrode both Irish and American literary movements tended to leave her trapped between both, somehow never quite fully realizing her potential on both sides of the Atlantic. Had she remained in her native land there is no doubt she would have continued to produce work, she may have moved in several different directions such as company or venue management and production as she has frequently been compared to Lady Gregory. She may even have continued her work

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<sup>3</sup> Feargal McGarry, *Eoin O'Duffy: a self-made hero* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 164.

<sup>4</sup> Murray, Christopher, 'Taking a Position: Mary Manning and Eleutheria', *Ireland on stage: Beckett and after*, edited by Hiroko Mikami, Minako Okamuro, Naoko Yagi (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2007), 66.

with Irish film or, like Denis Johnston, moved into mainstream broadcasting. I believe the key factor is that Manning, along with countless other talented practitioners, was a woman writer active during an era that has been painfully overlooked and that only recently is attracting the full attention of scholars, It can only be to the greater enrichment of Irish cultural studies that in recent years this discrepancy is being adequately addressed.

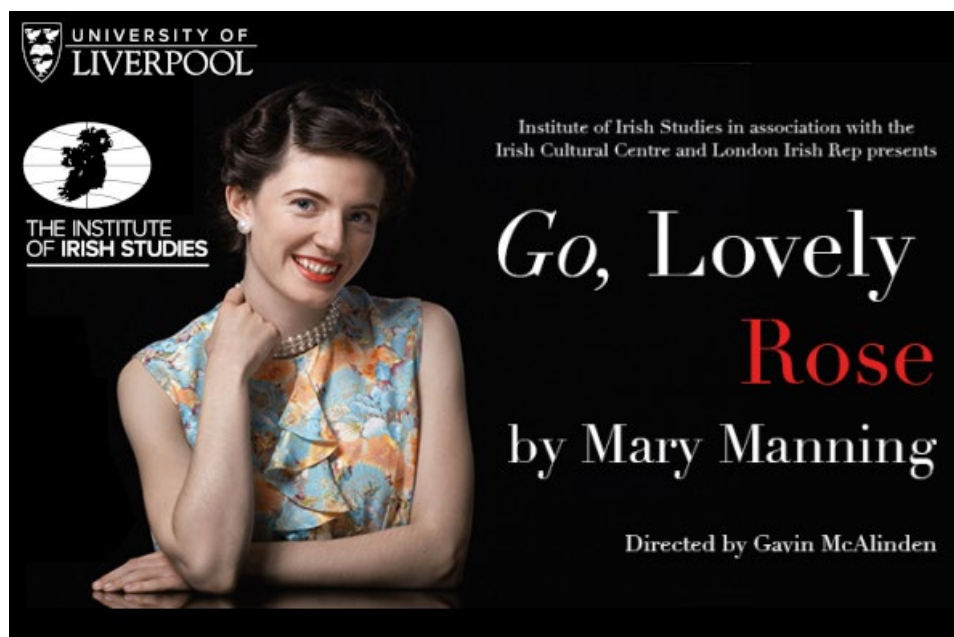
## Epilogue

### Manning Today: Go, Lovely Rose

Since the commencement of this thesis, I have been looking for opportunities to explore the work of Manning in a contemporary theatrical context. I approached several companies and venues in London and Ireland with the idea to produce *Youths The Season-?* Nevertheless, cast size and budgetary constraints made such a venture prohibitive in the eyes of managements and venues, and my efforts were wholly unrewarded. However, in 2018 the Institute of Irish Studies offered a knowledge exchange award with the objective of engaging the public in elements of current research at the institute. The award consisted of £10,000, along with in-house support from the Institute for any affiliate venues or institutions. I approached the Institute with the idea of producing *Go, Lovely Rose*, a dramatic monologue which was Mary Manning's final original piece of work. After a written submission and an interview process where I also presented a budget my proposal was accepted. The idea was that I would produce and direct a full production of the play which would be staged for a single performance at the London Irish Cultural Centre and then at Liverpool



University's Eleanor Rathbone Lecture Theatre, in March 2019.<sup>1</sup> I was given the rights to perform the play by the Manning family, and they allowed me to make any cuts or 'tweaks' as I deemed necessary. The budget ensured that everyone involved in the project was paid union wages and their travel and accommodation was covered when the production moved to Liverpool.



Publicity image for *Go, Lovely Rose*. Image copyright Michael Brosnan.

Manning was eighty-one when she wrote the play, and it was first performed on the September 20<sup>th</sup> 1987 as part of a Poets' Theatre fund raising evening at the JFT

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Lauren Arrington, Dorothy Lynch, Viola Segeroth and the team at The Institute of Irish Studies Liverpool University. Tom Foote, the late David O'Keefe and everyone at the London Irish Cultural Centre. From London Irish Rep, Siobhan Gallagher, Paul Donnellon, James Jones, Calum Excell, Viktorija Raščiauskaitė and Michael Brosnan for their kind help and support with this project.

library in Harvard, along with readings from Seamus Heaney and Richard Wilbur. The play was subsequently performed as part of the International Women Playwright's Conference in Galway in 1999. Manning was inspired to write the play when she read Doris Kearns Goodwin's controversial biography *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys: An American Saga*.<sup>2</sup> The biography tells the story of three generations of the Fitzgerald and Kennedy family and covers a ninety eight year period from the baptism of John Francis Fitzgerald, the Mayor of Boston John 'Honey Fitz' Fitzgerald and his daughter Rose's marriage to Joseph Kennedy, and finishes at the inauguration of their son John Fitzgerald Kennedy as President of the United States. The section that interested Manning was the chapter entitled 'Eyes Full of Laughter' which told the story of the young Rose Fitzgerald before her marriage to Joseph Kennedy.

*Go, Lovely Rose* tells the story of seventeen-year-old Rose Fitzgerald, who would later marry Joe Kennedy and have nine children including President John F. Kennedy, Attorney-General Robert Kennedy and Senator Edward Kennedy. The play is in two

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<sup>2</sup> Doris Helen Kearns Goodwin b. 1943 is an American biographer, historian, former sports journalist, and political commentator. She has written biographies of several U.S. presidents. Her book *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* won the Pulitzer Prize for History in 1995. In 2002 Goodwin was accused of plagiarism when an article published in *The Weekly Standard* stated that Goodwin's book *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys: An American Saga*, used without attribution numerous phrases and sentences from three other published works, including *Kathleen Kennedy: Her Life and Times* (1983) by Lynne McTaggart. Goodwin reached a private settlement with McTaggart over the matter.

parts and set in Rose's bedroom; when we meet her at the beginning of the play she is brimming with energy and confidence, it is the day she graduated top of her class from Dorchester High School and has been accepted to study at the prestigious and progressive Wellesley College, which she considers "the best college in all America."<sup>3</sup> Rose is particularly impressed with the College's professors who include economists and social reformers Katherine Coman, Emily Greene Balch and Edith Abbot, "when I think of the teachers at Wellesley I could swoon."<sup>4</sup> Manning included a lot of biographical detail and a hint of the romance to come with references to the Harvard bound Joe Kennedy, "that sandy haired boy with the big smile, I guess he'll be my sweetheart. We first met on one of those gorgeous summers at Orchard Beach when I

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<sup>33</sup> Mary Manning, and Doris Abramson. "Go, Lovely Rose." *The Massachusetts Review* 30, no. 4 (1989): 645–60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25090123.646>. Wellesley College is a private historically women's liberal arts college in Wellesley, Massachusetts. Founded in 1870 by Henry and Pauline Durant, it is a member of the original Seven Sisters Colleges, Wellesley is considered to be one of the best liberal arts colleges in the United States.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 647. Katharine Ellis Coman (1857-1915) was an American social activist and professor. She was Dean of Wellesley College, Massachusetts, where she established new courses in political economy and sociology. A strong advocate of social change her books included *The Industrial History of the United States* (1905) and *Economic Beginnings of the Far West: How We Won the Land Beyond the Mississippi* (1912). Emily Greene Balch (1867-1961) was an American economist, sociologist and Nobel Laureate. Balch taught at Wellesley College and worked on a number of social issues including poverty, child labour, and immigration. She became a core leader of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), for which she won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946. Edith Abbott (1876-1957) was an American economist, statistician, social worker, educator, and author. Her books included *Women in Industry* (1910), *The Real Jail Problem* (1915) and *Truancy and non-attendance in the Chicago Schools* (1917).

was five and he was seven.”<sup>5</sup> Goodwin described her liveliness and vitality perfectly:

“It is little wonder that Rose Fitzgerald at seventeen wanted time to stand still, for at that age she seemed to have everything a girl could have: an open ardent nature filled with wonder and belief, a radiant complexion and eyes full of laughter; a fine, slim figure and plenty of new clothes; a strong, active mind and abundant opportunity to engage it in stimulating conversation.”<sup>6</sup> We learn very early in the play that the dominant figure in young Rose’s life is her father, the then Mayor of Boston, John F. Fitzgerald, known as ‘Honey Fitz’. The young Rose consistently references her father throughout the play and he features as an ominous and looming off-stage presence, a shadow that hangs over proceedings and we strongly feel there is more to him than meets the eye. Manning offers a hint of extramarital impropriety in the family when Fitzgerald unexpectedly brings a pretty young reporter from the *Post* home for dinner: “The anger we could see written on Mother’s face frightened and surprised us. Daddy of course pretended not to notice it and poured his well known brand of honey all

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<sup>5</sup> Manning, *Go, Lovely Rose*, 648.

<sup>6</sup> Doris Kearns Godwin, *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys: An American Saga* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 130.

over Ms Burt. I couldn't sleep that night wondering"<sup>7</sup> The first half of the play concludes with an overwhelming sense of confidence emanating from young Rose, everything is possible in the young idealist's eyes, she even shares with the audience the extent of her ambition: "Thank God I was born in America where women are women, born free to be themselves and do what they like. I mean to be in politics, I want to be of use in the big world. (She stands centre, opens wide her arms, smiling triumphantly) Maybe I'll be the first women president of the U.S.A."<sup>8</sup> She then exits and in Manning's original version she describes an off-stage piper. I chose not to do this effect replacing it instead with original music by James Jones which I will discuss further when I describe production elements later in this chapter.

The second half of the play opens with a deflated and dejected Rose slowly walking onstage weeping, she tells the audience: "I can't believe this could happen to me. I can't believe it. *I'm not going to college.* Forget me, Wellesley, forget me, Emily Balch! I'm not going. My father told me last night. I knew when he came in that something was wrong." She explains further her father's decision: "It seems that if I

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<sup>7</sup> Manning, *Go, Lovely Rose*, 649.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 649.

go to Wellesley College and fraternised with protestants and free thinkers, it would be politically harmful for Honey Fitz. It wouldn't go down with the Irish political families."<sup>9</sup> We learn that the night before, her father had met Archbishop of Boston William O'Connell who disapproved of his choice of school for his daughter: "Apparently the Archbishop was horrified and said he was shocked and feared the impact of the decision on other Catholic families. Of course anything the Archbishop says is a message from on high. He who must be obeyed."<sup>10</sup>

Instead of the progressive Wellesley, Rose and her sister Agnes will attend the Sacred Heart Academy in Boston, boasting a curriculum which included needlework and dressmaking, with a view to preparing their students to become good wives and mothers. Rose, devastated by her fate, highlights the gender disparity with her cousin Joe Kennedy being permitted to attend Harvard, and Manning cannot resist a little jab at her audience: "Why is he going to Harvard, which was founded by Boston Brahmin types like Adamases, Cabots, Quincys and Lowells? How can he belong to that world?"

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 650.

<sup>10</sup> Manning, *Go, Lovely Rose*, 50. William Henry O'Connell (1859-1944) was an American cardinal of the Catholic Church. He served as Archbishop of Boston from 1907 until his death in 1944. He was made a cardinal in 1911. Conservative and non-ecumenical by nature he famously instructed his priests to refuse communion to women wearing lipstick.

Those blue-nosed snobs?"<sup>11</sup> Rose then sings the family song and slumps to the floor in a cathartic moment of complete devastation. Manning deftly creates the moment of transformation in Rose. The character who stands up to deliver the final speech is a mature and steely person; transformed with an air of defiant acceptance - she will accept her father's decision but acquires a fierce determination to express a newfound feminine individualism with her choice of husband:

I accept my destiny. I will go on, I will be a good wife and mother. But there's one thing, Daddy, I will not be dictated to again. I will marry the man of my choice. Yes, I will choose my own husband even if it means fighting you. I see my fate. I know what's going to happen. Indoctrination. I will become over the years an uncompromising, devout Roman Catholic. I will obey my husband in all things, and if he should stray, which God forbid, I will hold him fast to his duty and to his vows and the sacred symbol of a loyal, closely-knit family. Are you listening, Rose? (she laughs bitterly) Yes, ladies of the Sacred Heart, I will be a first rate dressmaker and a champion with the dust mop. No more dangerous reading. Emily Balch, Gail and Farewell! March on, Rose Fitzgerald! Be the mother of kings (shakes her fist). But if I live to be a hundred, Father, I won't forget what you did to me. I will carry the scar. My name from now on is Might-Have-Been.<sup>12</sup>

The impact of her father's decision on young Rose was life-changing and it was something she carried with her for the rest of her life:

The incident haunts the imagination. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of this event in the maturing of a young girl's maturing

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Manning, *Go, Lovely Rose*, 651. It is interesting to note Manning's husband, Mark De Wolfe Howe, came from a Brahmin family, and was also a descendant of John Quincy Adams, the sixth President of the United States.

<sup>12</sup> Manning, *Go, Lovely Rose*, 652.

sensibilities. When asked at the age of ninety to describe her greatest regret, she was silent for a moment and then, with a bitterness of tone, which she did not often allow herself to betray, she said: "My greatest regret is not having gone to Wesley College. It is something I have felt a little sad about all my life."<sup>13</sup>

When I commenced work on the production of *Go, Lovely Rose* I quickly realised that the most difficult task would be casting an actress that could successfully play the role. Not only is it incredibly challenging for an actor to hold an audience for forty-five minutes, but I also wanted an actress that bore a physical resemblance to seventeen-year-old Rose Fitzgerald. I issued a casting call to the various London and UK casting portals; I was ideally looking for a London based actress to avoid additional costs for transport and accommodation. I also specified that I needed the actress to be a playing age of 18-25, and to be able to do convincing American and Irish accents. In addition to the casting call, I searched the online data bases of all the major London drama schools for recent graduates or students in their final year. The Central School of Speech and Drama provides show reel recordings of contrasting short film clips of their recent graduates and it was through this that I found the actress that would take the role of Rose, a British-Irish actress called Siobhan Gallagher who

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<sup>13</sup> Goodwin, *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys: An American Saga*, 143-44.



had graduated from that school a few months earlier. Not only did she audition brilliantly but she bore a striking resemblance to pictures I had seen of young Rose.



Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy. Image copyright JFK Library, Boston, Mass.

I asked Siobhan to learn the text before we commenced rehearsals which began in February 2019. We rehearsed for twenty hours spread over eight two-and-a-half hour sessions mainly in the evenings and at weekends as the actress had some work commitments that I did not want to interfere with. I also provided Siobhan with various background sources and helped her with her research. During the rehearsal process I looked for ways of exploring a playfulness into the character of Rose while injecting humour into the piece. I soon discovered that Siobhan was particularly adept

at accents and mimicry, which I employed at several points. In the production Siobhan played the character in a perfect Bostonian accent, but when Rose read from the Wellesley Curriculum, we put her accent talent to play:

Look out Daddy, when I've graduated from Wellesley, I'll be able to teach you a thing or two about politics (reading aloud again) "The Development of Modern Socialism." [Russian accent] Whew, what will Daddy think of that! "The Evolution of the Factory System, The Problems of Child Labour." [Cockney accent] (she giggles) and the life everlasting Amen (crossing herself) Rose, be good. (Goes on reading) "The Department of English Literature and Psychology use the medieval scholar Sophie Jewett, the poet Katherine Lee Bates, author of "America the Beautiful..." [Standard English accent].<sup>14</sup>

At this point in the original text Manning includes the stage direction, "She bursts into the song "America the Beautiful" and springs to her feet", but in my production I chose not to execute this direction as I felt it somewhat clichéd.

I chose to use a very minimal setting for the production with only a desk with some papers and writing materials and a chair on stage left and small piles of books downstage right. I was looking for new ways to tell the story for the audience and increasingly felt that a more visual platform would be a great asset to the narrative. I felt it would be interesting to experiment with other media forms, I also thought that

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<sup>14</sup> Manning, *Go Lovely Rose*, 647.

as a one-person show it would enrich the piece. I therefore commissioned Dublin born director and animator Paul Donnellon to create animation for the production.<sup>15</sup> We created fourteen stop-motion animation films that we projected onto a screen at the back of the stage. The films would build over 15-20 seconds hold for five seconds and then fade out over five seconds. Each film was timed to coincide with the point in the narrative that the character Rose delivering without distracting from the story. The animations included Wellesley College, Honey Fitz, Emily Balch, Harvard, the famine ship, a mop, ink spilling, a Cow, Rose dancing. These proved a particularly effective tool for engaging the audience and several of the animations had a comic effect. For example, when Rose delivered the line “Welcome to old Ireland where men are men and women are cows”, an image of a large cow was building on the projection and at the moment the actress said the word ‘Cows’ the image on the screen adopted a startled expression.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Donnellon b. 1966 is an Irish director and animator based in London. He began his career directing music videos and TV commercials and has won awards in both these areas and for his short animated films. He also designs film title sequences through his studio VooDooDog. He was nominated for an EMMY for his title sequence for the HBO film *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers* and has made title sequences for films such as *Smokin’ Aces*, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, and the *Nanny McPhee* movies. He was nominated for a BAFTA in 2019 for *Floogals*, a children’s tv series.

<sup>16</sup> Manning, *Go, Lovely Rose*, 652.



Siobhan Gallagher in *Go, Lovely Rose*. Image copyright Michael Brosnan.

In Manning's text she concludes the play with the following stage direction, she goes off singing "America the Beautiful."<sup>17</sup> Once again I decided to do something different, ending the production with a visual montage of the legacy of Rose's children. Working with the lighting designer Callum Excell, we edited a number of short video clips showing images of the Kennedy children at various times in their life to create a two-minute-long film which was projected onto the screen behind the actress who I kept onstage deliberately placing her further upstage centre. When Siobhan delivered the final line, the video commenced and the lighting on the actress faded over thirty seconds leaving the stage in complete darkness with the video

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<sup>17</sup> Manning, *Go, Lovely Rose*, 652.

playing on the screen illuminating the face and upper body of the actress. I felt leaving the Rose character onstage staring defiantly into the distance with the video and original music in the background would create a strong feminist impression in the minds of the audience. Rose, cruelly denied the opportunities she deserved by her ambitious father, maintained a fierce sense of strength and purpose for the sake of her family and the children she would have.

At the beginning of the play Manning offers the following stage direction, “We hear the sound of a piper offstage”. She repeats the direction in the middle of the play and then again at the end. I chose to replace this with original music by James Jones whom I had collaborated with on several previous projects. He created a haunting piano and violin melody with Irish influences which complimented his classical style. As a director I believe the function of music is to indicate to an audience what they should be feeling, in this respect James’ wonderfully evocative score was a great asset to the production, blending a hauntingly melodic composition with hints of traditional Irish folk music.

In her text Manning also offered the Fitzgerald Family song as the Irish famine song, *The Praties They Grow Small*, alongside the Piper playing offstage.<sup>18</sup> I felt this was not suitable for the production I wanted to create, so instead I asked the actress to sing, unaccompanied, the traditional Irish folk song *She Moves Through the Fair*.<sup>19</sup>



Siobhan Gallagher in *Go, Lovely Rose*. Image copyright Michael Brosnan.

The first performance of the play occurred at The London Irish Centre on Friday March 22<sup>nd</sup> 2019, which was followed on Friday 29<sup>th</sup> March with another

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<sup>18</sup> *The Praties They Grow Small* is an Irish lament song. Although the original author of the piece is unknown it is widely thought to have been written during the Great Famine in Ireland in the 1840s. It is sometimes referred to as the Famine Song, although it never mentions the famine directly.

<sup>19</sup> *She Moves Through the Fair* is a traditional Irish folk song usually credited to Padraic Colum. Within the song the narrator sees his lover move away from him through the fair, after telling him that since her family will approve of the wedding. His lover later returns in the form of a ghost, implying tragedy and a reunion in the afterlife.

performance at the Eleanor Rathbone lecture theatre at Liverpool University. The response from the audience was overwhelmingly positive. Although *Go, Lovely Rose* only had a single performance in London we did manage to attract three independent theatre critics. John O'Brien writing for *Londontheatre1* appreciated the visual element of the piece. In a four-star review he observed:

It is this life-changing moment that *Go, Lovely Rose* so compellingly explores... His animations [Paul Donnellon] for this play are equally striking. His evocations of the young Rose on the beach, or the grim-faced Archbishop O'Connell are spot on, but the most powerful is the one of the famine ship crossing the Atlantic in the 1840s which features a massive black cloud enveloping the entire ship, not for nothing were these called coffin ships.<sup>20</sup>

O'Brien was equally impressed with the ending effect, linking it with the strong feminist message I had hoped would translate for the audience:

The play ends with a series on very moving photos/film footage of the Fitzgerald Kennedy family together on holiday and at JFK's inauguration. *Lovely Rose* is there, a proud mother, but equally an incomplete life. It's a sobering reminder that for every advance there is a price to pay. And it's women, like Rose Fitzgerald, who have all too often paid that price with their lives.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> John O' Brien, *Londontheatre 1* (23 March 2019). <https://www.londontheatre1.com/reviews/play/go-lovely-rose-by-mary-manning-at-the-london-irish-centre/>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Michael Davis, writing for *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, offered the production a four-star review and also praised the visual element while recognising the importance of rediscovering neglected work:

The animation provided by Paul Donnellon that is played behind Rose complements Gallagher's performance – not only fleshing out what's spoken but possessing a playfulness and subtle wit....The reappraisal of female authors from Ireland continues to gain momentum, including novelist and playwright Mary Manning. One of her plays regarding a notable matriarch encapsulates the 'choices' that even the most privileged of women at the turn of the century faced and what they said goodbye to...<sup>22</sup>

London Olio's chose to lavish praise on the acting; in another four star review the critic commented:

This glimpse into the early life of the woman who would become the matriarch of a political dynasty like no other, the Kennedys, is beautifully brought to life by recent The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama graduate Siobhan Gallagher, who not only has a strong physical resemblance to Rose, but also masters the Bostonian accent perfectly....This play is just a snap shot of Rose's life, but it left you wanting to find out more about her and the woman she would eventually become. She may not have had the chance of being the first female president of the USA (something we are shockingly still waiting for more than one hundred years later), but she was still someone who shaped American politics by contributing to the political success of her children.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Davis, *Breaking the Fourth Wall*. 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 2019. <https://breaking-the-fourth-wall.com/2019/03/24/go-lovely-rose-irish-cultural-centre-review/>

<sup>23</sup> London-Olios, April 14<sup>th</sup> 2019. <https://london-olios.com/2019/04/14/go-lovely-rose/>



If we use these critical responses as a barometer, it is reasonable to assume that Manning's piece and its themes of strong feminine courage still speaks to an audience today. It is wonderful to conceive that Manning as an eighty-one-year-old could produce a piece that had the power to deeply move an audience. Soon after the Liverpool performance I was approached by arts producer Emma Smith from the Liverpool Irish Festival who invited the production to play several performances at Liverpool Tate Modern during a season of work she was curating at the gallery entitled 'IN: visible Women' in October 2019. Once again, the play met with an enthusiastic response from the audience.

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