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The Trickle Down Effect:
The 1911/1912 Abbey
Theatre Tour of America
and its impact on early
African American Theatre

Luke Devlin

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Abstract

This thesis will examine the direct and indirect impact the Irish National theatre had upon American theatre in general and the African American theatre in particular. It discusses the relationship between the Irish theatrical movement during the Irish Literary Renaissance and the drama that was produced during the Harlem Renaissance. To do this Rorty's concepts of the 'strong poet' and 'ironist' will be utilized. The bleeding and cross contamination of culture, it is contended, was due to the American tour that the Irish Players undertook in 1911/12. The tour, although staged in white theatre houses and attended by a mainly white audience, had a sizeable impact on the American theatrical landscape. This thesis will chart the course of this change, from the tour through to the beginnings of the Harlem Renaissance. From the Abbey Theatre to the Little Theatre movement and from there to the African American theatre a continuous thread of de-reification, of cultural awakenings is established. In essence, the source of the African American theatre, both the Artistic stylings and hopes of Alain Locke and the propaganda aspirations of W.E.B. DuBois will be referred back to the Irish tour.

Declarations Page

This is to certify that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed:

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Thesis layout

This thesis will examine the impact the Irish National theatre had upon American theatre in general and the African American theatre in particular. The main question of the thesis is what impact, both direct and indirect did the Abbey theatre tour of 1911/12 have on the African American theatre of the Harlem Renaissance. These direct and indirect linkages will be explored, particularly the effect that the Abbey Theatre's 1911/12 tour had upon the American theatrical landscape. The thesis will reveal how the Abbey tour of America allowed for the movement new theatre from mainstream/Broadway/'star' driven theatre to a more experimental and avant garde endeavour. It will reveal the relationship between the Irish theatrical movement during the Irish Literary Renaissance and the drama that was produced during the Harlem Renaissance via the Little Theatre movement. The thesis will emphasise that the bleeding between and cross contamination of culture, from Irish to white American and white American to African American was due to the American tour that the Irish Players undertook in 1911/12. The tour, although staged in white theatre houses and attended by a mainly white audience had a sizeable impact on the American theatrical landscape. This thesis will chart the course of this change, from the tour to the emergence of the Little Theatre movement and on to the beginnings of the Harlem Renaissance. From the Abbey Theatre to the Little Theatre movement and from there to the African American Little Theatre movement a continuous thread of de-reification, of cultural awakenings and dialectic theatre will be established. In essence, the political, social and artistic awakenings of the African American theatre, the hopes of Alain Locke's art theatre and the propaganda aspirations of W.E.B. DuBois will be referred back to the Irish tour. It is not the claim of this thesis that there are many (although there are some) direct links between the Abbey Theatre and the African

American theatre that emerged during the Harlem Renaissance. Rather it will argue that the Abbey Theatre created a theoretical and artistic framework whereby the African American theatre could exist, indeed must exist, if America was to create a truly American theatre.

This introduction will look at the Irish and African American communities and examine the need that both cultures had for a theatre where they could voice their concerns and communities' anxieties and successes. The chapter will provide the theoretical framework for the thesis, namely Richard Rorty's concept of the 'strong poet' in his text *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. His concept of 'strong poet', a person that can master the utility of language, a person that can exploit language and create new meanings, is central to the idea of dialectic theatre that the Irish and African American theatres utilised to their advantage. Rorty's use of the concept of the 'strong poet' as a creator of language, a destroyer of meaning and lexical performer is central to the concept behind the thesis. English, a language that was forced upon both the Irish and African American dramatist became a defining aspect of their plays, literature and concept of themselves. The difference in their lexicon compared to their colonial and slave masters was not only a means to differentiate themselves, it was a potential art form that lay dormant until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It was, and to a greater or lesser extent still is, the single most powerful tool that either culture have. Their language, use of words and matrixes of meaning still reside outside what is called 'received pronunciation'. Augusto Boal's concepts of the 'Theatre of the Oppressed' will also be examined in relation to what the two communities were expressing in their theatre.

The use of the 'strong poet' in the thesis allows for the examination and dissection of the theatre as a social construct, one that represents the goals of a people and allows for the repatriation of their cultures from others to themselves. The Irish and African American theatre hoped to be the centrifugal force radiating outward from the theatre which could, at best, redefine the place of their culture in society and at worst allow them to assert their own identity onto the stage. To this point, it could be argued, Irish and African American theatre

were subjected to centripetal forces, as the English and white American theatres asserted artistic authority over them. As an access point to the two movements this thesis will examine the Irish and African American theatre, not through the lens of close readings of plays or a discussion regarding the performativity of the two theatrical movements. The thesis will look at the use of language, the use of culture and the use of history as the catalyst for the two culture's attempts to both subvert and radically change the normative traditions of the British and white American theatres. This thesis will argue that the 'strong poet', a term that will be explained more fully during the introduction, is the cornerstone of these movements and is the originator of many of the changes that occurred on stage in American theatre during the 1910's and 1920's. The 'strong poet' achieved this through dexterous manipulation of language, history, culture and expectation and through these endeavours allowed the Irish literary renaissance and the Harlem renaissance to be the mouse that roared.

Setting the Stage

The focus of this thesis, as has been stated, is the effect the Irish theatre had on African American theatre through the Abbey Theatre's 1911/12 American tour, however, the thesis must first fill in some of the history of the theatre in America and Ireland that may not be immediately apparent. To this end Chapter 2 examines the need to create a theatre in Ireland for the Irish and goes on to recount the tour that the Abbey Theatre undertook. Chapter 3 takes a broad look at the African American theatre in America prior to the arrival of the Abbey Theatre. This is necessary for several reasons, namely; a) To show that African American theatre had a strong heritage in America – one that dated back to the early 1800's. The idea, that the omission of this chapter could suggest, that the African American theatre that emerged during the Harlem renaissance was created in a vacuum needs to be addressed and some level of scrutiny needs to be made of the African American engagement with minstrel theatre. b) The chapter also shows a linear progression, and a development of the 'strong poet' in African

American theatre. Again, it would have been at best lazy, at worst disingenuous to so many artists not to have mentioned. c) The discussion of African American theatre and the involvement of African American actors on the American stage allows for the discussion of Bert Williams, an actor that of late has received ever greater accolades for his role in theatre and film and has been the subject of many biographies and the 2005 excellent historical fiction novel *Dancing in the Dark* by Caryl Phillips.

As a counter-point to the African American theatre, the thesis briefly examines the state of the mainstream American theatre at the turn of the twentieth century. It looks at the centralisation of the American theatre in New York by the Theatre Syndicate and the struggle between the Syndicate and the Shubert Brother's. This is necessary to set the background for the following discussion on the Little Theatre Movement as the dismantlement of the Syndicate, the role of the smaller theatre owners and the scaling back of the melodramatic play all coalesced in increasing the need and desire for a different type of theatre and a different type of play that could represent new American values. The fall of the Syndicate coincides with the Abbey Theatre tour and it will be argued that through the Abbey Theatre's interaction with these small theatre groups they showed American theatre a different way of creating theatre. The Little Theatre movement's existence was in part as an attempt to reclaim theatre for the smaller companies. Their focus was not on the melodramatic plays that were being staged on Broadway, but on plays that were being created by American authors that spoke to and about American society. This, in turn, leads to a discussion of Eugene O'Neill, the man that, along with Frederic Ridgely Torrence, is credited with sketching the first three dimensional African American characters to appear on stage. The discussion centering on *The Emperor Jones* leads to the examination of the lasting impact that Bert Williams and Charles Gilpin had on African American theatre. That penultimate chapter leads to a discussion concerning the framework of an African American theatre and lays out the conflicting arguments put forward by Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois regarding theatres purpose in society. This ties in neatly with the

discussions regarding Irish theatre and the need to explore cultural meaning on a stage which is located in, and plays that are written by, portrayed by and attended by members of that culture.

‘Strong Poets’

If one examines the Irish and African American theatrical scene, and for that matter if one looks at the majority of their cultural output before the turn of the twentieth century, a pattern emerges that is recognisable as an inherent trait of colonialism. In both societies their artistic imagination and cultural endeavours are inspired by, staged for, and portrayed through, the art of their colonial masters and perceived societal betters. Ireland, England’s first colony, planted by English settlers as far back as 1556 (Montaño, 187), had a literary renaissance at the turn of the twentieth century. This revival not only encouraged authors and playwrights to throw off the shackles of the perceived British-ness of their language and subject matter, but encouraged an amalgamation of what was viewed as ‘Irish’ and ‘British’ into a new and exciting art form. That the Irish and African American people had such a long history with their oppressors, the fact that both cultures had their own art denigrated through their contact with outsiders and that both cultures, despite their lack of education and opportunities at home, sought to de-reify their portrayals and create something new within their own culture, speaks to the shared bonds, literal and figurative, between the two peoples. The Irish and African American communities share a remarkable quirk in history that, in the context of this thesis, is of interest. The Irish education system was established in October 1831 with the Stanley Letter. Edward Stanley was then the Chief Secretary for Ireland, later was to become Edward Smith-Stanley, 14th Earl of Derby Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (Commission of Inquiry into Primary Education (Ireland), 22). The English did not receive national education until the The Elementary Education Act 1870 which introduced mass elementary schooling into England and Wales for the first time (Brockliss & Sheldon 65). The New York Legislature

funded the African Free School in New York in 1801 and by doing so the school became the first state funded school in America. James Weldon Johnson argues that this school was the precursor of the New York public school system. The fact that both Irish and African American children had access to state sponsored education systems before their English or white American children counterparts is a curious oddity, and something that cannot be ignored if one is to examine the origins of a literary and artistic explosion in both cultures within a century of schooling being established. The fact of an African American school existing in New York in the early nineteenth century will be examined further in Chapter three of this thesis.

Role Play

The recognition of Ireland's unique place in the western world, a place where the European white population was perceived by some as more akin to non-European indigenous people has been commented upon by many historians. Although in his article *Locating and Dislocating Ireland in Colonial and Post-colonial Studies* Joe Cleary gives this idea little credence, Noel Ignatiev, in his book *How the Irish became White*, argues that the Irish, particularly once they left Ireland, were seen as little better than non-European indigenous peoples by white settlers. The oppression that the Irish endured, both politically and economically, in their home country was observed by Friedrich Engels in 1856. On returning from a visit to Ireland, he noted in correspondence with Karl Marx that 'Ireland may be regarded as the first English colony and as one which because of its close proximity is still goverened [sic] in exactly the same old way, and here one can observe that the so-called liberty of English citizens is based on the oppression of the colonies' (Cleary, 120). Ireland was obviously both an integral part of the United Kingdom and yet held a very definite position as 'other'.

From the outset the Irish Cultural Renaissance was closely associated with the theatre. Yeats, who founded the Irish Literary Society in 1891 and the National Literary Society in 1892, both

driving forces of the literary revival and explosion of artistic endeavour at the turn of the twentieth century, also founded the Irish Literary Theatre in 1897, the Irish National Theatre Society in 1902 and the Abbey Theatre in 1904 (Sternlicht, 13). Yeats, Lady Gregory, A.E. Russell, Shaw and Synge made the stage a site for cultural examination and exploration. The stage would become a political arena where Irish playwrights could examine and critique their own influences and culture. The theatre would become a political actor, encouraging a population to laud or protest their self-representations. It would become the counterweight to the highly conservative and Catholic nationalism that was championed by Sinn Fein and its political leader Arthur Griffith. Indeed theatre was a political game that could end in public recriminations and riots if it was not seen to be advocating Ireland as anything but pure. Arthur Griffith felt so strongly about J.M. Synge's play *In the Shadow of the Glen* that he responded by writing a conservative and moral alternative titled *In a Real Wicklow Glen* (Pilkington, 42). The fact that *In the Shadow of the Glen* was construed to have called into question the virtue of Irish womanhood and allegedly slandered the Irish peasant meant that the play could not be staged unchallenged. However, the mores and folkways of conservative Catholic Ireland would routinely be examined and challenged on the most public of arenas by the artists of the day. The desire for self-rule and self-determination would be stated and examined through folklore and a variety of revisionary readings of Irish history. To both aid and counteract this wave of nationalism the Irish stage would become the wind of change that would generate a wave of excitement and condemnation of theatre in Ireland, Europe and, as this thesis argues, America. However, the stage in Ireland was, first and foremost, a vehicle for the creation and examination of an Irish identity. The theatre would be situated in Ireland, it would stage plays penned by Irish playwrights about Irish people and have those characters portrayed by Irish actors. The plays would be produced in front of an Irish audience and received by Irish critics. In a land of peasants theatre would become a new and thriving cottage industry.

Cultural Bruising

In America the black population were slowly integrating themselves into a few small areas of mainstream culture. By the late 1800's horse racing had become a popular and profitable sport in America and the ranks of jockeys were made up of mainly African Americans. The first Kentucky Derby was won by Oliver Lewis - a black jockey (Johnson, 60). Isaac Murphy, perhaps the greatest American jockey of all time, was an African American¹. On June 17th 1890 a black-Canadian by the name of George Dixon travelled to London and defeated a British boxer by the name of Nunc Wallace to win the Bantamweight boxing championship of the world (Glenn, 51). Dixon, whilst world featherweight champion, toured America with a vaudeville group called 'The George Dixon Speciality Company' (Ibid, 56). George found that boxing aficionados dropped (temporarily) their racist presumptions when supporting his boxing endeavours and brought this cross race appeal to the stage. George Dixon, by appearing in public as both a black boxer and the leader of a minstrel company, entered the two arenas that were most open to the black entertainer. Despite these small advances white America was very aware of the dangers of allowing African American fighters and entertainers too much influence in both black and white communities. Notwithstanding his success, Jack Johnson, the first African American heavyweight champion of the world after his defeat of Jim Jefferies in Reno on 4th July 1910 was not met with as much white understanding (Johnson 1930, 65). His victory was so popular among the black community and so vilified among the white that Congress passed a law prohibiting the inter-state exhibition of moving pictures of

¹ In the Saratoga season of 1882 he won 49 of his 51 races, and was the first jockey to ride three winners in the Kentucky Derby (Johnson, 61).

prize fights in an attempt to contain the euphoria of the African American communities (ibid, 67).

The showing and imitation of African American bodies proved to be valuable commodity in the market place. The comedic minstrel, the aggressive and dominant boxer, the jockey as a tamer of wild and powerful beasts all alluded to both the primitive and raw potency of these black bodies. These men, whilst being pioneers of the African American in mainstream popular culture, were also the first African Americans to carve out a niche for black people to follow the 'American Dream'. As Booker T. Washington was advocating economic and commercial rights, W.E.B. DuBois demanding equality and Marcus Garvey driving the 'Back to Africa' agenda, these were among the first to follow that purely American dream – get rich. However, for these men to partake of society they had to establish their various theatrical stages and act out complex and challenging role. Their 'poetry' was made manifest through whip, banjo and fist, their successes dictated by their physicality and dexterity. Their stage, not as steeped in the traditions of theatre as those on Broadway and Chicago, had a greater audience yet carried with it a greater chance of failure.

The increased appreciation of the African American dialect, particularly of the Southern dialect, was brought from the plantations to the stage by men eager to bring a new form of entertainment to a public used to the refinement and grandeur of mainstream melodrama theatre. However, unlike the experiences of Synge, Yeats, Lady Gregory et al, the African American culture that began to appear on the American stage was not portrayed by black actors but by white actors in black face. The age of the minstrel arrived in America as a means to both access and define African American culture. As will be discussed in Chapter two, once Thomas Dartmore Rice, accredited with bringing 'Jim Crow' to the American stage in 1830, brought the African American dialect to the masses it almost overnight made black America accessible to the white mainstream whilst giving them ownership and creative control over the African American character. However, as the twentieth century progressed, there were artists

that attempted to subvert the minstrel from within. Bert Williams and George Walker, perhaps the greatest and most well-known African American actors of the early twentieth century, began to subtly change the role of the minstrel. It has been noted that 'on stage, audiences ostensibly saw what audiences had seen for decades: a character in blackface paint stuck at the lowest rung of the social ladder ... but as reinvented by Williams, the figure was not a caricature. Comical, yes, but not a buffoon' (Dunson, 60). The fight against almost one hundred years of African American misrepresentation on stage was in its nascence. A new more subtle dialogue was being pursued by black practitioners of minstrelsy, one that would have the power to entertain and subvert expectation in equal measure.

Solidarity Reg

In Richard Rorty's book *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* he states in the introduction that

ever since Hegel ... historicist thinkers have tried to get beyond ... [a] ... familiar standoff. They have denied that there is such a thing as "human nature" or the "deepest level of the self." Their strategy has been to insist that socialization, and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down - that there is nothing "beneath" socialization or prior to history which is definatory of the human (Rorty, xiii).

He goes on to ask 'What is it to inhabit a rich twentieth-century democratic society' and 'How can an inhabitant of such a society be more than the enactor of a role in a previously written script?' (ibid, xiii). This question: can a person be more than the enactor of a role in a previously written script, is central to this thesis. Indeed this question strikes at the heart of what differentiates culture and society from subaltern cultures and society. When one examines American theatre, British theatre, Irish theatre and African American theatre they all share many aspects and are all inherently related to one another. They all, for the most part, stage some form of show for the enjoyment/interest of the public. They stage these shows, again mostly, in theatres or other spaces that are set aside for theatrical artistic endeavour. They all depend on playwrights and/or musicians to pen the dialogue and music for the productions and they all request an audience to view the performance. As such, on a

superficial level, Rorty's question seems to be rhetorical. We are all, it could be argued, Stanislavski-esque, methodically going about our lives, performing our multifarious roles assigned for us by society through Durkheim's division of labour². Rorty states that

All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. I shall call these words a person's "final vocabulary" (Rorty, 73).

This is the life that is taught, the reality that is created and the vocabulary that is dictated to everyone by societal and cultural norms. This 'final language' is the descriptor of our lives, the beat to which we march and is at the heart of all our actions. Just as this 'final vocabulary' is, as described, intrinsically personal – it is the device through which we communicate personality, it also is inherently universal as it is the basis by which we presume to be understood. In the theatre, this 'final vocabulary' could be associated with the description and normative behaviours of characters that are sketched out by playwrights. The fast talking urban African American, the dim witted Irishman, the exacting German or the off-handed English gentleman are all characters that are well known clichés of culture. These characters, therefore, could be said to be a part of our 'final vocabulary', as they are so ingrained on our societal conscience that they can be recognised moments after their introduction. Indeed, their presence may be so ubiquitous that it may even be called omnipresent and can be logged under presumed knowledge. Though there must be a tacit acknowledgement of the existence of a 'final vocabulary'; after all my expectation is for the thesis to be communicated through a

² For further information on Durkheim's division of labour please see his published doctoral dissertation *The Division of Labour in Society* in which he sets out the need for society to divide itself into different specialities in an attempt to make the most use of everybody's skillset. He argues that through productivity humanity will remain coherent and happy.

medium universally understood by English readers, the final vocabulary does not go unchallenged.

Returning to Rorty he states that we

shall define an "ironist" as someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old (Rorty 73).

This is an example of the strength of the 'strong poet'. The 'ironist' is a person who can paint in many colours, not merely primary blocks; a person with the lexical dexterity to trapeze between concrete language and land softly in a tissue of quotations of their own devising. The game of 'playing the new off against the old' is precisely what the playwrights of the Irish and African American renaissances did. They sacrificed nothing at the altar of convention, cherry picking the sweetest fruit from both their own and their colonial cultures to make something new, different and fresh. Neither the Irish or African American playwrights 'discovered' a new culture. The culture that they projected through their plays and the language that their characters uttered may never have been heard off the stage, however, the heady mix of cultural repatriation and re-examination by the 'strong poets' in society brought forth an exciting and novel spectacle.

The 'strong poet'

spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game. She worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being. But she cannot give a criterion of wrongness. So, the more she is driven to articulate her situation in philosophical terms, the more she reminds herself of her rootlessness (Rorty 75).

Time and again we see the enquiring mind and nimble dialect of the ‘strong poet’. This thesis uses this concept and encourages the reader to engage with the construction of the Irish and Harlem renaissance’s theatre in terms of language and cultural creation. To this end the thesis focuses on the spaces between society and theatre, the gap between the recording and telling of society. The details of life described by Synge in *Rider’s to the Sea*, the racial discoveries that are relayed by Grimke in *Rachel*, the powerful emergence of Brutus Jones in *The Emperor Jones* or the pseudo-bravado of Christy Mahon in *Playboy of the Western World* are considered secondary in this thesis to the manner by which these plays emerged from a culture that, to that point, had not been given their own voice on the stage. Rorty claims that ‘we are doomed to spend our conscious lives trying to escape from contingency rather than, like the strong poet, acknowledging and appropriating contingency’ (ibid, 28). Acknowledging and appropriating contingency, allowing for, yet working against the status quo and through the manipulation of pre-existing language creating new meanings, new methods of thought and new ideologies is the cornerstone of the theatre that was promulgated by the Irish and African American theatres.

As Tracey Mishkin said in her book *The Harlem and Irish Renaissance* ‘Because, like the Irish, they [African Americans] believed possessing a noble past facilitates gaining respect in the present, African American theorizing radical identity had to address their African heritage’ (Mishkin, 74). She continues ‘As Arthur Schomberg, a patron of the Harlem Renaissance wrote “[t]he American Negro must remake his past in order to create his future”’ (ibid 74). In essence this is declaring the need for a ‘strong poet’ and ‘ironist’ to make new, amalgamate, recreate and collage an identity where once there may have been many, or indeed none that could challenge orthodox beliefs. When the axiom of one’s culture was that their culture was ‘the work of heathen savages ... and it has nothing to do with art’ (ibid 74) the creation of an identity may take a paramount importance. To this end, like a true ‘strong poet’ and ‘ironist’ the artists of the Irish and Harlem renaissances explored the depth of the intrinsic and extrinsic

cultures in which they were immersed. Both cultures took the blueprints of the coloniser's and master's societies and broke them, piecing them back together in a multi-society collage, incorporating the pieces of that culture that 'fit' best with their own. The authors and playwrights became, like Legba (Gates, 32), masters of 'all languages' and became interpreters of myths and cultures (ibid, 32).³ Legba is 'a principle of fluidity, of uncertainty, of the indeterminacy *even in one's inscribed fate*' (my italics) (ibid, 32). Here Legba becomes the embodiment of the 'strong poet' inherently recognising contingency and embracing the many aspects, nuances, intricacies, subtleties and differences that are inherent in the spoken and written word, teasing out many possible meanings when previously there may have been but one. So too, in Ireland and in America, people long held under the heel of their colonial and actual masters wove their own and the alien culture into a coherent whole, something that crossed the divide and expressed meaning to both cultures in the creation and production of the work.

The Irish and African American authors had to contend with the reality that many members of the population were ignorant of their native tongue. The words that they did speak sat uneasily on their lips, the language that they utilised lacked the utility to encompass the historical realities that they had to contend with. Heart and mind once flowed organically; their native language describing themselves completely, however, the orbit of their social solar system was interrupted by a foreign sun. By the twentieth century, ironically, the lingua franca of both America and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was English and their dominant

³ In Africa, the god Legba is a trickster or culture hero who, like Prometheus, stole fire to aid humanity. Legba makes trouble, disrupts harmony and is regarded as a divinity with transformative powers (P. duBois 2014, 148).

culture was British. Despite this both the African American and Irish people used their overseer's language and culture for their own purposes. The plays, poetry and literature that they produced utilized their own newly created lexicon, a language fashioned through the filtering of their own speech patterns and idioms with English. Synge, in a preface to *The Playboy of the Western World*, asserts that the speech utilised in the play is 'as deliciously flavoured as a nut or an apple' (Blunt, 75). The analogy of language to the product of the soil is apt. The language used in the early productions of the Irish theatre was one that was not commonly heard in public places of repute and good standing. The dialogue was uttered in a facsimile of the earthy language of the peasant classes. However, like nature, in which Synge suggests it is deeply rooted, this language seasons English with an Irish grounding and new sprightly air that differentiates it completely from the English language one could hear in the rest of Britain. This new and exciting lilt and vocabulary does not necessarily bring a truth to the stage, but it may subvert supposed truths. Society, culture and economics are played out on many stages, but on the Abbey stage all three facets were, at the same time, artistically disregarded yet were central to the whole enterprise.

Nietzsche's definition of truth as a 'mobile army of metaphors' amounted to saying that the idea of 'representing reality by means of language, and thus the idea of finding a single context for all human lives, should be abandoned' (Rorty, 27). This argument is rooted in the idea of a 'final vocabulary' – namely that we all exist in a uniform reality. It seems to suggest that if we could return to the tower of Babel, if we could recapture the singularity of language that existed then, we would at least have the same perspectives on morality, humanity, theology and society as there would be only one way to describe any of it. Nietzsche, perhaps rightly, states that the project should be abandoned as we can never return to the idea of one descriptor for existence. The world is too nuanced for such a project to be sustained. Indeed, it could be suggested, that this single vocabulary could never account for the African Americans that were still in bondage at the turn of the nineteenth century or indeed for the millions of dispossessed

and disenfranchised Irish that lived on the produce of their smallholdings. Both these Counties communed in a single vocabulary, both these countries created a reality that was at odds with their stated lofty goals of humanitarianism and the pursuit of liberty.

The English dialect that the African and Irish people created forged a reality which the polite society represented in much of the British and American literature and stage had to contend with. The army of metaphors that Nietzsche was describing were swiftly mobilised by Irish and African American authors and artists during the twentieth century and marched, as to war, on the English vernacular. However, the struggle for artistic creation encountered by the Irish and African American theatre was based on both the cultural work of the ‘strong poet’ and ‘ironist’ and the use of a new and fresh dialect on stage. James Weldon Johnson, along with many African American artist and intellectuals sought an art that was ‘larger than dialect’ that would be appropriate for a ‘high art’ (Mishkin, 48). To this end he regarded the work of the Irish Renaissance and the theatre that it produced to be the perfect blueprint for the art that the African American artist should produce (ibid 48). There was resistance, however, to the idea of a more ‘mediated dialect’, notably by Zora Neal Hurston (ibid 478). The issue was that the Irish had a remembered mythology and history from which to draw stories and plays that bridged the gap from old to new. The African American artist had no history from which he could draw reputable material – there was no well from which the African American artist could draw a new old dialect that could mitigate against the bad reputation of the African American dialect, there were no ancient sagas or mythological hero’s that could ennoble the African American idiom (ibid 48). Their ‘strong poets’ had more freedoms yet far less material from which they could amass a new vocabulary. The issue of creating a new dialect is underlined by the political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson when he is quoted by Mishkin as saying: ‘Those who attempted to substitute English dialects discovered that the long derogation by both dominant and subaltern group members rendered dignifying the extremely difficult’ (Mishkin 48).

White Face, Black hands

Clarence Lusane in his book *The Black History of the White House* asserts that most of the hands that built the White House were black hands (Lusane, 48). The vivid imagery that this provides aside, it shows how integral the African American was in building, forming and maintaining the American state. Indeed one of the foundation stones of the state was slavery and the recognition of the necessity to maintain this status of black community within its society and culture. There is something quite ironic in the fact that in 1915 *The Birth of a Nation* was the first film screened in the Whitehouse. That this bigoted and racist diatribe against the African American community was allowed to be screened in one of the Americas most revered buildings, a building whose very existence was due to the labour of black hands, reveals the tacit recognition and approbation of benevolent racism by the president of the United States. Daniel Bernardi, in his essay 'Blacks in Early Cinema', states that through the film the audience could only experience 'a polarized caricature of former slaves as either "faithful souls" loyal to the legacy of whiteness or overly sexualized "brutes" out for revenge' (Bernardi, 23). The slave was the very definition of a 'final vocabulary', one where the lexicon was both cerebral and physical. The film succeeded in part due to lazy apperception of the audience. The film, however, reveals that there are a variety of truths, and that perhaps the only consistency in history and language is revisionism and relativism. Oscar Wilde wrote in 'The Artist as a Critic – Part 1' that 'the only duty we owe to history is to rewrite it' (Wilde, 256). To this noble cause white America spent many hours casting the African American and white American roles in binaries that captured and entangled the former in stereotypical chains just as firmly as the slave was placed in actual chains.

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Rorty eludes to this rewriting as he states

It became possible to juggle several descriptions of the same event without asking which one was right - to see redescription [sic] as a tool rather than a claim to have discovered essence. It thereby became possible to see a new vocabulary not as something which was supposed to replace all other vocabularies, something which

claimed to represent reality, but simply as one more vocabulary, one more human project, one person's chosen metaphoric (Rorty, 39).

The concept of 'one more vocabulary' as opposed to a 'final vocabulary' is something that resides at the heart of the Irish and African American experience. The well of experiences that they draw from are esoteric to their cultural experiences. The relationship of national history to experienced history and the cleavages that exist between the two are, in essence, the crux of the Irish and African American art at the turn of the twentieth century. The mores that they are attempting to verbalise are both unique to their own culture and universally understood. In this way they are creating 'neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real' (Rorty 73) but 'playing the new off against the old' (ibid 73). The vocabulary, the language, the descriptors that they use are one more addition to a pre-existing vocabulary, a universal addendum to a language that is experienced by all.

In both the African American and Irish stage, albeit some Irish theatre was portrayed in the Gaelic language, the plays were, for the most part, spoken in English. Language was taken by these people, broken, just as their people were for generations, and a vocabulary that encompassed a new idiom, a different 'human project' was created. It could be argued that the language of Synge and many of the Irish playwrights was truly created as the plays focused more on representation and less on authenticity. The characters portrayed by these cultures did not come free from societal constraints, however, but through them, new ideologies and personalities could be created within pre-existing social norms. On both sides of the Atlantic the characters that were born from these movements and the language through which they expressed themselves may never have existed in society but may have been a new theatricality brought to bear on a stage that was more used to Received Pronunciation. The 'human project' that these movements undertook created a theatre that amalgamated, collaged and fused mythology, cultural values, dialect and characters that represented a subaltern community and an imagined past and present.

As much as the thesis dwells on the society and culture that inspired these theatres the art emerged from real events. In 1847 the *Derby Mercury*, a British newspaper claimed of Ireland: ‘One year we are called upon to feed the population, the next to pay the cost of keeping those in order whom we have goodnature[dly] [sic] saved from starvation’ (de Nie, 126). This article, written during the height of the Great Irish famine, does not mention that Ireland was a net exporter of food to Britain at the time even though hundreds of thousands died of starvation (Butterly, Shepherd, 50). *Punch* magazine printed, on the 1st of April 1848, the infamous cartoon ‘The British Lion and the Irish Monkey’ which depicted the Irish as essentially a simian race (de Nie, 125). However, this overt racism was dwarfed in comparison to the American press’s relationship with the African American community even at the turn of the twentieth century. ‘[N]ationwide American audiences were well aware that lynching and race riots were frequent, well-attended occurrences, and white news-paper accounts were particularly noteworthy for their sensationalistic reportage’ (Chesnutt, 378). African American actors and audiences had to deal with the white appropriation of their culture and the enduring popularity of the minstrel characters Zip Coon, Uncle Tom and Sambo – all of which were created by white artists. The coalescence of the press, literature, theatre and the popular imagination against these cultures was yet one more obstacle that was thrust in the way of the Irish and African American desire for self-expression and self-enablement. To overcome the monstrous machinery of an aggressive and heavy handed state the artistic communities turned to the ‘strong poet’ in an attempt to redefine the boundaries of their societies. It was their lot to reconstruct and subvert the imagery and language of the oppressor to one that was useful and meaningful to the population and, perhaps most importantly, to revitalise a people that were for so long drifting in a foreign ocean without a map.

Rorty’s ‘strong-poet’ in a sense captures the desperate need for Irish and African American artists to establish a new dialogue between themselves and the outside world. The debates that occurred between the protagonists in the Irish theatre in attempting to decide what the theatre

was, what it should be and who it should represent spilled out from the stage and the rehearsals onto the streets and even into the Irish press. Similarly conversations regarding African American theatre, what its aims should be, who should decide its goals and what avenue it should take was a topic of some import, and one that fuelled the passions of the community.

Crafting the Stage

Theatre, perhaps more than any other art, is one that is intrinsically linked to the community. A play needs actors, playwrights, a building and, crucially, an audience to exist. Whether a play is an expression of 'art for art's sake' or a piece of propaganda, the medium through which it transmits its message is the community. The audience gets the opportunity to instantly react to the performance and the messages that lie therein. Several studies by Victor Turner and Erving Goffman which used theatrical paradigms to describe universal patterns suggest 'a universal dramatic structure parallel to social process: drama is that art whose subject, structure and action is social process' (Bennett, 10). One of the first manifestations of what would become the Irish National Theatre Society was located at the back of a butcher shop which was 'not wide enough to swing a cat in, well, not a good sized cat' (Fitzpatrick Dean, 62). The KRIGWA theatre, one of the most influential within the African American community, had its base of operations and stage in the basement of New York's 135th Street Library in Harlem (Young, 108). That these theatres had their foundations outside the proscenium arch, that they drew their audiences from the working classes that may not have been frequent theatre goers, increases the need for 'one more vocabulary' (Rorty, 39). The language that needs to be transmitted is the language of the common man. The manner of speech must ape the patterns and lexicon that the business of the day is transacted in. There needs to be a sensitivity, an acknowledgement of the audience that is transmitted through the subtlety of the art. The closeness of the environment, the nearness of the theatre to the street, the recognition of the play as representative of its people all dictate the need for a 'strong poet'; in essence a person

that can walk through the liminal spaces of culture, cherry pick the choicest of language from across the divide, and hang a play from the bounty.

From the Irish country peasant to the black urbanite, from the recalcitrant Irish tinker to the buffoonery of the Plantation slave the depiction of these two cultures had to be repatriated, reinvested with meaning and recast to undo the years of damaging stereotypes. The Irish and African American artists had to issue a new licence to explore their own culture. The Irish had to alter the foreign words and expressions from the mouths of their stage characters that were being drawn by the pens of foreign playwrights and create a new voice that encapsulated an Irish imagination and a more cohesive national agenda. For the African Americans the minstrel had to be undone, the power of that performance weakened and defeated before they could cast a new array of characters that could fully represent their community. The normative 'final vocabulary' would be undone and, phoenix-like, from the ashes of the misrepresentations and comfortable stereotypes that the American and British populations had grown used to over the years a new voice would be heard. An Irish tongue could speak truth, an African American voice could speak intelligently, both had the power of cognition and both needed a stage on which to give full voice to these newly acquired and powerful tools. Ireland, having a long and complicated history was able to embrace this new thought process as there was already a 'tissue of quotations' (Draine, 323) from which they could draw. The Irish had their home soil beneath their feet and with their ancient myths and legends still vibrant they could connect to their landscape and past in a way that was impossible for the African American community. The Irish could connect to a past, they had a history, albeit an ignominious one, which they could mould, reimagine and 'play... the new off against the old' (Rorty 73). The African American revolution had to be more thorough, more complete, as no matter how they wrote, how they managed to incorporate their history into their story, it was a history of displacement and theft. Their vocabulary could only be woven from fragments, from many languages and from many places. Their 'strong poets' would be the inheritors of

a different and carefully chosen metaphoric. Their poets would be trapeze artists, balancing on the colour line, each footstep taken with care and every forward step one movement further away from the disparaging white single consciousness.

Ships Passing in the Night

Within African American literature the concept of 'passing' has been a popular trope since the turn of the twentieth century. If one reads James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* or Charles W. Chesnutt's short story *The Wife of his Youth* it becomes obvious how important this concept is to the early theories of the dichotomies of blackness and whiteness. 'Passing' is a term that is used to describe a black man with pale skin 'passing' as a white man in society. The act gives him the ability to assimilate into a culture that is usually denied to him, and allows him insight into the workings of white America. The problems that were, and indeed still are, encountered by African Americans is captured by W.E.B. DuBois when he stated in his work *The Souls of Black Folk* 'the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color [sic] line' (DuBois 2008, 3). However, the issues that the African American communities dealt with on a day-to-day basis are summed up by DuBois as

the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (DuBois 2008, 8).

DuBois cogently depicts the 'twoness' of being black in white America, the concept of being inherently outside the system whilst simultaneously being a decisive cog within it. African American culture is both intricately meshed with, and yet distinct from its white counterpart. The theatre bestows a certain freedom on the artist to imitate, to be a single entity with two distinct minds, set of actions, needs and desires. In essence the theatre demands that its actors

employ a 'double consciousness' on the stage in order to get through any performance. Be it *Hamlet*, *The Iceman Cometh*, *In Dahomey*, *The Mikado* or indeed a Christmas Pantomime the actors that are on the stage play two roles; themselves and the characters that they portray. However, as I will deal with in Chapter two, access to the stage was not an avenue that was open to African Americans, the African Grove Theatre aside, until the latter half of the 19th century. Even then they did not gain access on their own terms but by playing black stereotypes to white audiences that had pre-conceived notions about what they expected to witness. Here we can apply the concept of a 'strong poet' to this self-effacing performance. Within the same meter that the white man writes his verse and lives his life, the African American subverts the language and subtly change its meaning. What does it mean to be white if a black man can survive and thrive in both his and their community? What power or race discourses are available to the white man that could obfuscate meaning to those nominally living on the other side of the colour line? African American actors could sway between two worlds, the black communities from which they came and whose language they could speak and the white world where they were making inroads through their intelligence and ability to delight the audiences with their malapropisms and linguistic dexterity.

The act of seeing 'himself through the revelation of the other world' is something that both the Irish and African American cultures had to contend with. Richard N. Lebow, in his book *White Britain and Black Ireland: the influence of stereotypes on colonial policy*, states that 'Anti-Irish sentiment was widespread amongst almost all segments of the British population ... they had been part of the British scene for centuries. The only novelty in Victorian times was the fact that the prejudice was increasingly articulated in the terminology of racial differentiation' (Lengel, 3). Indeed, once the Irish immigrated to America they found themselves competing with the African American communities for dominance in the common culture of the lowly. In America, as in Britain, the Irish soon found themselves caricatured by the media of the day as 'they also both suffered the scorn of those better situated. Along with

Jim Crow and Jim Dandy, the drunken, belligerent, and foolish Pat and Bridget were stock characters on the early stage' (Ignatiev, 2). Although the Irish and African Americans competed for recognition it was the black communities that would suffer the hardest and longest in white America.

Invisible blackness

A new concept of 'invisible blackness' entered the American social and legal lexicon and became a national consensus in many court decisions that ostracised many white woman, by declaring them black, after they associated with, or defended, black men during the height of the Jim Crow wave of terror (Sweet, 11). The concept of a 'white-looking black person' arose in the American North during the 1830's after the Nat Turner incident and reached as far as Louisiana by 1900 (ibid, 11). During this time the courts in America decreed that merely looking white did not necessarily lead to you being legally classed as white as, at times, juries could become confused over what race the person on trial was. To overcome the lack of objectivity of the association (who the person associates with, black people or white people) and physical appearance test, states began to adopt blood fraction laws (Cooper, 12). Blood fraction was the only race assessment tool, due to the perceived objectivity.⁴ The 1849 trial of *State v Whitmell Dempsey*, a man of European appearance, in North Carolina for possession of a firearm, it being illegal for 'any free negro, mulatto or free person of color [sic], to carry about his person or keep in his house any shotgun or other arms, specified, unless he obtain a

⁴ Blood fraction law, as the name would suggest, looked at your ancestry to see if you had any African American blood in your family tree. Quite often if the individual had 1/8 African blood they were considered African American, if it was less than that the person was deemed white (Cooper 12). In practice if one of your great grandparents was black you were legally black irrespective of actual skin colour (ibid 12).

licence from the county court' (Sweet, 174), became almost farcical as the courts ruled that Dempsey, with just one of his sixteen grandparents being black, was to be regarded by law as black. This contravened the North Carolina Act of 1777 which defined as white any person that had less than '1/8 Negro blood' (ibid, 175). The jury convicted him anyway and the appeal judges agreed with the ruling (ibid, 175). To combat this ambiguity by 1910 many states began to adopt the 'one-drop law' or 'traceable amount rule' whereby if you had any traceable black ancestry in your family you were deemed non-white (Cooper, 13). By this we can vividly see the stakes that are at play when a black person chose to don a white persona. The societal and legal framework was set up specifically to reinforce and reinvigorate the colour line.

Charles Chesnutt wrote extensively on the subject of 'passing' and the colour line, but it is in his 1899 short story 'The Wife of his Youth' in *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color-Line* that he shrewdly changes the concept of 'passing' as something that a black person not only is capable of doing in white society but can also do within their own communities. In these texts the concept of the 'Blue Vein Society', a club where only black people with skin pale enough to show the blue veins that run just under the skin can join, are brought to the reader. These societies call for the need of an educated elite, something that DuBois would later call the 'talented tenth' (DuBois, 59) and the need to create a gentrified and tiered African American society. However, Chesnutt's exploration of the concept of 'passing' was not mere artistic whimsy. The novelist, critic and editor William Dean Howells in a review that was published in 1900 in the *Atlantic Monthly* journal, entitled "Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt's Stories" stated that

Any one accustomed to study methods in fiction, to distinguish between good and bad art ... such a reader would probably have decided that the social situation in the piece[s] was studied wholly from the outside, by an observer with special opportunities for knowing it, who was, as it were, surprised into final sympathy. Now, however, it is known that the author of this story is of negro blood—diluted, indeed [but] it is not from their racial interest that we could first wish to speak of them, though that must have a very great and very just claim upon the critic. It is much more simply and directly, as works of art, that they make their appeal, and we must allow the force of this quite independently of the other interest (Howell *The Atlantic*).

Howells succinctly illuminates a concept and debate that still rages more than one hundred years on. Who has the right of representation, who should give voice to minorities and who should be listened to when they speak? Chesnutt, himself from mixed race lineage, was a keen observer of the process of passing. Chesnutt's task was twofold: 'African Americans are to prepare ... for social recognition and equality through writing; in turn the writing will lead whites "imperceptibly, unconsciously step by step to the desired state of feeling [full acceptance of blacks]' (Wright, Glass, x). Chesnutt, through his art, was attempting to draw attention to, analyse, and then subvert the debate regarding race in America. Chesnutt was at the forefront of the discussions around the colour line and was a powerful voice in recognising the need for a more tolerant and understanding approach to race relations. In 'The Wife of His Youth' Chesnutt was not discussing a 'passing' of a black man in a white society, but a black woman in a light skinned black community. Race is not a binary issue; subtleties abound, niches are created and defended and hierarchies are strictly guarded. Indeed 'passing' was not only a threat to white society, it was also viewed as a treachery by many in the African American community. It was thought that 'the unwritten law was that Negroes should form a solid unit against the white man ... Passing over to the whites was regarded as a betrayal' (Waters, 67).

The Ex

'Passing' as a subterfuge and sleight of hand that allows a person to play the character of a white citizen in a given situation is toyed with in literature. However, despite this chameleon like ability to blend into the background, or indeed foreground, of a society, this act does not come without a cost. As in 'The Wife of his Youth' and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* there comes a reckoning when the true nature of the individual needs to be decided upon. In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* this occurs when the narrator falls in love with a white woman and has to decide whether or not to tell her

his true racial background. In 'The Wife of his Youth' a founding member of the 'Blue Vein Society' must decide if he will accept a female black ex-slave into his house after she claims that they were once married on a plantation. Through these stories a deep fear, shame and disjoint is elucidated. The men, although successful, educated and erudite are never able to fully escape from their background. In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* Johnson paints a picture of the moment that he realises that he is of African American descent,

"Tell me, mother, am I a nigger?" There were tears in her eyes and I could see that she was suffering for me. And then it was that I looked at her critically for the first time. I had thought of her in a childish way only as the most beautiful woman in the world; now I looked at her searching for defects. I could see that her skin was almost brown, that her hair was not so soft as mine, and that she did differ in some way from the other ladies who came to the house; yet, even so, I could see that she was very beautiful, more beautiful than any of them (Johnson, 15).

Here Johnson points out the conflicting feelings that occurred within the African American communities when describing their bodies. The child is full of admiration regarding his mother's physical beauty. She is, in his own words, 'the most beautiful woman in the world' although now the world has taught him to look at the world through a different gaze. He now looks for 'defects', looking for the tell-tale signs of impurity and shame. The colour and curl of the hair, the tint of skin, these things, once a sign of her beauty, are now a symbol of his perceived ugliness. His world has shrunk and now encompasses only those things that are allowed to him and his newly discovered race. His early naïve belief in meritocracy has been distilled down to a two tier system of the haves and the have not's. This inability to escape history, through the eyes of a child in Johnson's novel, or through the bitter gaze of an upwardly mobile African American gent in Chesnut's 'The Wife of his Youth', seems to encompass and encapsulate the 'works of art' that are discussed by Howell in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Although, through reading these passages regarding 'passing' and analysing the act through this lens you get a sense of the conflict that is inherently associated with the performance, it is, arguably, on the stage that 'passing' became the plaything of the African American community. Rather than attempting to imitate white people in a white society, always unsure of their place within it and afraid of the potential repercussions if they are found out, on the stage they had, bizarrely, black actors pretending to be white actors pretending to be black actors pretending to be white actors. While this sounds confusing and almost implausible, this is indeed the entertainment that was enjoyed by many Americans during the late 1800's and the early 1900's.

Indeed, 'passing' could be read as a first hand example of the ability of the 'strong poet' to create something new from an old and trusted regime. The 'strong poet' creates a new entity out of two personalities, a new race out of black and white. This is not misogyny, this is a new, wilful and creative action that counters old prejudices and bigotry. A black person dwelling among white society, encountering it, examining it, relating to it and drawing from it gives rise to a new language, a new experience that can be built upon. As stated before, Rorty claimed that 'the strong poet's anxiety of influence, [is] his horror of finding himself to be only a copy or a replica (Rorty, 24). In the act of 'passing', the protagonist finds himself being more than 'only a copy or a replica'. He prowls on the same stage as the rest of humanity, yet stands apart, seeing his reality through the prism of his culture, his language. 'Passing' is a creative force that allows for a deeper understanding of the positive and negative qualities of both society and race. Despite the freedom that could be experienced by 'passing', white society found their own way of 'blackening up'. The African American was banned through legislation from adopting the persona of a white man but when the roles were reversed and the white man covered his face in burnt cork, you had to buy tickets to enter the show.

Black faces

James Weldon Johnson contends that ‘Negro minstrelsy, everyone ought to know, had its origins among the slaves of the old south’ (Johnson, 87). The form started as a brand of entertainment in which the slaves mimicked their masters’ customs, habits, style of dancing, walking and talking (Thompson, 58). This, of course, led to the white actors mimicking their black counterparts who were mimicking them. Add another layer of black actors mimicking white actors in black face who are mimicking black slaves who are satirizing their white masters and you are left wondering who the art form actually belongs to. John Strausbaugh in his book *Black like you: blackface, whiteface, insult & imitation in American popular culture* states that

Imitation plays a large role in how American Culture is formed. Black people who complain that Elvis or Eminem “stole” their music seem to be ignorant [sic] about how American popular culture is produced, disseminated, consumed and replicated ... Americans are cultural magpies, and borrowing from one another is a big part of the creolizing that makes Americans and American culture unique (Strausbaugh 33).

Although this may be true the magpies, for the most part, came from white middle class society – the shiny baubles that they collected and displayed for their amusement were derived mostly from those whose nests were not so feathered.

When the age of the minstrel arrived, it gave the African American actor the ability to ‘pass’ on stage as an actor rather than a black man, giving the artist the tools with which to sublimate different cultural preconceptions and turn racism into a force for understanding rather than fear, of light mainstream entertainment rather than the entertainment of the lynch mob. This ‘passing’ was without the elements of immediate danger that was faced by those African Americans that clandestinely entered white society that may have been in the audience. There was a veritable army of critics ready and willing to critique and criticise the minstrel art and there was always the danger of some trouble in the theatre, however, the fourth wall was a barrier behind which the actors could ply their craft with a degree of security and

understanding. The stage, although ostensibly the most public of arenas, is also a place that allows a quiet introspection on the part of a nation. The stage, in essence, becomes the psychiatrist's couch, a safe haven where the psychosis, inadequacies, anger, eccentricities, achievements, schizophrenia and hopes of a people can be examined and diagnosed. The stage bestowed an unfettered social space in which the African American artist could explore, lampoon, challenge and subvert ideas of whiteness and blackness without the necessity to constantly justify his reasons for doing so. Although minstrel shows were fundamentally a vehicle for comedy and song, many of the black actors that took to the stage set out to alter the humour, subtly angling it away from crude stereotypes and outright racism towards a more generalised humour that critiqued characters rather than people and social mores rather than races.

Minstrelsy is sometimes regarded as the completion of black culture (Lott, 58), that the white encapsulation of African American culture professionalised and justified it, giving the culture both professional and societal standing. To give the credit to white actors for first displaying the minstrel to the public is to ignore the syncretic nature of minstrelsy. It seems to rely on the presumption that there was a general equality of cultural bleeding between the various cultures in America. However, at the turn of the twentieth century the social and economic climate of the day played a major role in the demise of African American theatre companies (Perkins, 308). The idea that American culture and particularly theatre was a free and willing mixing of societies is an argument that functions as an explanation of racial politics that posits benevolent whites and passive African Americans (Smulyan, 26). Conceptually there was, even during the early years of minstrelsy, a grudging acknowledgement that the art form was

of benefit to the African American community⁵ (White, 12). The theatrical performance became a reified entertainment under the stewardship of the white theatre agents, and although the African American culture was, superficially at least, being referenced, the ownership and representation of that portrayal was never in the hands of the black population.

The work that was carried out by black actors at the turn of the twentieth century made the performers hyper-conscious of the veil⁶ (Sotiropoulos, 2). Indeed the double-consciousness that DuBois refers to is brought to its inevitable absurdity as Bert Williams, one of the ‘Two Real Coons’ explains that although he played the character of a ‘swell darky ... nothing seemed more absurd than to see a colored [sic] man making himself ridiculous in order to portray himself’ (ibid, 106).

In this way, the stage displays of the Irish and African American people were more about the reaffirmation and tacit acknowledgement of the need to continue the subjugation of these cultures than any willing attempt to tease out a meaning from the societies. Their performances needed to be hackneyed, the characters needed to be two dimensional and coarse, the stereotype needed to be simplistic and brutal, for the continued presumption of a sophisticated benevolent culture cherry picking the juiciest fruit from a culture of scraps and

⁵ White states that ‘African American minstrelsy nurtured the first generation of black entertainer and formed the bedrock of virtually all subsequent African American stage and theatrical performance – from vaudeville and musicals to stand-up comedy and film’ (White 12)

⁶ DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk* address the concept of ‘the veil’ and its relationship to African Americans in America. He conceptualises the veil as representing three facets of the African American psychology. For DuBois, the veil concept primarily refers to three things. First, the veil alludes to the black skin of African Americans, which is the most obvious demarcation of their difference from the white population. Secondly, the veil implies the white population’s lack of ability to see African Americans as “true” Americans. Thirdly, the veil refers to African Americans lack of clarity and power to recognise themselves out with what white America labels and prescribes for them.

half formed images. The inherent racism frames a multi-layered cultural canvas on which the only active brushstrokes would be painted by the culturally dominant group. That the minority cultures would eventually be sketched as cartoon characters, not quite in tune with their surroundings is, perhaps, the inevitable conclusion of art in such environments. However, like Rorty's 'strong poet' the Irish and African American artist, rather than changing the art, manipulated it and altered what the language represented. The use of an accurate dialectic, the infusion of native meaning, the honest representations of native characteristics are matters that will be covered in the other chapters, however, the steps that are taken at the genesis of these movements are as important as the end results. In this art ends, means, differences and sameness all amount to a collage of newness that allowed a people, once painted out of their own canvas, to establish a gallery to represent both their incorporation with and differences from their 'other'.

Thesis layout

Chapter two will look at the Irish theatre's emergence at the turn of the twentieth century. The drama that was being created by the Irish owed much of its style and ethos to a broader European nationalist theatre movement. In 1906 Karel Mušek, a translator who converted Synge's plays from English into Czech, visited the Abbey Theatre and met with Synge due to his fascination with the Abbey Theatre and its national agenda. He recognised that the Abbey Theatre shared many similarities with the Bohemian National Theatre in Prague (Mathews, 158). Synge was also intrigued by the Czech theatre, and was himself influenced by their use of dialect and peasant plays, although he was taken aback by the vast sums of money that they had at their disposal compared to the Irish theatre (ibid, 158). The Irish theatre, through their 1911/12 tour of America brought a type of theatre that was to challenge the theatre that had been in vogue in America for the previous century. However, first, the thesis will be discuss in Chapter 2 just how the Abbey Theatre became the representation of a disputed Irishness that

acknowledged and repudiated glaring and ugly stereotypes under which the Irish actor and playwright struggled to be accepted. There is a deep irony that the reason for the 1911 Abbey Theatre tour of America was an effort to raise finances for the continuation of the Irish players, yet through their contact with American theatre they were to challenge the power of the dollar on Broadway and throughout the American theatre.

The state of American theatre at the turn of the twentieth century, as will be revealed in Chapter four, was dominated by the melodrama, the star system and the centralised Theatre Syndicate. The theatre was a place of business where artistic endeavour was secondary to the ability of a play to make a profit. Many plays, and many actors' careers, were dominated by their profitability in typecast roles. The American theatre was still importing plays from Europe that would have been regarded as pastiche in their countries of origin. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was to inject realism onto the stage in Europe through the plays of Ibsen and Synge, however, by the time the Irish Players first stood on the American stage the English man Pinero, the Irishman Dion Boucicault, and the American David Belasco's, to name but a few, melodramatic and lavishly produced plays still dominated the New York stage.

Chapter three will examine the state of African American theatre, such as it was, since the arrival of the first slaves on American soil. The chapter will not flow in a chronological order from Chapter 2, however, it is vitally important to locate the impact that African Americans had on the American stage. The drama that blossomed during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920's in New York did not emerge from a void. African American theatre dates back to the early 1800's, with the establishment of the African Grove Theatre. The founding of this theatre, and the impact that it had on both the African American community, and the greater American theatre could, potentially, be overlooked as there seems to be too large a gap between the closure of the theatre and the emergence of the next African American theatrical movement. This would be an incorrect assumption to make for many reasons. First, it places

the African American intention to find a public place to celebrate its art at a time that there were still slaves in New York. Secondly, the Grove Theatre was the first theatre in America that could be called a playwright theatre, as those involved in the theatre wrote and staged their own plays. Third, the manner in which the theatre staged its plays, and the resilience that it showed throughout its brief history would, it could be argued, be a blueprint for the future of some African American theatres – particularly the KRIGWA theatre in Harlem.

The chapter will also look at the origins of Minstrelsy, a theatre that is, it could be argued, almost unique to the American stage. It is during the establishment of the Minstrel act that many of the tropes and stereotypes that were to hamstring the African American actor, not to mention the community in general, for the rest of the nineteenth and much of the early twentieth century would be created. However, despite the damage that was inflicted upon the African American community by their depiction by white actors wearing burnt cork, this chapter will also examine the origins of minstrelsy in America.

Chapter five will address the impact that the Abbey Theatre tour had upon the American stage, looking particularly at its close relationship with the emergence of the Little Theatre Movement in Chicago. There is, as will be revealed, a direct correlation between the Irish Players that toured America and some of the most important Little Theatres in Chicago. The plays that were produced, the manner of acting, the agenda that the Little Theatre set for itself could easily have been lifted from the Abbey Theatre, not to mention the sharing of plays, and stages, that occurred after the tours end. It is in this chapter that the concept American non-commercial theatre will be discussed, and how this, through the Chicago theatres elite' interaction with both French and Irish theatre, created spaces in which those who wished to create art for art's sake were allowed, for the first time in America, to thrive, albeit in an almost off-off-Broadway manner. An important concept that is sometimes overlooked in the workings of a theatre, particularly in a new theatre, is how the audience is created to view and appreciate the spectacle that is being staged for their benefit. Audience creation is as key to

the success of a play as market research and advertising is to a new product and in this section of the thesis the way that these early Little Theatres managed to create an environment in which they could thrive will be examined. This chapter will also focus on how the emergence of these new spaces allowed playwrights to discover new, and sometimes controversial, material that could be put on stage. Away from the bright lights and expense of Broadway. The little theatres that mushroomed all over the United States could be utilized in the same manner that the Abbey Theatre employed its stage, as a means of examining the mores and folkways, the taboos and restrictions that were inherent in their society. Just as the Abbey Theatre seemed to excavate a layer of Irish life that was consigned to history and deemed unimportant, so too America would be able to dig into its own social conscience and reveal to itself the truth and art that had, heretofore, lain dormant.

Chapter six will examine the effect that Eugene O'Neill has upon the Little Theatre Movement and track the emergence of a new American playwright from his youth to a wharf in Provincetown to Broadway. O'Neill's contribution to the American stage can hardly be underestimated, yet the influence that the Abbey Theatre, and particularly the Irish Players tour of America in 1911/12 cannot be denied. The influence of Synge and the impact that the Irish plays had upon O'Neill will be explored. However, the greatest gift that O'Neill bestowed to the American theatre in his early career has to be *The Emperor Jones*. The chapter will examine, not only the impact that this play had on the audience but on the impact that Charles Gilpin made on the stage. Gilpin, an all too briefly central figure in African American theatre, was, at the time, second only to Ira Aldridge, a product of the African Grove Theatre, in his influence on American theatre. Gilpin, an actor who cut his teeth in vaudeville with the Lafayette Theatre in New York and minstrelsy with the Williams and Walker productions would become the first African American actor to play a dramatic role on Broadway. This chapter will look at the reception of his role and lead to the next chapter which will briefly

explore the roles that Gilpin and Bert Williams played both on and off stage for the betterment of the African American actor.

Chapter seven, although again unchronological, steps back and takes a look at two of the most influential early practitioners of African American theatre in the early twentieth century. Bert Williams, an African American minstrel who was for a time recognized as the foremost practitioner of his trade, was famous on both sides of the Atlantic for his excellence in minstrelsy. His attempts to legitimize African Americans on stage would see him change the concept of minstrelsy and make it a study of characters rather than a study of a race. Williams and his partner George Walker were central in the rise of the cakewalk as a mainstream, dance and recorded many music hit singles. However, of the two it is Bert Williams that was the better known and, possibly, more skilled of the two. His theatrical career will be placed alongside that of the aforementioned Charles Gilpin. Both these men cleared a path for their peers and future African American actors and playwrights, giving them a credence in the eyes of white America that was, to that point, inconceivable. The two men also shared the fate of many pioneers and did not enjoy the rewards that their careers created for others.

The next chapter looks at the rise of the African American theatre through the eyes of Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois. These two men were integral in the development of the African American drama yet could not agree on the ideology behind their concept of theatre. Locke, the recognized leader of the Harlem Renaissance and editor of the seminal *The New Negro*, pioneered many projects that developed and furthered the African American stage presence, yet approached art as a Pan-American, indeed worldwide kaleidoscope, where the artists took their inspiration from wherever they found it. In many ways Locke was the African American equivalent of William Butler Yeats in the Irish Renaissance, advocating art as the savior of a people and the artist as a well of creativity that may create what he desires. DuBois could tentatively be compared to the Fay brothers in the early Irish theatrical movement, calling for a distinct and separate art that could be used to differentiate one race from another. DuBois

promoted the concept of drama as propaganda, a tool to be used to interpret and reinterpret the past in a way that would further the African American. Theatre, accordingly, was only useful when it was politically engaged and socially involved, pursuing the uplift of the community rather than the display of artistic brilliance. This chapter will also look at the KRIGWA theatre, founded by DuBois, and examine how the early history of this important African American little theatre in ways mimicked the origins of the Abbey Theatre, and how almost by accident the two theatres were involved in audience creation despite themselves.

The conclusion shall do what it states, looking at the overall impact that the Irish Players tour of 1911/12 had on American theatre and African American theatre. As well as engaging with the major thesis question, the final chapter will look at further research that is raised by the thesis.

Chapter 2

Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss the Abbey Theatre tour and analyse the immediate impact it had upon the theatrical scene in America. I will explain the overt political message of the tour and the respect that the newly developed Irish theatre's exciting form of drama engendered in the American theatrical audience who was more used to bigger melodramatic and vaudeville productions. I will also consider the connections that the Abbey Theatre made with other theatres in America. These relationships would have benefits that far surpassed the impact that the tour had on America. The ideology behind the Irish Players tour, the concept of placing importance on rhetoric and utilising the 'strong poet' rather than staging. The tour also revealed the benefits of not having a 'star system' in the Irish theatre – a system that will be explored in chapter three.

As will be discussed in Chapter 4, the people who came to see these plays would change the way that theatre was produced and experienced in America thereafter. The Irish Players would also begin to open up avenues for 'strong poets' that were, for the most part, denied or ignored by the American playwrights and audiences before 1911. The Irish Players would also bring a European flavour to the American stage but nuanced with uniquely Irish undertones. Peasants as heroes of the stage, dialectics that were allegedly born in the small acreages in the west of Ireland, plays that were sold as being rooted and connected to the Irish soil as the native Irish, were all new and exciting concepts brought to the stage by a small group of Irish artists.

A notion once again

The Irish National Theatre was founded with one main aim in mind. It was to repatriate the stage Irish man from the English to the Irish stage. However, as stated by Mary Trotter in her book *Ireland's National Theatres: political performance and the origins of the Irish dramatic movement*: 'Creators of a nation do not exactly identify a community out of which to build their state so much as they imagine one, establishing a sense of commonality among a people that overrides the ideological and cultural differences within the national group' (Trotter xi). Indeed, the Irish intelligentsia were more than willing to recognise the fact that there had to be a common ground from which the people could form a cultural zeitgeist, and realised that they had to do this on two fronts. First, there need to be a 'De-Anglicizing' of Ireland and secondly the common ground must be found through the perpetuating and encouraging of the use of the native language, culture and mores. These points were elaborated upon by Douglas Hyde in his 1892 lecture "The Necessity for De-Anglicizing of Ireland". This appeal to the population to re-embrace Irish culture was heeded and just one year later the Gaelic League was formed. This organisation held feisianna (festivals, usually musical) and ceilithe (dances) throughout the country (ibid 3). It was from these beginnings that the Irish Literary Renaissance was born and that the Abbey Theatre would emerge.

Hyde states in his lecture:

It has always been very curious to me how Irish sentiment sticks in this half-way house – how it continues to apparently hate the English, and at the same time continues to imitate them; how it continues to clamour for recognition as a distinct nationality, and at the same time throws away with both hands what would make it so (Hyde 2).

There was a need for the Irish to find an identity which could tie the many strands of Irish identity together. Indeed the lecture opens with a warning against the total De-Anglicising of Ireland as Hyde states that the hoped for effect is 'not ... a protest against imitating what is

best in the English people, for that would be absurd, but rather to show the folly of neglecting what is Irish, and hastening to adopt, pell-mell, and indiscriminately, everything that is English, simply because it is English' (Hyde 2). Irish society, it seems to suggest, had moved beyond a single nationalism and one cultural trope. To be Irish was to be a diffuse cultural entity with a foot in both English and Irish concepts of self. Despite this, the De-Anglicising of Ireland was to tip the balance of power regarding Irish identity back to the Irish side. The divorcing of the stage Irishman from the English stage was a necessary step to reclassify and re-examine Irish cultural identity. Douglas Hyde, the first President of the Irish Free State, grew up among the people that Synge was to later seek out for inspiration. In rural Roscommon Hyde, who was of protestant Anglo-Irish stock, mingled easily with the rural people in his environs and conversed with them in their Gaelic tongue. He coaxed from them, through the liberal application of whiskey, their folklore and native poetry and published many of these stories and tales.

The Abbey Theatre that would come to define Irish theatre for the early part of the twentieth century did not spring full formed from this backdrop of cultural awakening. It was, in effect, a national theatre that was formed from the raw materials of the various forms of Irish nationalism that were prevalent in the late 19th and early 20th century. The resulting nationalism is not one that represents any single concept of 'Irishness', nor is it one that would be dominated by a single ideology. In essence the Irish Literary theatre, the Irish National Theatre, and later the Abbey Theatre described on stage a mythology rather than a nationality. Their stories were broad sweeps of what they imagined Ireland to be; their 'Irishness' a study of what could almost be described as Irish archetypes: Catholic, Poor, Ignorant, Cunning, Atavistic, Innocent, Dangerous. The plays which will be discussed in this thesis are not meant to be an accurate representation of Ireland, instead it offers a smorgasbord of concepts of Irish traits, wrapped in a language that both interprets and misinterprets the Anglicised Irish tongue.

The Abbey Theatre itself was an amalgamation of several different representations of Irish theatre. From the highbrow Irish Literary Theatre devised by Yeats, Lady Gregory and Moore to the more populist Irish National theatre established by the Faye brothers, the Abbey Theatre would walk the fine line between intellectualism, emotionalism and Irish representativism. That in this one entity their already was a fractured yet pieced together concept of Ireland would be, perhaps, its saving grace. There was no one way to represent Ireland, there was no English language that could replace native Irish, there was no stage that could encompass nationalism, yet, from their comedies to their tragedies they delivered onto the Irish nation enough sketches that they created – I would imagine to both their delight and horror – stage Irishness. This new Irish presentation, however, had to contend with a stage Irishman that had already tread the boards of English stages for many years. The buffoon, the simpleton, quick to emotionally respond to any stimulus regardless of logic and intellectualism was the Irishman's lot in theatre. A figure of comedy and pity, a two dimensional man that, like a beast in the zoo, was to be regarded emotionally by the audience but not to be taken as a fully developed human being. He was the embodiment of the fallen tower of Babel, forever an incoherent member of society, speaking a variant of English that immediately set him apart from his betters.

When the Irish Literary Theatre began its third and final season on the 21st October 1901 the Irish mythological figures of Diarmuid and Grania were transposed from the page to the stage for the opening night. The play *Diarmuid and Grania* was jointly penned by William Butler Yeats and George Moore. Yeats, highly regarded for his poetical turn of phrase in his plays and Moore, a man who many at the time regarded as a 'literary scavenger', were attempting to raise the standing of the latter – even at the small expense of the former (Cousins 1). The play gathered 'everybody who was anybody, and a great many who were nothing but wished to be something in the Ireland of ideas' (ibid 1). The Irish Literary Theatre had for its first

two seasons hired individual professional English actors to fill the roles of the characters in their plays, however, for the opening of the third season the Benson Shakespeare Company were hired to fill the roles (ibid 1). As the play's first act ended there was some disquiet from the audience, by the end of the second act the disquiet had become more audible – as the curtain fell on the production the authors were called for to explain the production that they had just witnessed. The problem with the play was not the words, nor was it the story – the audience regarded the acting, not as bad, but as missing the point of the play. It was being bowdlerized, in the eyes of the audience, into a simple tale of a man misusing a friend and abducting his wife (ibid 1). The meaning of the play had been lost on the actors. The play had been Anglicised, the Irish saga of magic, sex, hatred, love and death had become a domestic farce (ibid 2). Yeats confronted the audience and claimed that the Irish Literary Theatre wished to 'break down the vulgarity of the English commercial theatre', many in the audience laughed at the presumed joke – Yeats was deadly serious (ibid 2).

The next effort of the Irish National Theatre was, perhaps, the greatest achievement of any theatre company that played in Ireland to that date. A play was staged that was penned by an Irish author in Gaelic and was performed by native Irish speakers (ibid 2). The play *The Twisting of the Rope*, written by Douglas Hyde, was performed by a cast of Irish actors (with Hyde taking the lead role) and was performed to an enthusiastic Irish audience. The one act play revolved around a man, Hanrahan's, desire to marry a woman and the equal desire of her and her family for the match not to happen (ibid 2). The tale is simple but spoke to an Irish audience as it held within its small events that every Irish person would recognise as their own. The play also transcended many of the religious and Irish/Anglo-Irish issues that were rife in Ireland at the time. Hyde, an Anglo-Irish Protestant, penned a play that was performed by Catholic native Irish speakers in front of an audience that comprised of a heady mix of both sides of the divide. The play was the embodiment of Hyde's call to De-Anglicise Ireland. The

play was the result of many strands of Irish culture – it embraced many sections of society. The baby was not thrown out with the bathwater, the best of English and Irish could exist on the same stage, both compromising to the benefit of each.

The Irish Literary Theatre only had three seasons, however, the final act of the theatre was to give Irish theatre a place to start replacing the stage Irishman with an Irishman on stage. *The Twisting of the Rope* did not shine so brightly on the stage as many of Irish theatres later works but it did prove that the collaboration of Ireland's fractured identities is more productive than the rejection of either. Like Hyde, Yeats also had a more holistic view of Irish culture and was adamant about creating a 'Unity of Culture' (Flannery 61). The cultural unity was always, for Yeats, to be regarded as a Utopian ideal, something to strive for and for him the 'Unity of Culture' was prevalent only when a country's '... religious, aesthetic, and practical life' were one, when no social or occupational distinctions existed, because all – the prince and peasant, craftsman and poet, artist and day-labourer – were of "one mind and heart" (ibid 61). Although the concept of 'Unity of Culture' sounds almost communist in its ideals there was a preponderant concern for Yeats regarding the role of the poet within the culture. The poet 'as a maker of images, provides a principle means whereby society attained Unity of Culture by enshrining in his art the myths and rituals of a race or nation, and by creating new images that were passed down to form that society's inherited traditions' (ibid 61). In essence this seems to advocate Rorty's concepts of the contingency of language. Creating new images that were passed down to form that society is the work of the strong poet. Rorty claims that 'questions about how to give a sense to one's own life or that of one's community – are questions for art or politics, or both, rather than for religion, philosophy or science' (Rorty 3). This, in essence, argues against the concept of absolutes, against the idea of concretised conceptions of place or person. Identity, language and belonging are malleable – their truth sustained so long as they are described through a commonly accepted language. This is what Hyde and Yeats were

searching for in a 'Unity of Culture'. The search for a common language, even if that language consisted of Gaelic and English, that would encompass a new artistic endeavour was paramount to their cause. Neither man was searching for an Irish culture that predated their search or that somehow subsisted before their creating it. The 'Culture of Unity' which they sought was an amalgamation, to some an abomination, of cultures that allowed it to be differentiated from what went before without wholly divorcing it from its heritage. Indeed, just as the bible is the appending of sometimes unrelated texts to create a universal whole, a 'Culture of Unity' could take two unrelated, and on first reading conflicting representations (e.g. Irish Culture and the English representation of it), and create something new that could find an artistic 'truth'. Rorty continues that many philosophers regard 'politics and art as spheres in which the notion of 'truth' is out of place ... [however] ... the very idea of such a representation [is] pointless' (Rorty 3,4). Truth, therefore, is contingent on language, perception, society, culture and representation. Truth is not 'out there' waiting to be discovered, it is created by man and survives as 'truth' so long as arguments can be made to sustain it. A 'Unity of Culture' without claiming a truth to any single part of the cultures that lie at its heart can describe a more universal truth.

Yeats considered that

The poet, as both creator and guardian of culture, thus had a sacred duty to fulfil in society. It was Yeats's conviction that individual life had "only come to perfection", or achieved Unity of Being, in those ancient societies which had been united through the images created and sanctified by poets – images "always praising the one mind, their foundation of all perfection" (Flannery, 62).

In this sense Yeats advocated strongly the need for a strong poet in society to create and reinforce the contingency of truth, to create images that can align and realign themselves with a Unity of Being. In his belief, just like Rorty, Yeats seems to claim that truth is not an objet d'art in and of itself – it is a created entity that survives on its contingency to society, and on the ability of the strong poet to use images and language to bring that society to place value in

those images. The truth, if one can be said to exist, is to be found in the creative process – truth as a constant means rather than an end in itself. The creative process divines a cultural divinity rather than a divinity bestowing onto a people a culture.

The ‘Unity of Culture’ cannot be regarded as simply an extension of the past, or an application of an old truth to a new realm. As Rorty states the search is

not a discovery about how old vocabularies fit together. That is why it cannot be reached by an inferential process – by starting with premises formulated in the old vocabularies. Such creations are not the result of successfully fitting together pieces of a puzzle. They are not discoveries of a reality behind the appearances, of an undistorted view of the whole picture with which to replace myopic views of its parts. The proper analogy is with the invention of new tools to take the place of old tools’ (Rorty 12).

Yeats’s ambition, and that of Hyde’s, was to create a new vocabulary to describe Ireland and to give it a truth that was previously distorted by the clash of two old vocabularies. The sinews that connect language to culture and art to society, rather than being wasted are flexed by the pursuit of a ‘Unity of Culture’. The new tools that Yeats and Hyde needed to create seemed to be at odds with each other. On the one hand there needed to be a decoupling of the English and Irish cultures. Ireland needed to be De-Anglicised. However, despite this, Ireland could not fall back on the culture that they used to call their own – the Irish society had long since removed itself from this almost mythologised culture. Ireland needed to create a new tool, a new emphasis, a new zeitgeist that could reflect its newfound cultural invigoration.

To do this Yeats and other likeminded artists created a myth around the new Irish culture that leapt from the Abbey Theatre stage and into the fundamental concepts of what Ireland was. The image of the ‘Anglo-Irish Synge listening to servants through floorboards ... was attempting to justify not just what was perceived as the difficult language and rhythm of his speech, but the seemingly impossible realities addressed by his plays’ (Frawley 22). However, the tale of Synge listening through the floorboards does enough to distort reality enough to

allow the strong poet to create a truth within the image that could not have existed without this sordid tale of eavesdropping. Whether Synge actually listened to the peasants earnest conversations or not did not matter after his plays were staged. Whether he accurately depicted the words, the sentence structure and the meaning of their conversations did not matter. What mattered is it gave Synge an immediate heritage, an immediate 'Unity of Culture' that fastened Anglo-Irish and native Irish together in an artistic truth that did not need to reside in any of the 'old tools' that were at his disposal. His peasant speech was manifestly 'not a discovery about how old vocabularies fit together' but an attempt to create a new vocabulary that could access a truth that did not exist before – and as an aside may not exist today. Through his plays Synge depicted Ireland, his plays became a powerful representation of Irishness and his peasants transformed from commoners to stage royalty. The new language, despite the mythology, was 'not discoveries of a reality behind the appearances' but the creation of a new reality that reflected a new 'Culture of Unity'. Hyde's hoped for amalgamation of the best of two cultures may not have manifested itself in much of Irish culture but one could argue that the Abbey Theatre's creations came the closest to a reimagining of Ireland's past, a redefinition of Ireland's present and a reconstitution of Ireland's future.

The culture that was depicted by the Abbey Theatre in plays like *Riders to the Sea* and *The Tinker's Wedding* was one slightly divorced from reality and brought this theatrical reality to the stage in a dialect that never existed. However, despite this the Abbey Theatre created a new lens, a new gaze through which the Irish, and the world, could view the Irish psychology and Irish home-grown culture.

An Invitation to Play⁷

The Abbey Theatre players had played at the Court Theatre London in the summer of 1911, as ever for a longer period than their previous tours, and to a larger audience. The management of the Abbey Theatre was made an offer by the theatrical managers, Liebler & Co., to play for three or four months in the United States, and the offer had been accepted (Gregory, 169). The 1911 Abbey tour of America was, at its core, an attempt to export Ireland's newest indigenous industry, art, and in particular a new, thriving and popular drama to a country filled with recent Irish immigrants and, most importantly, monetary resources. The Abbey Theatre's tour had many resounding impacts upon American theatre. The Irish Theatre's 'depiction of the fisherfolk [sic], the farmers, the myth and history and political conflict of a non-urban and non-industrial people' (Farfan 53) increased the potential range that the American theatre had explored up to that point.⁸ The tour, albeit an attempt to raise money for the theatres coffers,

⁷ All Newspaper articles are taken from Abbey Theatre scrapbooks, 1905-1939 ; 1966-1971 which are kept in the Irish National Library in Dublin. There is no date stamp on many of the articles and no page numbers. All information that was available has been provided in the in-text citation.

⁸ The Springfield (Mass) Republican suggests that the Irish players have 'no mannerisms, no extravagances of voice or pose, in fact, no posing at all, and seemingly no histrionic style' and the Boston American argues whether the Irish Players and the plays have done more than simply introduce us to unfamiliar things in plays and acting is a question'.

and increase the standing of the individual playwrights and actors in the company, was a chance for the Irish nation, so desperately seeking independence, to display its cultural depths and artistic heights to a nation that was for generations so closely associated with mass Irish migration.⁹

The Abbey Theatre was foremost a playwrights theatre, a theatre of literature and cultural representation. The playwrights that honed their skills in the Irish theatre disassembled notions of an Irishness in their plays. They amalgamated Irish, Anglo-Irish and English sensibilities and created a theatre that appealed across a wide spectrum. The ‘final vocabulary’ became the starting point of a new engagement with theatre and its power to transmute cultural binaries into cohesive wholes. The acting, although intrinsic, played a secondary role to the script. The actor, although somewhat marginalised, still had an obvious role but had to fight for the central role that was his due in many theatres. Dudley Diggs, one of the foremost Abbey Theatre actors declared that ‘in a theatre which was dominated by poets and dramatists, mystics and philosophers, passive resisters and physical-force men, you can imagine that the poor Thespians were put to it to defend their ancient right to a place upon the stage’ (Diggs, 31). Yeats, who, as already mentioned, pioneered the concept of an Irish playwright’s theatre, outlined the goal of the Abbey Theatre stating: ‘we have to write or find plays that will make the theatre a place of intellectual excitement – a place where the mind goes to be liberated as it was liberated by the theatres of Greece and England and France at certain great movements in their history’ (Ellis-Fermor, 65). J.M. Synge claimed that the theatre’s writers ‘will appeal

⁹ In 1905 alone almost 53,000 Irish made their way to the United States. Between 1856 and 1921 3.1 million Irish had emigrated to America in the hope of a better life (Emmons 2).

to that limited public which gives understanding and not to that unlimited public which gives wealth ... because the intellect of Ireland is romantic and spiritual, rather than scientific and analytical' (Yeats 2013, 7). Here Synge is invoking the conceptual basis of the 'ironist and 'strong poet'. The minds that he hopes to liberate could not be unshackled through just a physical freedom; that would not be experienced by the Irish until later in the century, but through a reinterpretation and outright rejection of concepts that were, at the time, viewed as facts. The gaudy stereotypes that the Irish laboured under, the distorted concepts of the Irish peasant, both as sub-human and idolised representatives of a true Ireland depending on your political beliefs, were to be challenged on all fronts through a re-examination and reinterpretation of these tropes.

Exit stage West

The Irish players, under the auspices of W.B. Yeats and Lennox Robinson, undertook the tour and departed from Kings (Cork) harbour in September 1911. Their American tour managers, Liebler & Co., were planning to open a new theatre in Boston, the Plymouth Theatre, and the company was to appear there to mark the opening of the establishment. It also was presumed that there was a ready audience for the art of the Abbey Theatre players as in the spring of 1904 Miss Margaret Wycherly performed *The Land of Hearts Desire*, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, *The Countess Cathleen*, *The Hourglass* and *A Pot of Broth*, all plays written by Abbey Theatre authors, to an eager and expectant audience (Weygrandt, 51). The tour was much anticipated,

both for the arrival of an already successful touring company¹⁰, and the much loathed/loved production of J.M. Synge's controversial and contentious play, *The Playboy of the Western World*. The 1907 furore in Dublin over the staging of the play, the political fallout after the 'Playboy riots', and the ensuing battle for the ownership of Irish cultural representation gave the play, as far as sections of the Irish-American community were concerned, a particularly virulent flavour. The arrival of the Irish players was regarded as an opportunity for the institutionalised Irish American communities, and the Roman Catholic Church, to rail once again at the perceived injustices that *The Playboy* visited upon the peasant communities of Ireland, and the apparent misrepresentation of that community to a wider world. However, *The Playboy* was not the only play to pique the interest of the Irish American nationalists. Shaw's *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Postnet* and Synge's *The Tinker's Wedding* and *The Well of the Saints* were also bones of contention for the outraged masses. In both cases the perceived sacrilege against the church and its representatives and the depiction of Irish peasantry were particularly galling.

That the Abbey Theatre did not respect the wishes of the Roman Catholic Church or indeed the whims of the Irish nationalist movement, whilst struggling against the depiction of the Irish, speaks to the skill and dexterity of the playwrights. The Irish theatre, as stated, was not created to root itself in an Irish nationalistic dogma – beating the drums of an Irish purity that stood against the perceived inequity of the coloniser. The theatre embraced, as indeed it had to as many of the playwrights were Anglo-Irish, the values of Ireland and Britain and through

¹⁰ The Abbey Theatre had just finished a successful critical and popular tour of England before it departed on its American tour.

this brought a new experience to the stage. In essence they were ‘playing the new off against the old’ (Rorty 73). A new Irish idealism, a new realisation for the potential of Irish theatre being a byword for cultural exploration and questioning – a tacit rejection of any ‘final vocabulary’ – was the ultimate aim of the endeavour. It was this journey that caused the many controversies which the theatre encountered, but it is also the cause célèbre of the art.

The Abbey Theatre players took with them a mixture of comedy, tragedy and drama. However, unlike many of the American theatrical companies, the Abbey players planned to stage three to four plays in a single night (The Boston Common, 14/10/1911).¹¹ The theatre going audiences in America were used to a single play being performed for a week, thus this intriguing variety was something very much out of the ordinary. Although this theatrical range was something new for the American audiences, the 1904 staging of Cathleen Ni Houlihan aside, they were used to Irish plays and especially Irish characters being a source of comedy and amusement.¹² The idea that a theatrical company from Dublin would have the ability to

¹¹ Taken from the Holloway Collection - Abbey Theatre (1911-1912). Description 1 folder '1912' in a box of the Holloway Collection relating to the Abbey Theatre '1911-12' from this point onwards all quotations from this collection will be noted as (authors name)/ Holloway.

¹² ‘The irony of *The Shadow of the Glen* was not grasped, nor was the tense tragedy of *The Birthright* fully comprehended. One reason for this was the fact that the American public has come to regard any play touching on Irish life in the way of a comedy. The very dialect is taken as a signal for laughter, and it was very trying for those who endeavoured to digest the plays in their true light to hear shouts of merriment coming at the most inopportune moments’ (Boston Sunday Post 24/9/1911).

perform tragedy was something that the theatre-going public of America did not take as read. The appetite for comedy was sated by Lady Gregory's plays but Yeats', Robinson's, Shaw's and Synge's plays were of a very different and challenging nature.

The Abbey Theatre took their staples: Lady Gregory's *The Workhouse Ward*, *Spreading the News*, *Mixed Marriage* and *Hyacinth Halve*; J.M. Synge's *The Tinkers Wedding*, *The Well of the Saints*, and *Riders to the Sea*; the Yeats/Gregory collaboration *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*; G.B. Shaw's *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Postnet*; and of course Synge's infamous *The Playboy of the Western World*. Despite their full program they introduced new plays during their tour. Lennox Robinson's *The Birthright*, a tragic tale of inheritance and disenfranchisement, was first staged in America. The repertoire was a mix of homely humour, dark tragedy and representations of the newly propertied Irish. Despite the relative obscurity from which they came, and the lack of knowledge of their actors' and acting styles *The Playboy of the Western World* was already known to many in the United States.

Playboy Plays Up

The furore caused by the first performance of *The Playboy* in Dublin is well documented.¹³ The coruscating debates that ensued in the Irish media regarding the representations of Irish peasant life by the play, and indeed the lambasting of the theatre and its greatest playwright at the time, John Millington Synge, were heeded and parroted by the Irish Institutions in

¹³ For information on the *Playboy* riots see 'J.M. Synge and the Collapse of Constructive Unionism, 1902 – 9' in Lionel Pilkington's *Theatre and the State in Twentieth-Century Ireland: Cultivating the People*. Also Athenaide Dallett's article 'Protest in the Playhouse: Two Twentieth-Century Audience Riots' in *New Theatre Quarterly* (1996) 12 : pp 323-332.

America.¹⁴ The press in particular were quick to point out the ‘riots’ that occurred at the first performance of *The Playboy* and attempted to distance the Abbey Theatre from their claims of Irish nationalistic representations.¹⁵ Lady Gregory was worried by the negative press and the threats of riots and violence against the players, however, the Liebler Co. were unfazed claiming that they ‘don’t mind, [as they] think it will be an advertisement’ (Gregory, 177). Ironically the robust and negative campaign by Irish associations and press in America followed the traditional responses that the Abbey Theatre engendered from their formation. The intertwining of political and cultural debates, the questioning of perceptions of culture, and, perhaps most importantly, the open interrogation of the ownership of Irish culture was a cornerstone of the Abbey Theatre and its pretensions to being a National Theatre. As a

¹⁴ ‘*The Playboy* was announced for October 16th [1911] and on the 14th the Gaelic American printed a resolution of the United Irish Societies of New York, in which they pledged themselves to ‘drive the vile thing from the stage’ (Gregory 181). Representatives of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) were allegedly behind much of *The Playboy* disturbances. Joseph McLaughlin, national vice-president of the organisation personally disrupted a performance in Philadelphia and was physically ejected from the theatre by the police (Watt et al. 67).

¹⁵ Lady Gregory claims that in Washington two or three priests preached against the Abbey Theatre’s upcoming performances, and a pamphlet was handed to parishioners at the chapel doors denouncing the theatre. It stated ‘the attention of fair-minded Washingtonians is called to a most malignant travesty of Irish life and religion about to be presented upon the stage of a local theatre by the "Irish Players." This travelling Company is advertised as "coming from the Abbey Theatre, Dublin." True, but they came from Dublin, followed by the hisses and indignation of an outraged populace!’ (Gregory 190).

distinctive literary movement the Abbey Theatre, and under its former guise, the National Theatre Society, set out to establish a cultural arena free of party politics (Pilkington, 3). However, in the politically complex and fraught times in Ireland the literary philosophy was profoundly steeped in the cultural realpolitik of Ireland. Rider's *to the Sea* spoke of a humanity broken on the rack of colonialism and deprivation, however, it could be argued that the coloniser was the Roman Catholic Church in this instance and not the British. Conversely *The Tinker's Wedding* and especially *The Playboy* spoke out against the nationalistic idealization of the Irish peasantry.

To this end the Abbey Theatre fulfilled Rorty's first rule of the 'ironist' insofar as the playwright 'has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered' (Rorty 73). The 'final vocabulary' of the ardent Irish Nationalist speaks in terms that counter the desire and spirit of the Abbey Theatre's artists. Rorty claims of 'metaphysicians', and in this instance I will apply this term to the Irish nationalist movement, that:

They think this because the vocabulary they have inherited, their common sense, provides them with a picture of knowledge as a relation between human beings and "reality," and the idea that we have a need and a duty to enter into this relation. It also tells us that "reality," if properly asked, will help us determine what our final vocabulary should be (Rorty 75).

The Abbey Theatre, being an amalgamation of Irish and Anglo-Irish, could speak in many vocabularies and with many politically nuanced and distinct voices. Their role was both that of gate keeper of Irish culture and farmer of the Irish artistic scene – fertilising the culture with new vocabularies to allow new perspectives on what it meant to be Irish in the heady political atmosphere of the turn of the twentieth century.

The Abbey Theatre's tendentiousness caused hard-line Irish nationalists to rage against its depictions of Irish life, but conversely, through its presence on the Irish theatrical and political stage, the anxieties and doubts of a subjugated people were given a cause to champion. Yeats defended the right of theatre and literature to work outside of the political machinations of nationalism declaring the '[Irish] novelist and historian had but one object, that we should hiss the villain, and only a minority doubted that the greater the talent the greater the hiss' (Pilkington, 10). For the Abbey Theatre the hiss echoed across the Atlantic and reverberated around the theatres of the Eastern seaboard of the United States.

A Modest Revolution

The tour, under the direction of Liebler Company's George C. Taylor, was to focus mainly on the east coast cities of America as these held the lion's share of the Irish immigrant populations. The financial rewards that could be attained were, according to Mr. Taylor, secondary to bringing a new and dynamic theatrical form to the American public. He stated:

We have believed a play either to succeed or else have produced in the belief that we were doing a fine thing in making a given play known to the public, without regard for its chances of success. It was in such a spirit I brought over the Irish Players, although I look for commercial results of the highest as an outcome of their visit. It is not always easy to interest the American public in good acting for its own sake, I know, but in the case of these visitors from Dublin we are attacking a public already well up on the repertoire, which is mainly made up of the plays of W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and J.M. Synge' (Taylor/Holloway 16).

The general American population were perhaps not quite as 'well up' as Mr. Taylor suggests, but there is much evidence to suggest that the plays emanating from the Abbey Theatre were

becoming ever more popular in academic circles in America. Running concurrently to the Abbey Theatre tour Lady Gregory was giving lectures on the university circuit, attempting to increase the cultural standing of the Abbey Theatre whilst also illuminating the distinctions between Irish theatre and that of mainstream America and Britain. Lady Gregory attempted to explain the process of writing Irish comedy and tragedy and the vital role of the playwright in the Abbey Theatre. Indeed her audiences at times consisted of the crème of American playwrights. In her manuscript *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography*, she relates an evening lecture in Philadelphia where she ‘gave [her] idea’s on “playwriting” again ... and was told just before [she] began that there were several dramatists in the room, including the author of *Madame Butterfly*’ (Gregory, 93). The impact that the Abbey Theatre had upon American dramatists is exemplified by this appearance of the famed David Belasco at one of Lady Gregory’s lectures. It demonstrates, perhaps, the evolution of playwriting as the fulcrum around which the carousel of theatre turns. Frank O’Connor, in *The Art of the Theatre* states:

For the decline of the British theatre there is only one reason which will bear examination. The partnership of dramatist, audience and actor has been dissolved, and the actor was in the saddle. But of the three elements in the theatre only one, the writer, is a conscious one, and it is only through the writer that contemporary feelings and ideas can make their way on to the stage. When the writer is excluded, life itself is excluded, and its place is taken by make-believe pure and simple (O’Connor, 23).

The incursion of the make-believe and whimsy onto the American stage is noted by Walter Prichard Eaton, author of numerous books on the theatre and a professor of playwriting at Yale. He asserted that David Belasco, the aforementioned producer of over one hundred Broadway plays,

has never preached a philosophy of life nor announced that he had one to preach. Perhaps life does not greatly interest him, his interest in the theatre is so tremendous and so absorbing. He is not the stuff that preachers are made of, and all realists are preachers of a kind. What Mr. Belasco has done has been to write pieces for the play-house, not criticisms of life (Eaton, 209).

That one of the foremost playwrights, producers and actors of the American stage seems to be disconnected from life, politics, society and opinion was an anathema to the playwrights of the Abbey Theatre. Its project was to immerse itself in the culture of Ireland (or at least the part of the culture which they thought worthy) and condense and transmute it through their artistic lens into moments of theatrical social commentary. The Irish Independent claimed that ‘the [Abbey Theatre playwrights] went to the countryside, the peasant’s cottage, the lonely strand and the misty glen for simple tales, and they found treasures’ (The Irish Independent 15/3/1912). In America the Abbey players sought their own entertainments and found some treasures at the doorstep of the theatre. Whilst the theatre was in Washington Lady Gregory wrote: ‘Today I had a scattered rehearsal of Spreading the News. The players kept slipping out by the back door, and I found that Negro’s were dancing and singing out there, it being their dinner hour. It was, of course, irresistible’ (Gregory, 201). As far as cultural sharing and theatre building this hardly stands out as the moment the Abbey Theatre impacted upon the African American stage, however, it is noteworthy that the artistic skill on display was enough to entice the playwright and cast out of the theatre. Many decades before the formation of the Abbey Theatre Fredrick Douglass wrote of Ireland:

the spirit of freedom that seems to animate all with whom I come in contact - and the entire absence of everything that looked like prejudice against me, on account of the color [sic] of my skin-contrasting so strongly with my long and bitter experience in the United States, that I look with wonder and amazement on the transition’ (Douglass, 105).

The interaction and shared cultural experiences of the African American and the condition of the Irish in their native country is noted, not only by Douglass but also by Claude McKay. McKay stated ‘I suffer with the Irish. I think I understand the Irish. My belonging to a subject race entitles me to some understanding of them. And then I was born and reared a peasant; the peasant’s passion for the soil possesses me, and it is one of the strongest passions in the Irish revolution’ (Jenkins, 286). The relationships between Irish and African American cultures did

not begin or end during that dinner hour, but it is a glimpse at the shared experience and enduring interest which the cultures had in each other.

Not Led by a Star

The Irish players that toured America were not a cast of individual stars aspiring to grab the attentions of an unexpected audience. The players were a cohesive unit bent on the delivery of their lines for the good of the play. In *The Literary Digest* New York on the 14th October 1911 it was reported that one Mr. Parker in a journal *The Transcript* wrote that ‘no company within Bostonian memory has so played as a team, it would be ungracious and futile to try and differentiate its members as individual talent’ (Parker/Holloway). The amelioration of the dramatic experience was sustained through the selfless portrayal of the characters. Despite the apparent futility of singling out one cast member for special attention Fred Donovan did merit particular praise for his ability to play various and distinct roles. In the same article it is claimed that his portrayal of ‘Hugh’ the loveable but indifferent youngster in *The Birthright* was ‘a performance of handsome, masterful, exuberant youth [that] would have fastened forever upon an American player a host of just such other parts. He would have become a popular ‘juvenile lead’ – even a small starlet in large type’ (Parker/Holloway). Despite the obvious dramatic and indeed commercial appeal that he had

at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, such is not the way. If it were, we should lose Mr. Donovan’s delightful impersonation of the callow youth in *Hyacinth Halvey* with his comic distress over the embarrassments of the good character he acquired and his desperate attempts to rid himself of it. And what young American actor, however good, would be given the part of the second old man in *The Workhouse Ward*? Perhaps it is only fair to ask also, what young American actor could have played the part so well? (ibid)

The wide artistic and commercial chasm between two concepts of theatre is expounded upon in the article. The Irish players concerned themselves with the delivery of the lines rather than elaborate gesticulations from centre stage. Their acting style was one of artistic

understatement and control of movement. There was 'no devastating 'star' parts to break the harmony of the company, which acts as a unit intent on the just interpretation of the author ... attain[ing] a realism that seems reality in the absolute, if it were not for [the] knowledge of the study and the art that lie concealed beneath' (Byrne, 95). Indeed Yeats argued vehemently against 'the fidgety 'business' of the professional or semi-professional actor [but] praises the stillness of amateurs who did not move about much because no one had ever taught them they ought to' (Ellis-Fermor, 71). This allowed the building of a new acting tradition, at least for poetic, romantic and tragic drama, from the foundations up. Yeats believed the actors

may throw emphasis on the words in poetical drama, above all where the words are remote from real life ... the actors must move, for the most part, slowly and quietly, and not very much ... [and] be content to have long quiet moments, long grey spaces, long level reaches ... for what we may call the business-will in a high state of activity is not everything, although contemporary drama knows of little else (ibid, 71).

Through this acting style, and with Yeats's determined vision of what theatrical art could and should be, the Irish Players brought a new, alien and exciting concept of art to a country that had long laboured under commercial considerations and brisk, rapidly developing complications and plots (*The Lady of the House/Holloway*, 15/4/1912).

American theatre, with its pursuit of stardom and personality, could never allow a handsome youth to explore his full acting range and potential. Indeed, the American stage was the graveyard of many prodigious young talents. James O'Neill, father of playwright Eugene, played the lead character Dantes in *The Count of Monte Cristo* more than six thousand times. This tour-de-force used up an acting talent that at one time was thought to be of the highest quality. He began as Dantes in 1883 and by 1908 he claimed 'he was as much a prisoner of the Chateau d'If as Dantes ever was' (Bloom, 69). The snaring of young talent for wholly commercial means was an anathema to the Abbey Theatre as their focus was on the words and not, to be crude, the mouthpiece. It is claimed by the *Irish Independent*, quoting the *Chicago Herald*, that

The fact remains that for a sum representing many times the salary roll of this company such acting as it offers could not be duplicated by American players. Such an emblem does not exist in this country, because the spirit that created the ensemble does not direct and ennoble our players' (The Irish Independent, 15/3/1912).

Broadway audiences and critics alike were familiar with their home-grown theatre. David Belasco's melodramas where 'he has tried to give something superficial and episodic the air of depth and finality' (Eaton, 206) was regarded as edifying and entertaining theatre. This attempt to influence the audience through subterfuge did not take root in the Abbey Theatre. It was stated by observers of the Irish players that 'to audiences accustomed to the glittering elaboration of the conventional Broadway production, it meant a radical change of viewpoint to appreciate the simplicity of the stage setting, which were confined to the fewest of absolute necessary accessories' (Watkins, 353). It was further testified that

the [American] hand fed theatre critics who obediently chronicle the showy triumphs of the Syndicate Productions¹⁷ [were] ... apparently hurt ... by the lack of what one of the termed 'clean-cut histrionic method'. As a matter of fact, the very cornerstone of the singularly and compelling charm of these artisan players is that they have no histrionic method whatsoever (ibid, 353).

How The Abbey Managed it?

One of the most lasting legacies of the Abbey tour was the promulgation of their management style. The Abbey Theatre's methods of management and methods of staging new plays was recognised in Chicago before it impacted upon the rest of America. The tour occurred at a

¹⁷ The Theatre Syndicate and Schubert Companies will be briefly discussed in Chapter 3

watershed moment for the American theatre as the new Drama Players from Chicago was formed during the Abbey Theatre's visit. The movement sprang from the Chicago Theatre Society, a movement motivated to bring to the attention of the public such plays as conform to the highest standard of dramatic writing, and was managed by Donald Robertson, a well-known actor-manager (Newark New Jersey News/Holloway, 7/10/1911). The organization is the result of the interest shown, not only in the Windy City, but in numerous communities in the West in the performance of plays to which theatrical managers in this country whose policy was largely commercial have given little or no attention (ibid).¹⁸ Tellingly, the Drama Players shunned the Syndicate and sought assistance from the Shubert Co. to assist in the bookings and finance of the company. This had the advantage of allowing Mr. Robertson to devote all his attention to his duties as producer, and turning over the financial management to the Shubert Brothers, who 'will furnish the theatres and attend to all such practical details as do not fall under the province of the artistic supervisor' (ibid). The Newark News continues:

If the framers of this scheme to pressure a high standard in drama were influenced by such a motive as resulted in the founding of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and the formation of the Irish Players Company, a keener interest would be excited in their project. If they were animated by a spirit of nationalism, similar to that which brought the Dublin organization into

¹⁸ Similar groups emerged in St. Louis, Kansas City, Omaha, Topeka, Milwaukee, Detroit, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, and Minneapolis Washington, Baltimore and New York (Newark New Jersey News 7/10/1911).

existence, and made known such Irish playwrights as Synge, Yeats, Murray and Lady Gregory and secured recognition for such dramatic artists as comprise the Irish Players who are delighting Boston audiences by their acting and stage management, there would be cause for rejoicing over this latest 'uplift' movement (Newark News/Holloway).

The Boston American newspaper reported 'the Irish Players and their 'natural' setting of the dramatic gems of William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory et al. we are bound to agree with those who direct affairs at the Plymouth Theatre that the drama of the Green Isle is just the thing for the opening of a new playhouse' (ibid). The Abbey tour was the first to bring a repertoire of nationalistic and political theatre to America. The success of the tour was not based merely on the presentation of a pseudo-realism, but the volume and numerous varieties that the genre could engender. Comedy, tragedy, satire, domestic-drama and folk theatre were all represented, yet all had a basic focus on humanity that was not possible in much melodramatic or vaudeville theatre.

A National Cause

Nationalism aside, the list of playwrights who had been nurtured and given a chance to see their works produced by a relatively new and under-financed theatre is admirable. However, to have these plays written by Irish playwrights, for an Irish audience, performed by Irish actors and staged first in Ireland, even while the Irish cultural identity and indeed the future of the colony was being questioned shows the commitment and strength of purpose that inhabited all those concerned with the Abbey Theatre. Lionel Pilkington, in *Theatre and the State in Twentieth-Century Ireland: Cultivating the People*, suggests that the Abbey Theatre's agenda was not one of nationalism, but one of unionist control of Ireland's identity.

Yeats's arresting image of the artist as a Protestant messiah figure decapitating the grave images of Catholic idolatry illustrates his point concerning the cultural function of a nationalist theatre. Because a theatre's role is to cultivate individuality, idol breaking an idol, smashing must be its vital characteristics (Pilkington, 45).

This emphatic rejection of the corner stone of Irish cultural identity, Roman Catholicism, could be perceived as the rejection of an Irish identity. Certainly if a 'national theatre' distances itself from the culture that it claims to represent there is an argument that it has strayed from its stated agenda and wandered into the realm of cultural treason. However, if the depiction of a headless, thoughtless and desecrated church is offensive, the offence itself is a measure of the extent to which a national theatre is needed. Pilkington continues,

Individuality needs to be encouraged because the 'noble nationalism' of the past has been replaced by an anti-intellectualism emanating from three overlapping systems of ignorance: that of the Gaelic propagandist, the Roman Catholic priest, and the nationalist politician' (ibid, 45).

Individuality is the germ that reduces grand nationalistic idealisms and dissipates shared emotional and historic experiences. As Horatio claims in Hamlet, 'a mote it is to trouble the mind's eye' (Jowett et al., 716), and many a mote wafted through the air of the Abbey stage.

Pilkington claims that the animated spirit of nationalism, so longed for in America, is a problematic paradigm in Ireland, and is the tightrope upon which the Abbey Theatre treads a fraught path. The perceived anti-nationalism of the Abbey Theatre, the cause of the Playboy riots in Dublin and various cities in America, questions the concept of nationalism and in particular the agenda of a national theatre which claims to be the artistic manifestation of a distinct culture. The playwrights created a political counterweight to the prevailing institutions of Irish culture and question the impartiality of a doctrine based upon the twin pillars of allegiance to church and state. Of the Abbey Theatre's agenda Fred O'Donovan claimed, in an interview during the 1911 tour, that many Irish

felt that the romantic Irish dramas of Dion Boucicault¹⁹ were not a truthful reflection of Irish life and character. They reflected the sentimental Irishman as the English and those who wrote for English consumption liked to imagine him. The Irish Players wanted to put on the stage the real Irishmen of today – to reveal the real Irish conditions and real Irish character’ (O’Donovan, 101).

Here again we can see the highly political nature of their representations. Through forces of interests and resources, interested parties argue for the social standing of favoured symbols. These symbols are constructed through political rhetoric so that when they function successfully, they contribute to how individuals define their relationship to a community (Dobransky & Alan, 563). However, when they misrepresent it, it can lead a sundering of national pride and coherence. The plays, therefore play the role of the ‘ironist’ and ‘strong poet’ in Irish society, rejecting the prevailing known ‘truths’ of Irishness and creating, through the shared experiences of both sides of colonisation, a new emphasis on Irish identity and cultural representation. Just as the English ‘sentimental Irishman’ was to be challenged, so too was the idealised Irish peasant. The Abbey Theatre was a catalyst for debate, not merely against one interest group, but against all. Irish identity, the Abbey Theatre seemed to claim, is not a simple fact of not being English as many of the Irish were of English descent. The Abbey Theatre needed, if it was to be representative, to embrace all to its bosom and, like a modern St. Patrick, cast out the old rhetoric of nationalism.

¹⁹ Dion Boucicault (?1820 – 1890), playwright and actor. Starting in the theatre in England as an actor. He became a playwright of noted success. He is accredited with over 150 plays, including adaptations. He is accused of creating the ‘Stage Irishman’ (O’Donovan 103)

Distinguished Guests

The Abbey Theatre's project was to bring complex and thought provoking scripts to the audience through simplicity in acting. The scripts were to be rooted in Irish society and be intrinsically tethered to the Irish psyche. However, through the strength of their playwrights and determination to stage the plays which they chose they came into contact with and involved themselves in the politics of the day in Ireland, Britain and the United States. The theatre, long before the American tour, already had a run in with the Irish politician, author and editor Arthur Griffith.²⁰ Griffith was to become one of the leaders in the 1916 Easter Rising against the British and in October 1921, de Valera, President of the Irish Republic, had Arthur Griffith lead the Irish delegation to negotiate a peace treaty between Britain and Ireland (Knirck, 86). However, his public spat with Synge over his play *In the Shadow of the Glen*²¹ did not impede the Abbey, rather, it allowed the theatre to disentangle itself from the nationalistic policies of the day. Indeed the 'Playboy Riots' are attributed to Griffith's political machinations and dislike for the play and Yeats personally. When the Abbey went to America Griffith's vitriolic sentiments were waiting for them, but the Abbey was to find in America a political heavyweight who appreciated their art form and would speak against the rioters in their favour.

²⁰ Griffith, through his political involvements and writing was one of the leaders of the Easter 1916 rising in Dublin. He was the editor of *The United Irishman* and served as President of Dáil Éireann (the Irish house of parliament) from January to August 1922 (Martin, 55).

²¹ Griffith attacked Synge and Yeats in *The United Irishman* on 17th October 1903 (Kearney 83).

Lady Gregory writes in *Our Irish Theatre; a Chapter of Autobiography*: ‘Tuesday, November 28th: ... I was talking to Roosevelt about the opposition [to the *Playboy* in New York] on Sunday and he said he could not get in to the plays: Mrs. Roosevelt not being well, he did not like to leave home. But when I said it would be a help to us, he said, ‘Then I will certainly come,’ and settled that to-night he will dine with me and come on’ (Gregory, 205). It gives an insight into the political power of the Irish American emigrants that the Abbey Theatre could count America’s ex-president among its sponsors. Lady Gregory had already dined with President Taft in the Whitehouse during the tour, and was accumulating a celebrity status in America. Roosevelt did appear at the November 29th performance and publicly associated himself with the Abbey Theatre. After the first act Roosevelt was introduced to the players. He spoke separately to them and then made a speech, saying how much he admired them and that he felt they were doing a great deal to increase the dignity of Ireland and that he ‘envied them and Lady Gregory for America’ (ibid, 205). Roosevelt wrote an article in *The Outlook* on December 16th 1911 praising the Irish players and the motivations behind a national theatre, stating:

The Irish plays are of such importance because they spring from the soil and deal with Irish things, the familiar home things which the writer really knew. They are not English or France; they are Irish. In exactly the same way, any work of the kind done here, which is really worth doing, will be done by Americans who deal with the American life with which they are familiar (Roosevelt, 915).

He continued: ‘these Irish plays appeal now to all mankind as they would never appeal if they had attempted to be flaccidly ‘cosmopolitan’; they are vital and human, and therefore appeal to all humanity’ (ibid, 915). The Abbey Theatre, through the subtlety of their plays transcended the hills of Connemara and Wicklow and painted Ireland as a land of troubled humanity encountering global problems. Land inheritance, crime, marriage, poverty, death, life, religion, obligation and nationalism are all touched upon by the repertoire that the theatre

took with them to America. The unpretentious manner with which the actors delivered their lines allowed the plays to have a direct impact upon the audience.

Changing in Stages

The Abbey Theatre attempts to deconstruct the 'Stage Irishman' and place the resulting articulate individual in a recognisable setting was, with some degree of success, the work of the playwrights. The 'Stage Irishman' manifests itself in glimpses, yet the 'genial, witty, light hearted, sentimental kind of Irishman, always ready with a quip or a story or a sympathetic tear in his eye, willing to buy a drink or down one' (Shannon, 260), no longer exists as a self-contained entity. Instead a complex, intricate and socially aware character is exhibited on stage. The tinkers in *The Well of The Saints* critique society and lambast the social norms that have lost the capacity to self-analyse. *The Well of The Saints* strongly condemns Ireland for allowing ignorance (parodied by the village inhabitants following the Saint back to the church rather than heeding the declarations of the tinker Martin Doul) to circumvent and smother understanding. When Martin Doul 'with a sudden movement strikes the can [of Holy Water] from [the] Saint's hand and sends it rocketing across the stage' (Synge 1968, 147) the community is outraged at the blasphemy. Martin leaves the village defiantly and the community unquestioningly follow the Saint to the Church en-mass. Here we have an example of the sea change that the Abbey Theatre is instilling in the representation of the Irish character. Although the societal norms remain unaltered it is through the rejection of a 'final vocabulary' that the Abbey Theatre simultaneously threatens and assuages Irish identity. In the play the institutions, both colonial and indigenous, have an interest in maintaining the status quo, yet the individual, the Irish character as an exponent of rational thought, effectively rejects the community, the church, and its misrepresentations heretofore.

Lennox Robinson, through his experiences of grappling with and redefining the Irish character, inadvertently reveals the deep political and social cleavages in America when he claims that American playwrights and producers thought ‘going back to the peasant life altogether for our material was very novel, and interested them very much. They pretend in America that they cannot have a national theatre because they have no peasantry’ (The Irish Times, 16/3/1912). The Abbey Theatre encapsulates the hazard of politicising culture, and moreover, creating a discourse over ownership of a ‘national’ culture. In this utterance Robinson points American theatre towards a new dynamic theatrical form. America ‘pretended’ many of the ills in its society did not fully exist and was content to live a life dominated by a stringent and absolute ‘final vocabulary’. Although Robinson was not the first man to point out the absurdity of America’s blinkered vision, it is telling that within a decade the American peasant would emerge from the shadows and walk under the glare of the stage spotlight.

One of the roles of the ‘strong poet’ and ‘ironist’ is not only to challenge societal ‘final vocabularies’ and presumed axioms but to contest them in a way that engages with society and furthers a debate. To this end

Historians, like journalists and political actors, take into account the assumptions of their audience. If they choose to confront those assumptions, they must present an alternative storyline that not only is empirically justified but also makes sense in terms of the tacit knowledge and moral grounding with which their audience works (Fine, 1161).

Likewise, playwrights need to communicate their subject matter both in a method and manner that resonates with the audience. If America does not believe itself to have a peasant class it behoves someone to politicise the issues and bring it to the forefront of debate. The Abbey Theatre, as suggested by Pilkington, washed Ireland’s dirty laundry in public. It was necessary for Ireland, long a colony, to bear witness to its foibles, imperfections and downright follies before it could possibly claim mastery over itself. This was the challenge for the American playwrights at the beginning of the twentieth century; nationalism expressed through

antagonism rather than exultation and self-congratulation. Ireland had taken its first tentative steps towards nationhood, a nationhood that would witness religious persecution, political upheaval, murder and civil war before it found a political and social peace. However, the Abbey Theatre was the lightning rod that provoked debate in the nascence of Ireland's independence movement whilst simultaneously promoting Irish culture and new forms of mainstream entertainment abroad. The Abbey embraced a theatrical Irish peasantry, yet it did so in a manner that exposed many of Ireland's inherent dichotomies. To admit that a nation has such a class of people reflects the deep inequalities and social cleavages that prevail in that society. However, the concept of an uneducated uncouth rabble was not one that was politicised as an example of the ills of colonialism. It was, without overtly stating the fact, celebrated as the last bastion of a 'true' Irish culture in all its glorious profanity, vulgarity and shabby beauty. The playwrights that bore witness to the Abbey Theatre's tour witnessed a form of theatre that insisted that America comprehend the enormous social power and efficacy, both symbolic and actual, that a play can wield over a population. Using Yeats's argument that the creation of truth and beauty 'is a greater service to our country than writing that compromises either in the seeming service of a cause' (Ellis-Fermor, 65), art for art's sake can be as potent a weapon as a plethora of propaganda plays. This debate regarding the alternate merits of plays based on artistic merit and those that are written and performed for propagandistic purposes was one, we shall see later in the thesis, that was to be at the centre of the Harlem renaissance. The Abbey, through its defiance of the Lord Lieutenant's wishes in staging Shaw's *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Postnet*, its, albeit unwitting, refusal to close its doors on the death of King Edward VII, and its staging of *The Playboy of the Western World* in Ireland, Britain and America, demonstrated the intrinsically political nature of theatre. The Abbey Theatre made itself a political actor not only due to the content of its repertoire, but through the decisions made as to where and when it will stage plays that it decided to produce.

The Irish playwrights lauded the peasantry partly because they would be the bedrock on which any national endeavour would be built and partly due to an over-romanticised notion of hand and land. It also gave them the artistic and intellectual space to explore the full range of Irish society in the microcosm of a rural community. America had a ready store of peasants in which plays could be sourced. However, the commercial viability and the existence of the Jim Crow laws limited the potential to tap such a resource. Despite this, the Abbey Theatre had demonstrated through their own resilience, the manner in which such predicaments could be overcome. All that was needed was a theatrical company that did not have a commercial interest at heart and had the stomach to fight a battle that they were willing to lose.

Export/Import

The Abbey tour was one of the stones that caused a ripple of theatrical discontent that reverberated around American theatre for years after their initial performances. Allied to their tour and wooing of new audiences and critics, the tour was a networking expedition for the management of the theatre. Arguably their most successful connection was made in Chicago when they encountered Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr's Hull House Theatre.²² The theatre was a facet of a grand project initiated by Addams and Starr in an attempt to rejuvenate Chicago's rough Southwest section of the city (Hecht, 172). The theatre developed in a mansion purchased by Addams and Starr to create an artistic space for the "Hull-House" settlement, a social and educational centre for the largely immigrant community (ibid, 172).

²² The Hull House Theatre was founded in 1900, eleven years after the foundation of the Hull House settlement in 1889. (Hudson & Pinkerton 168). The theatre is often credited with being the forerunner of the 'Little Theatre Movement' in America (ibid 169).

Indeed before the Abbey Theatre toured America the Hull-House Theatre had already staged some of Lady Gregory's plays and presented her with 'a lovely bunch of roses' (Gregory, 250) on her arrival in Chicago. The Hull-House theatre based its concepts of art and theatre on the English artist and social philosopher William Morris's²³ theories of artistic communities.

Addams was heavily involved in the Hull-House Theatre and, despite the prevailing tastes of the time, found melodramas and vaudevilles grossly unrealistic and, so being, inadequate for the needs of an impoverished immigrant community unused to the humours and titillations and star vehicles that saturated mainstream American theatre (Hecht, 173). She desired to produce plays which subscribed to the European realist theatre pioneered by Ibsen. The dissection and portrayal of his plays can be read as an investigation into a culture wrestling with specific problems of genre, trying to redefine what to expect from certain modes of representation (Matz, 110). This attempted interrogation of cultural norms and socially constructed barriers were the very issues that the Abbey Theatre were championing in Dublin since the formation of the theatre. Likewise the Hull-House theatre was attempting to usurp the cultural status quo in America by providing pertinent theatrical entertainment and enlightenment to audiences from classes that had heretofore not been seen as an audience.

In 1911 'nearly a third of all Americans [had] been relegated in some degree to second class citizenship because of their race, colour, nationality, religion or politics and [were] treated

²³ Morris, reacting against perceived modernity and the mechanisation of art looked back to a medieval era in which guilds of craftsmen embodied fundamental ethical values, stability and co-operation, duty, dignity and honesty (Tames 42). Through the enshrining of these moral codes assured a healthy social position for art and beauty (Hecht 172). He believed that by making good art available, not only to an elite, but to the public at large it ameliorated the negative effects of Durkheimian anomie.

accordingly' (Kennedy, 7). The theatre-going audiences in Ireland, at least those with an invested interest in the status quo, questioned the success of the Abbey Theatre's attempts to refute the clichéd 'Stage Irishman'. In America, although the commercial success of plays was of paramount importance, many theatres considered dramas of social concern too risky to present (Hecht, 177). The Hull-House's presentation of social realism on a non-profit basis bestowed a freedom to innovate, a freedom that had been granted the Abbey Theatre since Ms. Horniman had severed connections with it (ibid, 177). The Hull-House Theatre, therefore became, inadvertently, a mecca for serious modern drama. They gave Chicago premieres, and often American premieres, of works by Shaw, Galsworthy, Lady Gregory and Synge, among others. Laura Dainty Pelham introduced the new Irish drama in 1912 just as Ireland's Abbey Players came to Chicago as part of their American tour (ibid, 177). Indeed the friendship between the two theatres, perhaps due to the social awareness and the shared rejection of the dominant culture in their respective countries, led to the Hull-House Theatre touring Ireland and England in 1913. A closer look at the activities and interactions of the Hull House players with the Little Theatre movement will be examined later in this thesis in Chapter 4.

A Case for New Theatre

The Tour, although commercially and artistically successful, was not without its controversy. Again it was Synge's *The Playboy* that was at the heart of both the attack and defence. From the first night of its production in America the Irish American audiences attacked the perceived misrepresentation of their homeland. One Dr. Gallagher condemned the play and the Irish players stating that 'Nothing but hell-inspired ingenuity and a satanic hatred of the Irish people and their religion could suggest, construct, and influence the production of such plays. On God's earth the beastly creatures of the plays never existed' (Gregory, 190). The criticism continues: 'such are the productions which, hissed from Dublin, hawked around England by

the "Irish Players" for the delectation of those who wished to see Irishmen shown unfit for self-government, are now offered to the people of Washington. Will Washington tolerate the lie?' (ibid, 190). In Boston the political powers deemed the situation of enough import for the Mayor of Boston to send his secretary, Mr William A. Leahy, to report upon *The Playboy*. The Police commissioners also sent their censor (ibid, 183).²⁴

There was opposition encountered in almost every city in which the tour performed, but it was in Philadelphia where the Abbey Theatre was to find its most forceful and vigorous opposition. There were rumours that charges of immorality would be made against the Abbey Theatre and that there was a possibility of arrests (Gregory, 223). This move was expected by the tour managers. It had been decided to stage *The Playboy* regardless and a bail bond was prepared for the eventuality (Gregory, 224). In *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography* Lady Gregory explains that 'there [was] some legal point,²⁵ and Mr Bradford thought that we might all be arrested if we go on. I said that I would rather be arrested than withdraw the play and could answer for the players feeling the same' (ibid, 224). On the night of the 17th of January the Abbey Theatre players were 'technically arrested'²⁶ in the Adelphi Theatre. During the subsequent court case as the prosecutors grew excited, 'the trial of the Irish Players seemed to

²⁴ Both reports agreed that the performance was not such as to "justify the elimination of any portion of the play." Mr. Leahy had already written of the other plays: "I have seen the plays and admire them immensely. They are most artistic, wonderfully acted, and to my mind absolutely inoffensive to the patriotic Irishman (Gregory 181).

²⁵ 'The Pennsylvanian State Legislator had passed a bill forbidding "any dramatic, theatrical, operatic, or vaudeville exhibition ... or moving pictures, of a lascivious, sacrilegious, obscene, indecent or immoral nature or character"; violation was punishable by fine, imprisonment, or both' (Watt et al. 69).

²⁶ The touring party were never actually locked behind bars (Watt et al. 68).

be forgotten, and it became the trial of Christy Mahon for the attempted murder of his father' (Gregory, 229). There is ample literature explaining the outcome of the court case. It is suffice to say that through the brilliance of John Quinn as defence attorney the case against the Abbey Theatre was not proven and the charges were dismissed.²⁷ This event resonates with events that occurred in New York in the 1820's when police intervened in the Grove Park theatres productions – an incident that will be expounded upon in the next chapter.

It can be said with a fair degree of confidence that the Abbey Tour challenged the whole of the American theatrical establishment. From the theatre owning and play producing Syndicate, to the critics, the audience, the idea of theatrical spaces, the concept of a playwright theatre and the acknowledged methods of acting, not one facet of American theatre was to remain safe from the tidal wave that was the Irish Players. From their minimalistic stage and their naturalistic stance they overcame the challenges of the Roman Catholic Church in America; the lobbying of American government bodies and legal system of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, who attempted to challenge the supposed immorality of the subject matter; the entrenched Irish-American institutions that derided and decried the perceived misrepresentation of an idealized Irish peasant purity; the theatre critics that

²⁷ During the cross examination one of the witnesses was asked by John Quinn witness if anything immoral had happened on the stage, and he answered 'Not while the curtain was up'. I think it was the same witness who said 'a theatre is no place for a sense of humour' (Gregory 230).

heretofore gorged themselves on a diet of stardom and melodrama and perhaps most telling of all the general audience that expected laughter on the first utterance of an Irish brogue. Added to this is the fact that university bodies flocked to see the Irish players act out the plays that had become stalwarts in their curriculum.

The Irish National Theatre was not, from its formation, a commercial endeavour. George Moore, who was involved in the Irish Literary Theatre movement from its foundation in 1899 and was a contributing playwright to the Abbey Theatre, suggests that

the stage must be redeemed from the counting-house. Money is the original vice, and it is the placing of the theatre on what is called a commercial basis that has brought about the licence and vulgarity of the musical comedy. Every year the theatre makes an appeal to the desire of amusement, every year the theatre is moved further out of ideas and more into scenery and stockings (Cousins, 6).

Indeed the Irish players were

unsophisticated; they acted with an intensity that shows how well they feel the life they portray; they speak verse with an understanding of its quality; they pass from gravity to humour...with an adaptability that shows art pliable in their hands...these men and women come from the rank and file of the workers, with no preparation for the stage (Byrne, 95).

The actors, so drawn from the general population, enabled the Abbey Theatre to mould them into the actors that they needed to emphasise the words and not the dramatic nature of the plays. There was much debate regarding the aptitude of the Irish for acting, indeed it was said that '[T]heir temperament just suited it. They were all actors if trained. Some of the ablest professors of acting were of the opinion that the less educated the pupil was, the better the chance of making an actor of him or her' (Hogan & O'Neill, 114). Sara Algood, perhaps the Abbey Theatre's most commercially successful actress, was apprenticed to an upholstery firm after the death of her father. Sara remained with the firm until she was salaried by the Abbey

Theatre (Katz Clarke, 41).²⁸ These players, and in particular the scripts which they were to deliver with subtlety and understanding, were to be the back bone of this new theatre and the inspiration for a theatrical revolution that would sweep across America.

Although the new school of acting was, through the lyrical waxing of the theatre critic, taking centre stage, the American theatre owners had more than just a passing interest in the running of the Abbey Theatre. Their methods of staging a play, the economic margins within which they worked and the paucity of stage props all appealed to an industry that was controlled by monetary interests. The fact that the Abbey Theatre was, first and foremost, a playwright's theatre was something of interest to an American theatrical community that had yet to produce its great American playwright. Lennox Robinson, in an interview with the Irish Times, stated that 'there is the greatest interest in America in the management of this theatre, because they are very dissatisfied with their present system of theatres. Especially in Chicago, we found that there was considerable enquiry concerning our beginnings and our methods of management' (The Irish Times/Holloway, 16/3/1912). Yeats elaborates the point stating that the American theatre seeks 'deliverance from their present dramatic influence, and it had never occurred to them that a movement could be made by knowledge and enthusiasm, rather than by wealth' (ibid). That commercial success is of importance in the running of a successful theatre cannot be questioned. It is a matter of what takes pre-eminence, the artistic talent and integrity of a company or the profitability of the company. The Abbey Theatre, perhaps through luck, perhaps fate, managed to uncover and give voice to some of the most significant

²⁸ In 1941 Algood's performance in *How Green Was My Valley* got her an Oscar nomination for Best Actress in a Supporting Role and a seven year contract at Twentieth Century Fox (Nissen 12).

theatrical voices of the early twentieth century. Nonetheless those playwrights needed a company of actors and a stage to transform their scripts into reality and the Abbey Theatre was a willing and able vehicle.

American Independence?

The Abbey Theatre's tour encouraged and enabled the American theatrical circle to branch away from the Syndicate centralisation and to pen plays that confronted social issues on the stage. The Little Theatre Movement, which had been burgeoning before the arrival of the Abbey Theatre, was given renewed life and public support that it may not have had had the management style, minimalist setting and acting ability of the Irish Players not been clearly displayed to an unsuspecting American audience. The Abbey tour was perhaps the catalyst that inspired theatres throughout America to write, act, produce and tour their own plays and present issues that were of social import in their community. It is true that just a few years after the Abbey Theatre left the Little Theatre Movement spread from Chicago to many other States in America. The new format of many one act plays, the size of the repertoire and the ability to mix and match the plays was something that new theatrical companies could exploit and experiment with in their own time and importantly in their own space. The Hull House Players had already been experimenting with these concepts and perhaps it is of this company that Lennox Robinson said 'in Chicago, we found that there was considerable enquiry concerning our beginnings and our methods of management' (The Irish Times, Saturday March 16th 1912). Their management style may well have been based upon that of the Abbey Theatre and they would have been given a first-hand look at the administration of the Abbey Theatre when they visited Dublin just one year after the Irish Players tour. That tour, and the impact that the Hull House Players and other Little Theatres had upon American theatre will be examined in depth in Chapter four.

The next chapter is going to take a step away from the Irish and white American theatre and examine the African American theatre in America from their first African American theatre through to the minstrelsy theatre. These issues need to be examined closely as it is imperative to explore the African American theatre that was being produced prior to the Harlem Renaissance. Indeed, the African American community produced America's first playwright theatre, the first guerrilla theatre and even the first internationally respected American actor. Although the chapter is unchronological, without its presence the emergence of African American theatre in the early twentieth century would not make as much sense, the tropes and stereotypes that were assigned to the African American individual would not be truly explained and the achievements of many African American theatre pioneers would be, unjustly, overlooked.

Chapter 3

Introduction

This chapter will take a broad stroke history of the African American theatre from its inception in the early 1800's to the end of that century. The intention of this chapter is not to give a focused or detailed trajectory of the African American stage, but to sketch in a background of African American theatre to justify claims made later in the thesis – namely the importance of Bert Williams and the integral role that minstrelsy played in the development of the stage African American and the dissemination of his perceived character types. However, the chapter will begin by looking at the genesis of African American theatre and the troubled path that led it to the Harlem renaissance. Just as the previous chapter plotted the trajectory of 1911/12 Irish tour of America, here the journey of African American theatre will be charted from its nascence in 1821 to the burgeoning African American drama that exploded onto the stage in the last decade of the nineteenth hundreds. This theatrical endeavour was not without its tribulations and detractors; the movement never had the freedom to express itself on its own terms, however, it was the first important and tentative steps towards a public self-expression and examination of African American culture, values and problems by those who were best placed to interpret it – namely African Americans. It was also the first attempt for the African American community to depict themselves on the stage, to add a third dimension to their public representation and to illicit more than pity, anger or laughter from their audiences as they, with little experience, staged Shakespearian dramas and plays that were en vogue on Broadway. The Irish theatre's attempts to reconcile the many strands of nationalism, racism and revisionism that were prevalent in Britain and Ireland was a struggle, however, the African American communities were struggling against a society that still enslaved many of their population at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Even though they were enslaved the African American contributions to American art goes back to the first slaves that reluctantly set foot on American soil. Indeed African American drama has a long history on the American stage, although there were many hiatuses and struggles by stage owners, playwrights and actors alike to get their art in front of the public. The genesis of African American theatre stretches back to the foundation of the African Grove Theatre, instigated by free African American citizens in New York City in 1821. The plays that were staged varied from Shakespeare productions to plays written by African American playwrights specifically for the Grove Theatre. The endeavour, however, was always swimming against the prevailing flow of opinion in society that considered African Americans as little more than servants and indentured slaves. Any artistic movement that could have been created in this environment was always struggling against the odds, not for profits or public acceptance, but for survival.

The fact that the theatre was created during the freeing of the last slaves in New York, and at a time when the white citizens were looking to disenfranchise many African Americans in New York, speaks to the pressurised and poisonous atmosphere that this theatre survived, and at times, thrived in. The mere fact that the African American community established a theatre almost immediately after the abolition of slavery in New York speaks to the important public good that a theatre could have for a minority community. It gave the community a vehicle with which they could display a culture and artistic energy that had long been subjugated. It also displays the importance of theatre as a means of a public expression of 'being'.

This chapter will examine the ideas of the African American off-Broadway beginnings, the initial rejection of the proscenium arch and the embracing of non-theatrical space.²⁹ Their art was as frightening and jarring for the white supervisors, masters and population in general as it was exotic and entertaining. It, again, speaks volumes for the need of communal art that the performances that they created in Africa were repeated in America after the middle passage. Theatre, public entertainment, the act of partaking in and witnessing a performance all have a panacea effect for those present. The creative juice that inspired early African Americans to perform were, at the end of the nineteenth century adopted by the white community and reinterpreted for their own agendas. To this end the chapter will also examine the origins of Minstrelsy and the ways which this form, albeit flawed and misunderstood, was to give rise to the breakthrough acts that would redefine African American theatre and define the next generation of propagandists, entertainers and race relations.

Staging the New York Act

By 1790 New York was the largest urban centre in America and had the privilege of being the site of the first American capital, the city in which the first Congress sat, the location of the first Supreme court and the Federal Building on Wall Street was where the first American president, George Washington, was inaugurated in 1789 (LeMay 54). The city was a thriving place of commerce thanks to the Erie Canal, built in 1825, that connected New York to the

²⁹ In many ways this is paralleled by the Irish National theatre some 80 years later as they located their first theatrical space between two shops on Camden Street in Dublin (Faye, 16). The theatre they formed was ‘a bare hall at the back of a provision merchant’s on the one side and a butcher’s shop on the other’ (ibid, 16).

vast and fertile agricultural markets of the interior (ibid 54). It was also the first stop for many of the migrants that poured into America from Europe (ibid 54). As the lifestyle of the white population became more affluent due to the economic success of the city entertainment, life in general became more tolerable in the African American community in New York too after the passing of the New York Act of 1799 which provided hope for a future free black population. The Act ruled that every male offspring born to a slave after July 4, 1799, would be counted a free man after a period of servitude to the owner of the mother consisting of twenty-eight years. In the case of females the term of service was twenty-five years (Johnson 12). The act gradually and sluggishly liberated the slave population north of the Mason-Dixon line, however, it forced and vouchsafed the last generation of slaves into indentured slavery until they were well in to their adulthood. Indeed the bill's passing, as momentous as it was, was the bitter fruit born of the failed 1785 gradual abolition bill (Gellman 153). Despite the slow progress and inhumanity that was displayed by the political elite in New York the African Americans had a staunch ally in the active and prolonged involvement of William Dunlap, the noted producer, playwright, actor, historian and owner of two of New York's most popular theatres in the late eighteenth century, the John Street Theatre (from 1796–98) and the Park Theatre (from 1798–1805). Dunlap was a leading and active member of the New York Manumission society; a society founded in 1785 to promote the abolition of the slavery of African descendants within the state of New York (Gellman 155).

African American's in New York benefitted from the actions of the Manumission Society not only due to their lobbying and political action but also from their social and educational achievements also. Although it was not the first school to be run for the benefit of African Americans, that honor goes to schools that were founded by the Quakers, systemic schooling was, for the first time, brought to the black population in New York with the establishment of the African Free School by the Manumission Society in 1787. The school consisted of a single

class room and was run by Cornelius Davis, a teacher who left his post in a white school to take charge of this new school run specifically for black children (Johnson 21). The first building for the school was erected on Cliff Street in 1796. For the first years of its existence it survived through small grants bestowed to the school by the Corporation of the City, however, its fortunes changed when the State Legislature appropriated \$1,565.78 in 1801 for the running of the school (ibid 21). The fact that the funding of the school was taken over by the state led to the historical curio that the black children in New York received free schooling some years before their white counterparts. Indeed, James Weldon Johnson argues that The African Free School is in truth the precursor of the New York public school system. The simple fact of this school's existence means that there was an educated African American population in New York that was a ready audience for a theatrical troupe.

The Cultural Stage

Albeit that there were African performance and songs that were incorporated into the work and society of African American culture, the first recorded attempt by an African American to enter into the world of theatrical stage productions was William Henry Brown. The Caribbean born Brown founded the African Company in 1816, an all-black theatrical group and became the first black theatre manager, owner, director and playwright in America (Thompson 4). He was a retired seaman, having served as steward on a vessel that sailed between New York and Liverpool (ibid 4). On his retirement Brown decided to stay in New York and try his hand at establishing a place of entertainment for the African American community.

African Americans, to this point, had little access to theatre as segregation was in force in New York. For example, in the aforementioned Park Theatre owned by Dunlap, a three-tiered building with seating for two thousand people which opened in 1798, the least desirable section of the upper gallery was set aside for blacks and rowdy whites. The seats that were

allocated for the African American patrons were even more disagreeable than the third-tier boxes reserved for prostitutes (Dewberry 128). Brown hired a house on the north side of Thomas Street and established a social and entertainment centre for African Americans in his back garden (Thompson 3). The space was set up as a 'public garden' or open air cabaret that would service the needs of the African American community (ibid 3).

For its August 1st opening in 1821 Brown invited not only his friends and family, but also the press. One of the people that accepted his invitation was Mordecai Manuel Noah, the sheriff of New York City (Hay 6). Not only was Noah the sheriff but he also held the positions of judge, consul, politician, playwright, critic, and the editor of the powerful *National Advocate* newspaper (ibid 6). When the invitation was sent to Noah one can only presume that Brown must not have realised that he had invited a pro-slavery official responsible for whipping up support to extensively rewrite the qualifications an African American had to meet in order to qualify for the vote.³⁰ Needless to say Noah accepted the invitation and immediately launched an attack, not only on the 'public garden' but on the occupants therein describing the men's 'shining faces, protuberant eyes, and widening mouths' whilst quoting Shakespeare to debase the female 'Black beauties 'making night hideous' (ibid 7). The fallout from Noah's abusive articles, however, led to so many people, including the white population, arriving at Brown's garden that the neighbours allegedly complained to the police about the noise and general overcrowding (ibid 8). Noah, however, needing no second invitation, closed the establishment

³⁰ A freed slave had the same franchise as a white citizen, that is to say he had the vote, if he paid his taxes or owned a freehold valued at twenty dollars or rented a tenement for at least forty shillings (Hay 6).

down, leaving Brown with a useless property with which he could do little. Although Brown's performance space had been deemed unfit for the purpose of staging performances and was closed to the public Noah had unwittingly set in motion events that would lead the African American community to establish their very own theatre. Sheriff Noah's closure notice stated that there could no longer be a tea garden at the premises, but it had lodged no complaint regarding a theatre (ibid 7). Having noticed that the Park Theatre, which was at the time closed for refurbishment, had booked the famous English actor Junius Brutus Booth to star in their *Richard III* production for its October 21st reopening, William Brown set about organising his own version of *Richard III* in his upstairs apartment which he now called the African Grove Theatre (ibid 8).

This first establishment was located on the corner of Bleecker and Mercer streets 'in the rear of the "One Mile Stone" Broadway' (Johnson 78). Noah attended the play on its opening night on the 20th September and duly slated the performance. The opening of the theatre was a double misfortune for Noah as it coincided with the Democrat's convention and the rejection of the pro-slavery Democrats alterations to the legislation that would modify the African Americans voting rights (Hay 8). Noah continued to lambast the theatre and the performances, however, just as before, his bombast only led to an increase in attendance (Hay 9). Indeed, Ira Aldridge, one of the African American actors in the African Grove Theatre and later the most renowned African American Shakespearean actor on both side of the Atlantic claimed that the people, especially whites, came to ridicule but stayed to admire (ibid 9). The increased attendance led to lower ticket prices which was of great concern to Noah. He was friends with Stephen Price and Shaw Simpson, the new owners of the Park Theatre, and the theatre's assistant manager Edmund. Noah realised that the African Grove Theatre was a potential rival to the Park Theatre (ibid 9). The problem was compounded for Noah as it was Price and Simpson that produced and staged the plays that he wrote. As expected Noah shut the African

Grove Theatre down, citing that the theatre caused riots but according to Ira Aldridge the disturbances were sparked by Price. Brown distributed a handbill about the city accusing Price directly of being responsible for the riots that occurred in the theatre and vowed to continue his theatrical project regardless of the harassment that he received (Thompson 13).

The closure of the African Grove Theatre led Brown to establish the first guerrilla theatre in America (Hay 10). Throughout the year of 1822 he moved his actors to many different rented locations throughout New York, daringly including a hotel room next door to the Park Theatre (ibid 10). Noah hunted these productions down, leading to many arrests, sometimes right off the stage. Indeed there were reports of the actors finishing their performance in the jail cell as, even in 1822, the show must go on! (ibid 10). This scene, as was revealed in the last chapter, would be re-enacted ninety years later as the Irish Players were dragged off the stage due to their encounter with American justice. Due to this elusive game of cat and mouse between Brown and Noah, the arrests, and the controversy that was caused by Noah's articles in the *National Advocate* condemning the antics of the African Grove Theatre, Brown became an isolated figure within the African American community, losing the support of church preachers and community leaders (ibid 10). These men were campaigning against the restricted voting bill, yet despite their best efforts the stricter voting system came into force. The new franchise was to limit voting to those men who

Shall have been in New York for three years, and for one year next to preceding election, shall be seized and possessed of a freehold estate of the value of two hundred fifty dollars over and above all debts (ibid 10).

Brown, undeterred by the backlash against his attempts at creating a theatrical space for his community created one last manifestation of his theatre which was to be used for propaganda purposes and to protest against racism (ibid 10). Brown went so far as to openly defy Noah

by returning to the closed African Grove Theatre. To add a touch of bravado to his actions he widely advertised the return on playbills and installed lanterns outside the building to light up its façade (ibid 10). The crowds that attended the reopening must have been satisfactory as Brown soon moved the theatre to a larger empty lot close to the original site. Here he built his own playhouse which opened in mid-July 1822 (Thompson 14). This was the first playhouse to be built by a black theatre owner and the first to be built to house a cast of black actors in America (ibid 14).

There is minimal information regarding the size of the theatre, its capacity or the size of its stage. There are reports that the capacity was three to four hundred people although Thompson, in his text *A Documentary History of the African Theatre*, thinks that these estimates are generous. The building was lit by a chandelier and there was a separate room available for the sale of drinks, however, we know nothing regarding its backstage facilities (ibid 14). Despite the lack of information regarding the building itself the performances were profitable and popular, with the audience composed mostly of 'laughter-loving clerks who came to see the sport, but invariably paid their quarter for admission' (Dewberry 128). Mary C. Henderson, in her book *The City and the Theatre*, refers to an extant playbill of Saturday, 7 June 1823, which names the two dramas then being presented by the African Company: *Tom and Jerry; or, Life in London* and *Obu; or, The Three-Fingered Jack* (Dewberry 129).

Another rare playbill dated 1 October 1821 highlights the fare that one could expect from an evening in the African Grove Theatre. This programme began with an "Opera," that is, a collection of songs by Hewlett, Hutchinson and Thompson. Followed by "for the last time this Season," *The Tragedy of Richard the Third*, with Hutchinson as King Henry and Buckingham, J. Hutchinson as Stanley, Mathews as Richmond, Hewlett as Richard, Miss Welsh as Lady

Anne, and Miss J. Welsh as Elizabeth. . . . The entertainment continued with the pantomime *Asama-Asama* by Hewlett, and *Asana* by S. Welsh. "The ballet got up under the direction of Mr. Hewlett, being received on Monday evening, Sept. 24, with unbounded applause, will be repeated again" with Miss S. Welsh as Columbine, Hewlett as Daphnas, Thompson as Old Man, and Master Geib as Servant. The theatre is set down as at the corner of Mercer and Bleeker Street. (Dewberry 130).

Here we see the diversity that the African Grove theatre undertook. In one playbill they staged an opera, a Shakespearean tragedy and a ballet. This would have been a vast undertaking for a well-financed theatre that had a long history of productions yet alone a theatre that was established through an act of defiance and continued as a labour of love. The African American theatre was to stage a show for everyone's tastes and, by the reports of the previous production of the ballet, their endeavours were met with particular success.

It was during this period, when the African Grove Theatre had found a permanent home that, perhaps, the African American Company undertook the most important act of its too brief career. On the 20-21st June 1823 Brown debuted a play that he himself had penned: *The Drama of King Shotaway*, the staging of which was intended as a benefit performance for Brown. (Dewberry131). This play was the first play staged that we know of that was authored by an African American (Thompson 13). As a point of clarification it is the first play we know of due to the fact that when Brown was arrested at the African Grove Theatre a year before he was already listed as a playwright and, therefore, presumably may have penned another play whose name or content has not managed to survive the ensuing years (ibid 13). The play, the text of which has unfortunately and somewhat inevitably been lost, is described in its playbill as "founded on facts taken from the insurrection of the Caravs on the island of St. Vincent. Written from experience by Mr. Brown" (Dewberry 131). The outrageousness of presenting

a play in a still deeply divided and racist America about a black revolution would have surely seemed foolhardy, more so when you consider it was being staged by a black cast and black theatre management. Perhaps expecting some sort of trouble at the theatre at the bottom of the playbill appeared a warning: "Proper Officers Will Attend To Keep Order." (ibid 131) The African Grove Theatre which was initially established as a centre of entertainment and refinement for New York's black community, evolved to include education, as well as having an implicit role in the black struggle for liberation. In an America where the African American was still being held in slavery, in a New York that was actively seeking to keep the voting franchise out of the hands of the black minority, and in a community where the theatre itself was losing the support of the elders and leaders, the African Grove Theatre managed to accomplish much in three years, and made an indelible mark on the American theatrical landscape. The theatre, from a room in an apartment, to a guerrilla theatre had morphed, against all the odds, into a large theatre space that had the capacity and ability to stage several productions encompassing opera, theatre and ballet in one night. Most impressively, however, the African Grove Theatre became a playwright theatre with the writing and production of plays being kept in-house. This is something that white theatre aspired to but did not do successfully for another century, an event that will be discussed in Chapters four and five.

Despite the initial success of the theatre, and the staging of a play that was written by a black person, the African Grove Theatre disappeared from the theatrical world. At about the time that Brown opened the newly built African Grove Theatre there was a Yellow Fever epidemic in New York. This epidemic peaked during the week of the 19th – 26th September forcing many businesses and households to close their doors and for some citizens to move from the infected zones of the city (Dewberry 15). On October 15th the *National Advocate* noted that the 'African Theatre was closing because of the fever and would travel to Albany for a few nights' (ibid 15). Brown closed his theatre at just the time the Yellow Fever was abating. On

its return in November, for we do not know if the theatre company performed at all during its absence from its home, it was announced that one of the theatres brightest stars, James Hewlett, was to journey Southwards (ibid 15). The departure of one of the theatre's brightest lights may indicate that there was some financial hardship at the time. At any rate, the theatre no longer had the capacity to hold onto its main attractions. On May 6th 1823 the newspapers announced that one William Brown filed a bankruptcy petition (ibid 16). The bankruptcy was made final in July of that year but alas the announcements of the bankruptcy did not give any details of William Brown, not even an address where his trail could be followed. By the following year William Brown had disappeared from the city directory. Thus exited the man who put African American theatre on the map; who established the first African American acting troupe, who built the first African American playhouse that was to be the home of the first African American drama company, who wrote the first play that can be attributed to an African American playwright and established the career of the first great African American actor, Ira Aldridge.

From small seeds

Although the Grove Park Theatre succumbed to the many tribulations it encountered, both societal and natural, it was a vital start on the journey to theatrical participation for later generations. In *The Harlem and Irish Renaissance* Tracey Mishkin writes '[f]or cultural invasion to succeed, it is essential that those invaded become convinced of their own intrinsic inferiority' (Mishkin 49). Indeed, the language, the dialect was as much a label of inferiority as the colour of the person's skin. In Charles Chesnut's short story *The wife of his youth*, he relates the tale of Mr. Ryder, a pale skinned runaway slave, that excelled in freedom and his plantation wife that is searching for him after abolition. He is pale skinned, she more darkly

coloured. However, it is her dialect that drives home the difference between the two. By example here is a sample conversation between Mr. Ryder and his wife:

[Mr. Ryder]: 'He may have married another woman. Your slave marriage would not have prevented him, for you never lived with him after the war, and without that your marriage doesn't count' 'No, indeed, suh,' [his wife] replied, "Sam ain' dat kin' er man. He wuz good ter me, Sam wuz, but he wuzn' much good ter nobody e'se, fer he wuz one er de triflin'es' han's on de plantation' (Chesnutt 12).

The dramatic difference in dialect starkly outlines the 'intrinsic inferiority' of the wife. Her language is, on face value, uneducated, stunted and shameful. 'Although black and white speech patterns had influenced each other and converged to a degree, many intellectuals in both groups denigrated African-American dialects' (Mishkin 57). 'Hyde, Lady Gregory, and Synge laboured to create a form of English that would convey Irish themes, sentiments and syntax without betraying them into "buffoonery ... [or] easy sentiment"' (Mishkin 56). Dialect was the double edged sword, but announcing and denouncing the artistic endeavour of the Irish and African American artist, however, this is not all the theatre in both communities shared.

The Grove theatre, as shown, spent much of its time, and indeed its crucial formative period staging its plays in non-theatrical spaces. Similarly, the nascent National Irish Theatre was first brought to the public's attention in spaces that were not commonly associated with the staging of plays. William Faye, one of the founders of the theatre, when asked about the initial staging's of the theatre stated that

[O]n the Saturday night we had trouble in getting our audience into the hall. The shops on either side of our entrance were a provision dealer on the left and a butcher on the right. Saturday being their busy day, large boxes of eggs encroached upon our entrance on the one side, while the butcher crowded the other with the half of a large cow that nearly touched the egg boxes. The result was that those members of the public who were courageous enough to support us had to get in by slipping sideways between the eggs and the beef (Faye 16).

The closeness of the production to the audiences meant that '[T]he actors worked alongside those that they wished to inspire and vice-versa' (ibid 16). It allowed, as attested by Faye, the theatrical space to be a common area frequented by citizens that had an interest in any facet of the Irish Revival (ibid 17). That the first Irish theatre and the first African American theatre started out in a space that was not associated with the theatre adds some credence to the words scribed by the 'strong poet'. The 'final vocabulary' of theatre was not only being challenged through language but through setting. The setting of the KRIGWA theatre, one that will be examined later in the thesis was also established in a non-theatrical setting. It benefited from using the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library as its base of operations and its performance space. The library, just as the initial space occupied by the Irish National Theatre Society, provided a space in which a people, 'long denied an understanding and appreciation of their own history and culture, could explore what it meant to be black. It became a sphere for public discourse' (Anderson, 386).

Theatre, in both societies, was a place where one could comfortably dwell on one's own identity. However, even these spaces were problematized as

[L]ike the dialect work of the Irish Renaissance, Harlem Renaissance dialect literature remains highly controversial ... [F]rom the artists' contemporaries ... to current critics ... reviewers, writers and scholars have questioned dialect literature: Does it promote racial stereotypes? Can it be used successfully for serious literary endeavour? (Mishkin 56).

The theatre, however, more than the written word brings an immediacy to language that few other art forms can employ. From the moment a character utters the first phrase of their dialogue the dialect points the audience in a direction, be it upper class, lower class, peasant, Irish, African American etc. The challenge that these theatres faced was to counter the axioms which these cultures engendered – i.e. an Irishman was sentimental and violent, an African American was ignorant, but to alter the perception of these dialects. Both cultures would not accurately deploy the accents and dialects which they heard on the street but would 'condense

the speech ... and the activities ... creating a vivid style, if not entirely a realistic one' (Mishkin 63).

The 'strong poet' and 'ironist' was, in this instance not 'simply ... playing the new off against the old' (Rorty 73), but creating something new out of an amalgamation of many of the cultural affectations which the culture was immersed in. The theatrical dialect was a concentrated dose of culture, a heady mixture of recognised and imagined speech which, they hoped, could capture the essence of the culture they wished to portray.

A Black Faced Phoenix

After the collapse of the theatre, it took many years before African Americans had a place to flex their theatrical muscles, and by the time that they could their cultural depictions were meshed and corrupted by white America's lampooning of their society and perceived collective characteristics. The loss of their agency and the reification of their culture for the amusement of mainstream theatre was to have a lasting impact on the African American stage. Characterizations of cultures and societies that are represented on stage are simply reflections of the manner in which that society is viewed by the main stream and the African American communities have suffered grievously at the hands of white actors and playwrights. Darwin Theodore Troy Turner, an African American literature critic, a poet, and an English professor suggests that American drama has presented five basic images of the black man:

- (1) Sambo, the oldest image of the black American, is a lazy, ignorant character who sits around all day playing a banjo.
- (2) The tragic mulatto, first appearing in 1852 in Uncle Tom's Cabin, is a virtuous and noble character because of his white blood.
- (3) The devoted Christian slave, who also first appeared in Uncle Tom's Cabin, is the good and humble "darkie."
- 4) The carefree Black, or noble savage who has no morality and is a child of nature .
- ..
- 5) The black beast, of whom there are two portrayals, is either the lustful brute who cannot control his animal nature or the Fair-skinned mulatto who wants to contaminate the white race (Turner 54).

The Black man's role in American drama was to be a simple reflection of the ideals of the white society that for so long dominated the portrayal and depiction of the African American character in the public's imagination. Essentially his role was to be 'a walk-on role, as self-effacing as he was supposed to be in real life' (Brown 103). The management of the depiction of the African American was as important as the day to day management of the citizenry on the street. Time and again, particularly in the Southern States, the representation of the African American population would have a direct impact on how they were perceived in the white community. The role that the black person played when they simply walked down the streets in many of the towns and cities in the southern states was quite literally the role of their lives. Long before the concepts of 'passing' were to enter into the public's imagination many of these men had to pass themselves off as compliant, happy and satisfied American citizens, even though they had no access to, nor indeed publicly harboured any expectation of, access to the law and society that their white counterparts enjoyed.

The first appearance of a black man on stage was in *The Padlock*, a two-act 'afterpiece'³¹ opera by Charles Dibdin, the text of which was penned by Isaac Bickerstaffe, an Irish playwright (Brown 672). The play was written for and first presented on the London stage in 1768 and a mere eight months later it was to be given its American debut in New York (Cooley 51). The character's name in the play was Mungo, a loud and irreverent West Indian who 'fathered a long line of comic Negroes in American drama' (Brown, 1967 672). This play, although staged initially in London, was to have an immense impact upon the American stage and it

³¹ An 'afterpiece' is a short, usually one act humorous opera that is staged after the main event. *The Padlock*, however was a two act 'afterpiece'

holds a special importance in the nascent development of the African American literary dialect due to its great popularity and the probability that it was imitated by later authors (Cooley 51). In the eighteenth century *The Padlock* had thirty two productions in Philadelphia compared to fewer than twenty for any other non-tragedy and fewer than ten for most similar plays (Pollock 191). The *Padlock* was to experience success in many American cities, being staged in Savannah, Charleston, Richmond, Washington, Baltimore, Newport and Boston. The play continued to be staged in New York until 1813. The play was the first of a plethora of plays that enhanced, extenuated and refined the African American character types, although *The Politicians* (1797) and *A Trip to Niagara* (1830), authored by the New York Manumission member and advocate for gradual abolition, William Dunlap, were two noticeable plays of that type (Brown 672). These early representations of African American life were the stepping stones to what is, arguably, America's first contribution to the world stage, the Minstrel show.

A Galaxy of Minstrels

The Minstrel show and the circus were leading contributors to the development and expansion of an American musical theatre (Mates 76). James Weldon Johnson contends that 'Negro minstrelsy, everyone ought to know, had its origins among the slaves of the old south' (Johnson 87). The form started as a brand of entertainment in which the slaves mimicked their masters' customs, habits, style of dancing, walking and talking (Thompson 58). Ironically, soon it became a popular form of entertainment throughout the white communities. They thought that they were aping their slaves' attempts at being 'white'. Soon the masters of the plantations were inviting their neighbors and friends over to see their 'darkies' perform (ibid 58). Many of the actors that took part in these Minstrel acts preceding Minstrelsy proper are still known. George Nichols; Bob Farrell, the original 'Zip Coon'; George Rice, Bill Keller

and Thomas Blakely to name but a few (Rice 6). James Roberts was reported to have sung a song in African American character as early as October 7th 1824.

White actors very quickly realised the portrayal of the African American character could reap an enormous commercial value and from the beginning of the eighteenth century they set about exploiting it by putting on 'black-face' acts (Johnson 88). One of the earliest, most influential and best known of these black-face actors was Thomas Dartmore Rice, who is accredited with being the original 'Jim Crow', a character that became synonymous with the Minstrel circuit. The history of the character, and how it was established, bears retelling here. Rice, whilst sauntering through one of the main thoroughfares of Cincinnati, 'suddenly found himself arrested by a voice ringing clear and full above the noise of the street, and giving utterance, in an unmistakable dialect, to the refrain of the song 'Turn about an' wheel about an' do jis so, An ebery time I turn about I jump Jim Crow' (Rice 7). Rice donned some ragged clothes in order to imitate the blind African American he heard singing and sang the song that he heard in the African American dialect. A crucially important step that Rice took was to look like the character he was attempting to imitate. The use of the dialect is as important as looking like the character and Rice seems to have been a competent actor and was recognised for his entr'acte songs and dances (Mates 77). Rice staged his first 'Jim Crow' act in the autumn of 1830 at a theatre in Pittsburgh and his performance was an immediate hit (Johnson 88). Wherever Rice played thereafter, and no matter what part he played, audiences would always ask him to perform 'Jim Crow'. Not alone did the portrayal of this character establish Rice as one of the preeminent entertainers of his day, it also launched a new type of acting onto the American stage, namely the imitation and interpretation of African Americans (Mates 77). During an engagement in Washington Rice took on an accomplice and the two became a double act. His partner Joseph Jefferson, later to become one of the stars of the American stage, was four years old at the time and would be carried onto the stage in a bag which Rice

had slung over his shoulder. With the announcement that ‘Ladies and gentlemen, I’d have you for to know, that I’ve got a little darky here that jumps Jim Crow’ he emptied the child, who was dressed in rags and had black face from the sack and proceed to sing (Johnson 88).

Indeed the single man on stage soon morphed into an ensemble and the first black-faced minstrel troupe, called the Virginia Minstrels, opened in New York City in February 1843 (ibid 88). Almost overnight black-faced troupes emerged in the larger cities across America and the theatrical genre that was to dominate the American stage for the next sixty years had begun (ibid 88). Minstrelsy changed repeatedly throughout its evolution. The form starting as single performer, changing in the 1840s to a highly ritualized two- or three-part show by four musicians/ comedians/ acrobats (Herring 4). The act morphed again in the 1850s with the popularity of ‘Tom shows’ (minstrel versions of Uncle Tom's Cabin) (ibid 4). However, the one constant in the early years was that the offering was played by white actors in black face. Another thread that links all forms of minstrelsy is the inherent racism that infects the whole show. The show sets about objectifying the African American character in comic set pieces and allowing the character to wander into situations, both verbal and physical, that the real African American, it is presumed, would not feel comfortable in and would be unable to deal with. The infantilising of the African American male both titillates and placates the audience, giving the viewer a glimpse at the shortcomings of the race in an environment that is safe and white. However, Bauch, in his text “*Gentlemen, Be Seated!*” *The Rise and Fall of the Minstrel Show*, states that ‘without doubt, racial discrimination was played down in the minstrel show. The minstrel show was meant as a form of entertainment, which was not intended to be taken seriously’ (Bauch 3). Indeed William L Van Deburg in *Slavery & Race in American Popular Culture* stated that

many of the popular jokes and gags performed on the minstrel stage had nothing whatsoever to do with black life, North or South, but simply used the black characters’ stock obtuseness, love of big words, and habitual mispronunciations to create

humorous situations. While certain elements of slave folk entertainment ... were incorporated into the stage shows, it is unlikely that a West African griot – the traveling entertainer of that society – would have recognised the minstrel version (Van Deburg 41).

The scattering of malapropisms and obtuse behaviour may not have had anything to do directly with black life but the depiction of the African American as an obtuse ignorant individual that is inherently weak minded and overly verbose paints a picture that is none too flattering. The racism here is more subtle than showing a simple man unable to survive outside the plantations. The depiction is of a man that cannot be upwardly mobile because he has long since plateaued. The African American is depicted as a man of shadow and no substance, a trained pet that, although attempting to ape the actions of those he sees in white America, will rarely, if ever, be up to the task. The minstrel shows often depicted the African American slave as a pathetic figure that sang melancholy songs about missing a loved one, plantation disturbances, the death of ‘Ole Massa’ or some other ailment of the heart. However, the horror of the original songs were watered down to more transient worries, and quite often, jokes would be used immediately after a tragic song in an attempt to alleviate the audience and ensure that nobody dwelled on the sadness behind the song (Van Deburg 45). Songs like ‘The Bee-Gum’ and ‘The Dinner Horn’ told the tales of toil, trauma, theft and loss that were the lot of the field slave, although these melancholy tales of slavery’s cruelty were ameliorated by the discounting of the long term effects of such anguish. In fact, the slaves that were depicted always had the ability to shrug off even the deepest of woes for after-hours play (ibid 45). When it came time to play the usually downbeat field hand became a fun loving ‘Nigger Nabob’, his day time troubles soon forgotten as he frolics ‘by de sunshine ob de moon’ (ibid 46). Yet again, the picture of the African American is carefully crafted and depicts a man child, a creature easily distracted by fun, almost animalistic in its ability to divert itself from its daily sufferings to enjoy the few hours that it gets to call its own when the day’s work is done. It is obvious that to make the spectacle entertaining there needs to be a wide berth given

to the truth of the plantations, if ever there was a place that was out of sight out of mind for the white population those places of commerce and cheap labour would rank highly on the scale, but the simplicity and lack of depth with which the characters are bestowed is quite jarring.

By the 1840's the minstrel show had organised itself into a standard layout. The entertainment that would be presented by 'Mr. Interlocutor', the master of ceremonies. Three more actors sat in a semicircle. The end-men in this semi-circle were called Bones and Tambo, and these characters shared jokes together or made fun of the slaves. The reason for their being named Tambo and Bones was due to the instruments that either man played. Tambo was proficient on the tambourine, and Bones, needless to say played the bones. However, through their jokes and jibes the minstrel show revealed its double edged sword to the public. Tambo and Bones would reveal, in an entertaining manner, the true depth of the racism that was inherent in white America, whilst at the same time exploiting the power and entertainment value that was apparent in African American culture (Bauch 146). Alternatively you could have the slow and dim witted 'Jim Crow' at one end and his urbane, witty and smarter companion 'Zip Coon' at the other (Norrell 31). 'Zip Coon' was depicted as an outlandish dandy, overdressed in long tails and tights and a top hat. He was the character that was the source of most malapropisms, and 'Zip Coon' was the living embodiment of what the audience came to regard as the urban black man. Regardless where the African American characters came from, despite their differing experiences and ignoring their sensibility, the minstrel shows reinforced and concretised white America's perception of the African American. However, despite the constant and consistent message that was vocalised from the stage the minstrel shows were slowly populated by African American actors. These actors would don black face and dismantle the concepts behind the racism piece by piece. The show became more based on

character than caricature and the greatest exponent of it was Bert Williams. His exploits will be examined further in Chapter 8.

Just as the Irish Players had experienced laughter at solemn moments in their plays during the 1911 tour of America, so too the African American is expected to be a source of comedy and low wit. The dehumanising, infantilising, simplifying and degradation of a people, a culture and a nation for the amusement of the great unwashed stifled the growth of the two cultures, Irish and African American, until the mid to late nineteenth century.

The seeds of the struggles that both cultures planted in the early nineteenth century, the gaining of Catholic emancipation in Ireland after the penal laws forbade the attending of mass from 1660 – 1829 and, importantly, the ability for Irish Catholic MP's to be legally elected and take their seat as an MP in West Minster was a first step in the gradual reshaping of the Irish psyche towards taking pride in their achievements. In America the 13th amendment abolishing slavery in the United States was passed by Congress on January 31, 1865, and ratified on December 6, 1865. It provided that 'Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States'. The two cultures, both political minorities in their homes, achieved momentous political breakthroughs and at last could attempt to reclaim their heritage, retake their place at the table and de-reify their national character after its prolonged ownership by their lords and masters.

Conclusion

It is true that there has always been an inherent grasp of theatre and acting in the African American community, and as stated, this need for an exploration of social and cultural values was something that the Africans took with them from their homeland.

That the African American community could establish a theatre in America as early as it did speaks volumes to the tenacity and skill of the African American actors and producers that populated the stage. The African Grove Theatre flashed like a comet across the theatrical landscape in America, and although it did not last long it shone brightly. Indeed, the residual effect of that single theatre company can easily be recognised in the dual ambitions of W.E.B. DuBoise and Alain Locke and their approach to African American theatre almost one hundred years after the demise of the company. However, the African Grove theatre exploited the white mainstream cultural activities of opera, drama and ballet. It engaged with these art forms in a manner that allowed the African American community to experience this forbidden fruit alongside their white brethren. The African Grove Theatre was a cosmopolitan arena where everyone could enjoy the spectacle as a single community.

The demise of the African Grove Theatre was both troubling and regrettable. That William Brown happened to pursue his theatrical and entertainment projects at the same time as there was a vote to restrict the voting franchise of the African American community made him enemies on all sides. Despite this his tenacity, his policy of guerrilla theatre, his blatant disregard for the Sheriff's attempts to stifle his theatre and his choice to stage *The Drama of King Shotaway* in a city that was still rife with racism reveals a man of true courage and strong convictions.

The emergence of the minstrel, the development of minstrelsy and the explosion of perceived African American culture onto the American stage was, arguably, the most important event in the American theatre during the nineteenth century. America had discovered its native theatre spectacle, and through the depiction of the African American, albeit in a rather clumsy, lazy and racist manner, brought the idea of an African American stage presence to the mainstream audience. From Rice's one man show to the gradual increase of the troupe to the eventual

emergence of African American actors taking part in minstrel shows, the genre was a key to opening a door long denied to the African American community. Although their emergence onto the floodlit stage was hampered by the stock characters shoes that they were forced to fill, it did allow African American actors to experience the stage and embrace, if not the role, then certainly the atmosphere and charismatic charm of the theatre.

Chapter 4: Little Theatre Movement

Introduction

This chapter will examine the genesis of the Little Theatre movement and examine the impact that the Abbey Theatre tour had on the movement. Before addressing the Little Theatre movement, the chapter will briefly outline the state of mainstream American theatre. This is done for two reasons, first to show the theatrical scene that the Abbey Theatre encountered on their arrival in America and secondly as way of filling in a little background as to where mainstream American theatre was at the time. The chapter will look at the emergence of the little theatres in Chicago and their transition from there to the eastern seaboard, particularly Provincetown and New York. It was this transition more than any other that allowed for the emergence of African American theatre, however, the Little Theatre movement created a space, physically, artistically and in bricks and mortar which encouraged the founding and growth of an African American theatrical endeavour.

The chapter will therefore begin with a brief look at the Progressive Era, the impact that some of the concepts and ideas that stemmed from the debates that took place at this time had on America and, most importantly, the influence the era's political and social movements had on the theatrical scene will be considered. The New Theatre, often cited as the forerunner of the Little Theatre Movement will be examined. The chapter will examine the social climate in which the theatre was created and the legacy that stemmed from its manifesto and productions. The Chicago Little Theatre, one of the first recognised Little Theatres, will be introduced and a brief discussion of its successes and failures will follow. The impact that the Irish Players had on the formation of this theatre, and how they influenced the artistic director's choice of

play will be examined. The Hull-House theatre, its location, its importance and its links to the Abbey Theatre will be the final discussion in this chapter before the introduction of the Provincetown Players and a shift of focus from Chicago to the American Atlantic seaboard.

The Abbey Theatre tour in America had some direct influences upon the Little Theatre movement in America, but it is the indirect impact it had upon the layout of theatre, the ability to have a repertory theatre, the need for playwright theatres and the concept of writing for and about your own culture that inspired the American and African American playwrights. Just as the Abbey Theatre had questions regarding its authenticity, the early African American theatre would have the same. Just as the Abbey Theatre playwrights were, for the most part Anglo-Irish rather than Irish, and could be attacked for their lack of understanding of the culture which they wrote about the first plays that attempted to capture something of the African American culture in a more positive light were written by white men. Indeed, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, even when African American playwrights attempted to write plays which depicted their own culture the use of dialect was controversial and contentious. This chapter will also show how the Little Theatre movement, like the Abbey Theatre, attempted to be a centrifugal rather than centripetal theatre, circulating cultural debate from its stages outwards rather than taking from society and replaying events back. To this end the chapter will look at how the Little Theatre movement attempted to create the audience for their theatre by engagement and direct access, rather than simply through the box office. This, in many ways, mimicked the nascent Abbey Theatre as they brought the plays to the people rather than bringing the people to the plays by bringing a new and direct dynamism onto the stage that heretofore was missing.

Broadway the Hard way

At the turn of the twentieth century Broadway was living up to its appellation of the ‘Great White Way’³², providing entertainment and distraction to an eager public. However, behind the scenes chaos reigned as actors, producers, playwrights and theatre owners from across America vied to attract performers and performances to their respective plays/theatres. Company managers arranged their tours by dealing directly with theatre managers (Travis 36). The managers of provincial theatres journeyed to New York and carried out their dealings alfresco, agreeing their bookings on the sidewalks surrounding Union Square in what was then New York’s theatrical hub (Hirsch 24). The system lacked any form of centralisation or control and often led to double bookings, an overabundance of bookings or no bookings whatsoever. Local theatre owners often found themselves at the mercy of New York producers who cancelled their shows if they were unable to secure a full season’s bookings (ibid 24). The theatre owners, in this system, ‘cannot have whom he will, and dare not refuse whom he would’, indeed to fill the exigencies of the booking department of this great power, these managers are regularly required to crowd ‘within the space of a week as many attractions as days in a town incapable of decently supporting more than one or two attractions in a week’ (Davenport 6). The theatre booking system was in disarray and, as was obvious to even the most casual observer, some order was desperately needed. From the detritus of this shambolic system a new force emerged which attempted to centralise the booking process and artistic

³² The term ‘The Great White Way’ was first coined by the *Morning Telegraph* journalist Shep Friedman in 1901. Friedman used the term to describe Broadway’s appearance after a particularly heavy snowfall, but it was later adopted to describe the neon lights that illuminated the street (Bloom 499).

talent under one organisation. This, arguably much needed force, was to present itself as the Theatrical³³ Syndicate and its effects on the theatre was to be profound and lasting.

The Theatre Syndicate, according to Norman Hapgood in his book *The stage in America 1897 – 1900*, was born out of the love of money and was a wholly commercial venture where play choice would be dictated by popularity and box-office sales rather than artistic development. Located in major cities throughout the country these theatres would become the backbone of a touring theatre network spanning the breadth of the United States. The initial agreement was to stage plays in thirty seven first-class theatres across America and guarantee thirty weeks of attractions in each (Hapgood 7). The number and location of the theatres gave these men a staggering amount of control of theatrical tours in the country. The Syndicate itself did not own any theatres, although the members within the newly formed enterprise did (Register 197). In an attempt to consolidate its position as the pre-eminent national theatre agency, the Syndicate monopolized its position through bookings rather than theatre ownership which in effect gave them control over hundreds of theatres throughout America (ibid 197). Playwrights and actors could only gain access to many of the most popular stages in America and stage performances through the Syndicate (ibid 197). Theatre owners and managers could only stage ‘star’ tours through the tour bookings of the Syndicate, and to gain access to these plays they had to open their houses exclusively to Syndicate productions (ibid 197).

³³ Also referred to as the Theatre Syndicate, or just the ‘Syndicate’.

The formation of the Syndicate was loudly and widely criticized from many quarters (Hapgood 15). William Dean Howells, realist author and noted literary critic, on learning of the formation of the Syndicate wrote:

Not merely one industry, but civilization, itself, is concerned, for the morals and education of the public are directly influenced by the stage. Everyone who takes pride in the art of his country must regret a monopoly of the theatre, for that means 'business' and not art (ibid 17).

James A. Herne, the author of the 1897 manifesto *Art for Truth's Sake in the Drama* and reputed as the 'American Ibsen' (Denison 22) stated that

The underlying principle of a Theatrical Trust is to subjugate the playwright and the actor. Its effect will be to degrade the art of acting, to lower the standard of the drama, and to nullify the influences of the theatre' (Hapgood 19).

The Syndicate had almost total control over the New York booking system, especially the booking of first-class theatres, but it was the real estate, the theatres themselves, that was the Syndicates most prized possession. Through the individual members' ownership of many of the premier theatres and the control they exerted through their booking agency they would come to have an unrivalled monopoly of American theatre for over a decade (Travis 36). There were some theatre owners and actors that refused to be associated with the Syndicate³⁴ but most were bullied into submission, paid off or financially ruined by the Syndicates tactics. The number of theatres that they owned or had booking control over was so great that it gave them the leverage to force many of the non-Syndicate theatres to shut their doors to the public in many towns, eliminating the competition (Beard & Cheney 36). Indeed, by 1900, a mere

³⁴ The struggle against the Theatrical Trust can be read in Hapgood's book. In it he reveals the tactics used by the Syndicate in subjugating the dissenting voices through manipulation of the media, contracts and strong arming actors to sign contract that would benefit the Syndicate

four years after the foundation of the Syndicate, it controlled the approaches to all the major cities in America – even those that did not have Syndicate controlled theatres in the cities (Travis 36). Lee Shubert said of the Syndicate it was a ‘concentration of authority never known before or since in the legitimate theatre’ (Hirsch 25).

The Theatrical Syndicate left a legacy of lavish New York productions being wheeled out to the other major cities in America crushing all aspirational and art theatre wherever they arrived. However, just as a new and powerful theatrical company, the Shubert Brothers, was making inroads into the financial powerhouses of theatre, the American population was beginning to consider what government should and should not be mandated to do.

What the Abbey found

The Irish Players that toured America arrived in a country that was changing, economically and socially at an incredible pace. Their brand of theatre was almost the antithesis of the prevailing theatrical tastes of America which were being sated by the melodramas that came pouring out of New York. There was a feeling that the theatre could offer more to the population than merely diversion and ‘star’ vehicles. The Theatre Syndicate had, in essence, gutted the theatres of America, utilising theatre companies across the continent as mere supporting casts to their more esteemed New York colleagues. The Shubert brothers did challenge the Syndicate, although the plays that they staged were, in the early days, vaudeville, minstrel and second rate musicals staged in second rate theatres that were located off Broadway. Although there may be some truth in the suggestion that the Shubert brothers appearance on the theatrical stage re-enforced the monetary nature of theatre in America, it did allow the emergence of different forms of stagecraft to be viewed by the public and it made mainstream theatre a more varied and thriving community than it had been since plays were first staged in America. It also had the unforeseen impact of restoring the artistic advantage

to theatre owners and audiences around the country, sometimes to the detriment of the Shubert brothers, by encouraging a flood of non-commercial and anti-commercial theatre. These theatres were unashamedly amateur and often found their home in what would now be regarded as 'alternative spaces', that is to say buildings that were not associated with, nor previously had the facilities, to allow for dramatic productions. This movement, called the Little Theatre Movement, may be regarded as the beginning of a truly American theatre, a movement that was arguably hastened by the arrival of the Abbey Theatre in 1911.

The Progressive Era is a term that is applied to new political and sociological trains of thought that flourished in America in the years roughly between the 1893 depression and America's entrance into World War One in 1917 (Dye 1). With the conclusion of the American Civil War in 1865 America's political and geographic make-up was settled, its internal borders defined and federalist rule entrenched across the country (Link 3). It was an era of a clear assertion of American nationalism which manifested itself in all aspects of life (ibid 3). It was also a period of American expansion abroad with the annexation of Cuba, the Philippines and Hawaii. During this period America attempted to define its political, economic and moral centres, to consolidate what had been built whilst constantly looking towards the future. The post-Civil War American population endeavoured to come to terms with the overwhelming dislocations that were the necessary, or more accurately, usual, by-product of massive industrialisation, the rise of the corporation and rapid urban growth (ibid 1). The social reforms that were being called for and enacted during this time period led to New York being

regarded as ‘the greatest social science laboratory in the world’³⁵ (Recchiuti 20). During this time period studying abroad became a popular enterprise. Two notable beneficiaries of this trend were W.E.B. DuBois, the Harvard trained historian and future African American cultural and intellectual leader, and Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, the founder of the Greenwich House Settlement, who both studied in Germany under Gustav Schmoller, the renowned leader of the "younger" German historical school of economics (ibid 23).

As the American population was beginning to question the distribution of wealth, the political status quo and the rampant advancement of corporate rights in their nation, there was an increasing need for social customs and practices that reflected this political and social dialogue. Despite the received idea that this was a time where many voices spoke out under a unified banner it has been said that Progressivism lacked ‘unanimity or purpose either on a programmatic or on a philosophical level’ (Chansky 3). The Era was defined by many and varied movements that made up a collection of aspirational sentiments rather than a defined lobby that negotiated for a prescribed programme of change. The diverse and, at times, almost discombobulated nature of the era, manifested itself through the diverse nature of theatrical productions. This new dramatic quality allowed the American theatre to encapsulate and represent many of the odd and disparate personalities that the Progressive Era exhibited. Be it forward-looking activism or modernist aesthetics, scepticism, nativism, elitism or nostalgia, all were represented in some way by these amateur theatre’s – sometimes, indeed, in the one production (ibid 3).

³⁵ As stated by the founders of the School for Social Research.

In 1970, historian Peter Filene declared that the term 'progressivism' had become meaningless as the era was one that was made of contradictions (Hamby 42). The Progressive Era could easily be regarded as the time of the championing of democracy yet it spawned a deep entrenchment of elitism. It was an era that reconfigured concepts of social justice but one that also furthered and reinforced social control. This age was the womb in which many small entrepreneurs were first incubated although it also give birth to a more coalesced and concentrated form of capitalism (ibid 42). The many contradictions and paradoxes regarding the era are examined in greater depth and with more rigor elsewhere, however, it is helpful and important to understand a little of the political and economic canvas on which this amateur theatrical movement set about sketching its own place on the American conscience.

When where and why?

The reasons for the rise of the Little Theatre Movement are many and multifarious. It came into being at a moment in history when the American population was both boldly stepping into the future whilst simultaneously staring longingly into the past. Indeed it was an era ripe for the 'strong poets' and 'ironists' to take a new approach at definitions and cultural assignments and challenge the 'final vocabulary' of the day. Although in the American conscience this was a brave new world, one where new language and 'strong poets' were needed to disentangle the multitudes of meanings that were being expressed through social and political debates, the furthering of the nation's art needed to be addressed. The rapid development of a nation and the effects that development had on art had been experienced before by the emerging British

empire. In 1821³⁶ Percy Shelly, in his essay 'Defence of Poetry', argued that the decline of dramatic art within a population, in essence, marks the decline of the nation:

It is indisputable that the highest perfection of human society has ever corresponded with the highest dramatic excellence; and that the corruption or the extinction of the drama in a nation where it has once flourished is a mark of a corruption of manners, and an extinction of the energies which sustain the soul of life. But, as Machiavelli says of political institutions, that life may be preserved and renewed, if men should arise capable of bringing back the drama to its principles (Shelly 23).

Shelley's assertion, many years before the emergence of the Little Theatre Movement, had already shown the way a re-engagement with the theatre by a nation that seemed to be losing its identity and value systems could reinvigorate and rejuvenate the moral core of the state. That people can find respite in theatre, can seek morality and question social values on stage is something that has been witnessed in many cultures. In the Chapter 2 it was argued that the Irish National Theatre was created for this very purpose. It was also previously noted that the African Grove Theatre was created to exhibit to the world that the 'highest perfection of human society has ever corresponded with the highest dramatic excellence' (ibid 23). It could be argued that the Little Theatre Movement operated as a sort of psychiatrists' couch for an America that was attempting to reposition her place in the world whilst reconfigure her rule at home.

However, the theatre arguably had perhaps a more resounding impact on American culture than similar projects could have had on other societies at the turn of the twentieth century. The American dream of upward mobility, the moulding and meshing of personality, bravado,

³⁶ Written in 1821 but published posthumously in 1840 in *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments* by Edward Moxon in London

aspiration, hope, work and luck was the carrot that drew so many to its shore. This promise of a multitude of better lives is a trope that is very neatly encapsulated in the actor. The actor is a fair minded politician, a leader of industry, a pauper, a picker, a grinner, a lover, a sinner, or a musician in the sun. The actor was and is, in essence, the figure that best embodies the idea of living the American living. Actors are the shining examples of whatever character they play, the greatest politician, the most evil of Robber Barons, the greatest lover and the most wicked of villains. The characters that they play are populated by the whole spectrum of humanity. In essence the actor is, on any given night, the living embodiment of the American Dream. However, the melodrama that was the mainstay of American theatre quite often distanced the character from the audience and distanced the actor from the role. The Little Theatre Movement, rather than forcing the actor to merely entertain, wished that 'men should arise capable of bringing back the drama to its principles' (ibid23). It desired to make theatre relevant to society, to examine society, critique society and tease the last fig leaf of society from its modesty-saving perch and reveal America warts and all.

America had not followed Europe in using the theatre as a place for social examination. There were flashes of social commentary, such as Dion Boucicault's 1859 play *The Octoroon* examines the question of miscegeny, although needless to say, the play was still couched in a melodramatic frame (Bigsby 2). The first attempts at Dramatic Realism were not wholly successful. In 1890 James A Hearne, the playwright that was so outspoken against the Theatre Syndicate, penned his drama *Margaret Fleming* as an Ibsenesque play examining the role of women within the institution of marriage. However, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is undone by Hearne who has his heroine Margaret reunite with her husband Philip. The original *play* ended with what he saw as the inevitable separation of the husband, who fathered an illegitimate child, and his unforgiving wife. The revision allowed a happy reunion (Elliott 337). This alteration was deemed necessary as the American audience were,

allegedly, not quite ready for the rampant social criticism Hearne seemed to be suggesting. No one could possibly feel empathy for a wife who could not forgive a philandering husband and would reject his wealth, security and family values (ibid 337). Mainstream American theatre, throughout its history, endeavoured to create an audience that expected certain conventions and certain spectacles. There was little appetite to view a play that was constructed to challenge prevailing social folkways and mores. It was, therefore, necessary for the Little Theatre Movement to construct its own audience that would readily accept an art form that eschewed theatrical devices and melodramatic stagecraft and, as Shelley espoused, bring it back to its 'principles'.

The embryonic Little Theatre Movement found its first incubator in Chicago under the auspices of the Chicago philanthropists and arts patrons Arthur T. and Mary Aldis. The Aldises were noted and generous in their altruism and Mary was herself a playwright. However, Arthur recognized the limitations of American theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century. He saw that theatre was not part of the accepted 'schooling' of the moneyed classes and, as such, was not seen as something to which they need, or indeed should, lend their support (Chansky 178). The theatre was viewed as 'at its best an amusement and at its worst as a vice' (ibid 178). As early as 1909 Arthur, in an attempt to raise theatre to a loftier perch and raise the artistic and moral nature of drama in society, sketched out two fundamental routes that the theatre could take to achieve the goal of middle class recognition. The first was to establish a repertory theatre which would be home to a stock company under the auspices of a competent director and would necessarily have access to a 'superior' choice of play (ibid 178). The idea of a repertory theatre was a new concept, the Gaiety Theatre in Manchester, which was Britain's first regional repertory theatre, had only opened on the 7th September 1908 under the auspices of the Abbey Theatre's aforementioned benefactor Annie Horniman

(Savory et al. xiii). For Arthur Aldis, the purpose of this theatre would be 'to try to interest the large number of theatre goers of moderate means and to gradually lead them on toward better things' (Chansky 178). The second route he suggested would be smaller in scale and would comprise of constructing a forum for the intelligentsia to discuss and enjoy theatre in the hope that such a rarefied atmosphere would, through a trickledown effect, eventually be enjoyed by more and more people (ibid 179).

In 1910 the Aldises established an artists' colony called The Compound in Lake Forest, Illinois. However, before this, in 1906, they established the New Theatre, located in Steinway Hall (still standing at 64 East Van Buren Street), which is seen as an important predecessor to the Little Theatre Movement. In creating this playhouse Arthur and Mary had settled for the second option, hoping that by encouraging an atmosphere of intellectual curiosity and experimentation American theatre could be advanced along more diverse and intellectual lines. Drama critic and editor of the *Theatre Arts* magazine Edith J. R. Isaacs has pointed out, however, that three Chicago groups, the Hull-House Theatre, the Robertson Players, and the New Theatre, 'may safely be said to represent the beginning of the Little Theatre Movement'. Of these three pioneers, only the New Theatre took its inspiration from the European 'art theatre' (Highlander 285). The Aldises seemed to have advocated the teachings of André Antoine and his Théâtre Libre when they stated 'it is the environment that determines the movement of the characters, not the movements of the characters that determine the environment ... that is the whole secret of the impression of newness which came from the initial efforts of the Théâtre Libre' (Marker 9). Indeed, the history of the Little Theatre is steeped in the history of early avant-garde European theatre, especially that of Antoine's *Théâtre Libre* where he, in association with a young coterie of amateurs, established his theatre at 37 Elysee des Beaux Arts (Shay 6).

The New Theatre would be a theatre that was created with a strong artistic vision.

Aldis, along with friends and like-minded individuals created the theatre for

The establishment of a theatre in which there shall be produced the best standard and modern plays of distinct merit and interest, with a worthy company and intelligent stage management, has long been talked of and wished for by all interested in drama. The Musical and Dramatic Direction Company proposes to lease, during the season of 1906-1907, a theatre for a term of thirty weeks, and to give about 15 different plays (or a new play every two weeks) selected from the best standard drama or from such contemporary as may seem worthy of production. The object is not commercial. [. . .] It is our intention to so grade the seats as to put them within the reach of everyone' (Highlander 286).

The need to decouple theatre from commerce was mooted long before 1905. During the course of William McKinley's 1896 presidential campaign, he promised the people a National Theatre (Rich & Seligman 53). The theatre was thought to be pandering too much to the almighty dollar, long since abandoning any pretensions to high art. Indeed, this ideal of a theatre that embraces art, that finds meaning on the stage rather than in the box office, finds expression in the 1905 guidelines and principles for a mooted national theatre. James S. Metcalfe reported in the *North American Review* that the intention was

- 1) To set a correct and artistic standard which shall be a continual incentive to the improvement of dramatic art in America...
- 2) To acquire gradually a repertory of the standard plays in English, both classic and modern, and to present them in the best manner and with the nearest possible approach to artistic perfection ...
- 3) Gradually to form and perfect the best and most thoroughly trained company of English-speaking actors in the world ...
- 4) To encourage American literature by giving production to adequate plays by American authors ... (ibid 54)

Despite the hopes, a national theatre was not to manifest in the United States, a lack that remains to this day. In its stead concerned private citizens took it upon themselves to redress the situation. When Arthur and Mary Aldis set up their theatre they instilled some guiding rules by which their theatre should be run. According to Victor Mapes, the stage manager and artistic director of the theatre, the manifesto of the New Theatre was

1. The elimination of the "star system." There was to be no "star" in the cast and no "featured" players.
2. There were to be no "long runs". Whatever the success of any play the number of its performances was to be strictly limited.
3. As to the selection of plays the guiding principle was summed up succinctly in the words "plays worth while." . . . No pretensions were to be made in the way of elaborate scenery, costumes or accessories (Mapes 202).

With these goals in mind the New Theatre of Chicago opened its doors to the public on October 8, 1906 as America's first subscription-endowed theatre (Rich & Seligman 53). This adherence to non-commercial theatre flew in the face of the history of American theatre, which from its first inception had been a purely commercial enterprise. The method of funding the New Theatre was, perhaps, lifted from the *Théâtre Libre* as from the outset both were supported by voluntary subscriptions³⁷. By so doing *Antoine's Théâtre Libre* avoided the temptation of profiteering, something that was taken for granted in America, whether of the toady or the financial sort (Shay 6). The artistic integrity of the New Theatre would also have a French flourish as Mapes himself had a first-hand knowledge of Antoine's theatre. After he graduated at the head of his class from Columbia in 1891 he enrolled at the Sorbonne in Paris to study drama and remained there until 1896 (Highlander 286).

The concept of a non-commercial theatre was also one of the corner stones of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Indeed, the raising of money was not necessitated as during this period it was still being funded by their wealthy benefactor Annie Horniman. From the outset the Abbey Theatre 'appears to have been conceived and promoted by Yeats so as to take maximum advantage of the difficulties besetting the English theatre. It was, first of all, a theatre to

³⁷ The *Théâtre Libre* was championed in England by George Moore – a founding member of the Irish Literary Theatre – a predecessor of the Abbey theatre.

forward the aims of men of letters as distinct from men of the theatre' (Flannery 134). This seems to mesh nicely with the stated aims of the Little Theatre movement. Yeats inserted the following note in the first issue of *Bealtaine*, the journal of the Irish Literary Theatre:

By the word "literary" is meant productions which – however much it may fall short of its aim – will at least be inspired by ideas uninfluenced by the purposes which under present conditions govern the production of plays on the regular stage, that of achieving an immediate commercial success (Flannery 135)

The similarity in their stated aspirational theatre could not be more similar. Both the New Theatre and the Abbey Theatre were to be judged on the artistic value of their productions rather than their pound and dollar success. This flies in the face of much of the perceived knowledge and operational values of theatre in America at the time. Perhaps it was due to the literary nature of the Abbey Theatre allied with their commercial appeal that drew so many of the interested theatre managers that Lennox Robinson mentioned on the tour. If the two, art and money, are not incongruous then the American theatre owner's managers needed to direct their questions to the Abbey Theatre.

It is the fact that the Abbey Theatre made an intellectual space for American theatre, and a subject matter that up to that point they did not engage with that made the Abbey Theatre's tour so impactful. Yes there were plays staged by Little Theatres around America that were donated to them by the Abbey Theatre, and yes there is direct involvement between the Abbey Theatre and most notably the Hull House Players – a link which will be elaborated upon later, however, the mere fact of a theatre company touring America espousing an anti-commercial philosophy and, seemingly, rewriting the perceived knowledge people had regarding Irish stage mannerisms was enough to inspire many theatre managers to follow their lead. If you take into account the Theatre Syndicate and its legacy of 'Star' tours these managers and owners had little to lose.

In obvious agreement with the ideals of the Abbey Theatre the notion that a well-funded theatre that would be able to free itself from the shackles of base entertainment and become a socially relevant and uplifting experience for the audience was something that Arthur and Mary Aldis would, understandably, support. Their plan to avoid long runs, regardless of the popularity of the play is also extremely relevant when we consider the environment in which this enterprise was competing. This was the era of the stage ‘star’ as actors were trundling out of New York to carry out lucrative tours, an expensive lap of honour bestowed by the Theatre Syndicate to the rustics. It is also the era which saw James O’Neill interminably play his version of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, a role that he claimed to play more than 6000³⁸ times.³⁹ To shun both ‘stars’ and long runs was to invest in plays rather than players, to invest in art rather than profit, to invest in the future rather than clinging lovingly and longingly to the dried husks of melodramas that had, in the opinion of many, long since overstayed their welcome on the American stage.

Despite the best of intentions by the 19th November 1906 the New Theatre was in trouble, mainly due to unfavourable reviews of their plays and a company of actors that were daunted

³⁸ He claimed to have played the role some six thousand times throughout his career, a number that he may have overestimated as Sheaffer puts it at approximately four thousand. Whichever one you are to believe is closer to the truth it is still a considerable amount of productions (Sheaffer 42).

³⁹ Eugene O’Neill once declared whilst thinking of his father’s capitulation to *Monte Cristo* and the lucrative dollar ‘that’s what caused me to make up my mind that *they* would never get me. I determined then that I would never sell out (Sheaffer 40).

by the quick turn-around of plays. The management of the New Theatre sought to redress the theatre's plummeting fortunes by employing Chrystal Herne as leading lady. Miss Herne, the daughter of the aforementioned James A. Herne, was already contracted with Charles Dillingham to manage her as a star for the coming season (Highlander 289). Despite its clear set of theatrical ideals it took just a little more than one month for the theatre to renege on one of the key concepts that made it stand out as a new and exciting prospect. In January of 1907 Mapes left the company, citing artistic differences, namely that he wished to stage new American plays whilst management desired to stage more recognised European drama, as the cause of the rift (Highlander 288). Despite the good intentions on which the theatre was founded and the aspirational nature of its manifesto the New Theatre lasted but twenty weeks. The project was declared a disaster, and the theatre closed on February 9, 1907 (Rich & Seligman 53).

From the ashes

As the New Theatre was consigned to history the concepts and ideals which it instilled in the American theatre took root in the imaginations and aspirations of an artistic community that thirsted for a more soul replenishing theatrical spectacle. Of these theatres the most noteworthy was Ellen Van Volkenburg's and, the British born, Maurice Browne's Chicago Little Theatre which was established in 1911-1912. It was located on the fourth floor of the Fine Arts building on Michigan Avenue, a building many Chicagoans claimed was 'the only skyscraper in the world devoted solely to the arts' (Tingley 130). Browne and Van Volkenburg, like the Aldises before them, had to fight the early prejudice of the melodrama fans that penned the warning to all those that attended a Little Theatre 'Dangerous! Beware of Highbrowism' [sic] (D'Arcy Mackay 104). Browne's opinion regarding the direction that the American theatre should take is captured in his assessment of his own theatre. He states:

It is a repertory and experimental art theatre producing classical and modern plays, both tragedy and comedy, at popular prices. Preference is given in its productions to poetic and imaginative plays, dealing primarily whether as tragedy or comedy with character in action [. . .] The Chicago Little Theatre has for its object the creation of a new plastic and rhythmic drama in America' (ibid 104).

The theatre was financially supported by a membership of some four hundred people, each paying an annual subscription of ten dollars, and by the sale of seats to the general public (ibid 104). With the opening of its doors to the public on November 12, 1912 The Little Theatre became the prototype for hundreds of other organizations of similar nature (Tingley 130). Although this theatre is often referenced as the first Little Theatre in America, Browne is cited as having given praise to the productions of Laura Dainty Pelham at Jane Addams's Hull House as well as those of other groups that foreshadowed his theatre (ibid 131). Perhaps ironically for a movement that was appended with the appellation Little Theatre Movement and the fragmented nature that this term calls to mind, its modus operandi, whether consciously or subconsciously, was to fulfil the promise of a national theatre, one that allowed for and encouraged the interaction and participation of a vast cross section of society. The concept of a national theatre was one that had already entered into the American psyche. In 1896 President William McKinley promised the American population a theatre that would represent the nation, in its stead he gave them the sinking of the Main and the Spanish-American war, the Republic of Hawaii, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. War and annexation was the theatre in which McKinley took a leading role. The business of theatre was left to the money men and art left to the wayside. The Little Theatre Movement repatriated the theatre back to its 'principles'.

The Chicago Little Theatre experiment was one that, although firmly rooted in America, sought its inspiration from further afield. It staged many plays from European playwrights. Indeed on its opening night the audience were entertained by Wilfrid Wilson Gibson's *Womenkind* and William Butler Yeats' *On Baileys Strand* (Dukore 2). This was one of many

direct links between the Abbey Theatre and the American Little Theatre Movement that allowed the movement to break away from the melodramas that oozed their way across the American stage in the early twentieth century. The reviewers, on the opening night, waxed lyrical and lambasted the artistic endeavours with equal measure, however, all of the reviewers agreed that the initial offering of the Chicago Little Theatre was not standard theatre fare as Chicago knew it (ibid 3).

It has been commented that the very idea for the establishment of the Little Theatre in Chicago was through the encounter Browne had with the Irish Players as they toured America in 1911. The Irish Players came to Chicago during the last months of 1911 and performed Synge's ever popular *Playboy of the Western World*. Whilst they were there Lady Augusta Gregory of the Abbey Players conversationally suggested to Browne

By all means start your own theatre; but *make it in your own image*⁴⁰. Don't engage professional players; they have been spoiled for your purpose. Engage and train, as we of Abbey have done, amateurs: shopgirls, school-teachers, counter-jumpers; cut-throat thieves rather than professionals. And prepare to have your hearts broken' (Tingley 134).

Lady Gregory, in suggesting that the Chicago Little Theatre follow the example of the Abbey Theatre was, in essence, instilling in Browne one of the core concepts of the Irish National Theatre. Drama should be by the people, for the people and acted in locations that are convenient for the people to attend. The theatre was, as Yeats commented, to be a 'national centre of education and refinement' and the plays 'a vehicle for enunciating high and philosophical truths' (Flannery 156). The trust that the Abbey Theatre put in their theatre was

⁴⁰ My Italics

not placed on the actors, not on the stage, not on the set design or the lighting, but on the ability of their playwrights to proffer a script that was worth producing. From this perspective the theatre was another medium that the author could exploit and allow him to question things in a more direct and emotive way than he could manage on a page. An author's script was delivered through the human beings that mouthed his words, on the simple setting, and, most pertinently, in the small space between stage and audience. The people could respond immediately and viscerally to what they witnessed. Illiterate people could engage in debates that were for the most part written, and concepts both large (nationalism, religion, economics) and small (personal loss, illness, marriage), could be played out in front of an interested public. The art was not a gateway to laughter, nor was it a spectacle for the audience to be amazed at. There was a place for these popular plays in the theatre, however, space must be made for a theatre that questions, theatre that educates and theatre that makes space for those that may not consider themselves the theatre going public.

Utilising 'shopgirls, school-teachers, counter-jumpers; cut-throat thieves' and asking them to play actors, rather than asking the actor to play these roles is a novel approach to theatre, however, it is undeniably where all theatre stems from. The connection and interplay between reality and theatricality, the methodology of acting, the willing suspension of disbelief is blurred and becomes a two-way street where both the stage and audience participants recognise a commonality between themselves and the roles that both are playing. In Dorothy Chansky's book *Composing ourselves: the Little Theatre movement and the American audience* she points out that

One Little Theatre in their study reported that 25 percent of their subscription list participated in their productions. Audiences who did not take part in productions were encouraged to see themselves as participants in creating a more meaningful and purposeful American theatre by virtue of their attendance' (Chansky 9).

The self-conscious nature of the Little Theatre allied with the all-encompassing aspect of the Little Theatre Movement gave Lady Gregory's suggestions room to be explored on the American stage.

George Pierce Baker, a Harvard Professor that is credited with making playwriting an accepted topic of research in American universities, installed the audience at the centre of the creation of new plays by making their written responses to new plays as the price for their admission (ibid 10). In this way the Little Theatre Movement was at the same time both 'high-brow' art and audience orientated. It is also through the active participation of the audience and the translating of feedback into performance that made these theatres centrifugal. The theatre became the fulcrum around which debate could turn; the stage was the centrepiece of social debate. Nowhere was this truer than with the Hull House theatre in Chicago. It was also a way of creating a holistic theatre in which each facet of the production was integral to the smooth operating of the whole theatre. In their article "Keeping a Head Above Water: Irish Theatre in a Time of Transition", which is an excellent examination of the state of Irish theatre during the financially troubled years in Ireland after the demise of the Celtic Tiger, Justine Nakase and Róisín Stack quote Jane Daly of the Irish Theatre Institute as she explains: 'There is a need to establish some sense of stability [in the Irish theatre scene] rather than deconstruct the existing infrastructure, which is already fragile' (Nakase & Stack 125). This statement could be retrospectively applied to the American theatre scene at the time of Browne and Van Volkenburg. Under the guidance of the Aldises, the New Theatre had broken ground for a new art theatre. The Little Theatre could exploit and better the instruction in this promising new arena rather than beating a new trail through the theatrical undergrowth.

The indirect influence that the Abbey Theatre had on Browne, and indeed on many of the theatres that are labelled as Little Theatres in Chicago is hard to overstate. Lady Gregory,

Yeats and Edward Martyn urged Browne to overcome the lack of money with originality (Watt 110). They also argued that he must not confuse 'theatric with literary values' and to remember that 'poetry must serve the theatre before it can again rule there' (ibid 110). As Lennox Robinson said during an Irish Times interview in early 1912 'going back to the peasant life altogether for our material was very novel, and interested them very much. They pretend in America that they cannot have a national theatre because they have no peasantry' (Irish Times 16/3/1912). The idea of America not having a peasant class was something that the Little Theatre would challenge and critique for the rest of the decade. New playwrights would become 'strong poets' and 'ironists', new actors would become their army of mobile metaphors. Language, once the purview of the system – the 'final vocabulary' which was the societal descriptor, would be challenged in dramatic fashion, both literally and figuratively. The word 'peasant', a word that had long been used pejoratively to describe a low born and generally contemptible person would become a byword for quiet dignity. Under the idealistic penmanship of the Abbey Theatre playwrights, a dignity was unearthed in these people of the land, a sublime and unchanging nature, one which mimicked and personified the hills and valleys where they eked out a living. Even the audiences were transposed from a society that 'had degenerated and that they revelled only in the sordid and the farcical ... [to be] ... more than appreciative of the sublime in the drama' (Byrne 136). Their interaction with this regenerative and rejuvenated theatre of the people revitalised the population as much as the stage.

The Irish influence on the theatre does not end there as George Bernard Shaw also played a crucial role in the popularity and life of the Chicago Little Theatre Company as the production of one of his plays, *The Philanderer*, gave the theatre their first major economic success (ibid 3). The play, although not reviewed favourably, was a hit with the audience. Night after night, the theatre was filled to capacity as the play proved an enormous success, and ran for several

months (ibid 3). During this time Browne was awarded the rights to the play in the American Midwestern area by Winthrop Ames, Shaw's representative in America. Despite the commercial triumph Browne proved that the Little Theatre was indeed amateur and lacked a financial finesse, as he fell afoul of Shaw's wrath after attempting to sell the right of the play to Mrs. J. A. Stewart of the Wisconsin Players in Milwaukee (ibid 3). Indeed Browne, although an ambitious artist was proven to be far from an astute businessman. On December 7, 1917, Browne announced the closing of the Chicago Little Theatre due to a dire financial situation. The final straw for the theatre was a financial squabble over non-payment of rent in which Browne had become embroiled. Browne was threatened with closure if he did not pay the full rent (he had paid 6/7 of it) for the property. He refused, even though he was staging *Mrs. Warrens Profession*, another enormously financially successful Shaw play at the time. In desperation he contacted Shaw and asked him to take the theatre owners to court as it did not fulfil the contract to stage his play. His response was one that revealed a certain amount of exasperation at the naivety of Browne's business dealings

I judge that you are not a man of business, because you suggest that I might take legal action against the people who have, as you consider, let you down. But if I were to take legal action, I should have to take it against you. As you say, I have suffered damage; but my remedy does not lie against the proprietors of the theatre, who were under no obligation to me, but against you, who neglected the most obvious business precautions in the enterprise on which you staked the fortunes of my play (ibid 5).

In essence it reveals the deep cleavages between the European and American art theatre at the time. The European practitioners recognised that theatre was a business, however, they used this business to their advantage, allowing their message to thrive in a world where many of the theatre going audiences expected a play to provoke rather than appease. Shaw signed off the letter with 'Here endeth the second lesson. Yours faithfully, G. Bernard Shaw' (ibid 5). Browne and Shaw's short lived collaboration did indeed seem like a master teaching a child how to behave in the community of theatre. His words, albeit slightly discourteous, were the lesson that American theatre had to learn if they wanted to involve themselves in non-

commercial theatre. Just because the goal is not dollars and the stage is not the setting for another melodrama does not mean that business is not involved in the enterprise. The Abbey Theatre's 1911/12 tour of America was undertaken as a means to finance the theatre. Their sensitive depiction of peasantry was financed by the audience, their brand of naïve stagecraft was expensively bought by theatre managers. Yeats, Shaw, Synge, Lady Gregory and Robinson were artists that realised that money was a very necessary evil, although it was a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Browne failed to realise this to his cost.

Despite this, during the Chicago Little Theatre's more than five years of existence, it produced a surprisingly high number of plays, forty-five (ibid 6). Playwrights who had their plays produced by the company included Andreyev, Ibsen, Shaw, Schnitzler, Strindberg, Synge, and Yeats (ibid 6). In total eighteen plays were given their world premiere at the Little Theatre and seven were presented for the first time in America (ibid 6). This is a staggering number of new plays, especially considering the theatrical landscape at the time. Browne and Van Volkenburg, although ultimately failing in their exploits in theatre, had altered that landscape irrevocably. This sea-change in the theatrical landscape was the true benefit of the Abbey Theatre tour. The management of the company, the manner of their productions, the repertoire which they commanded and the skill of their playwrights revealed to American theatre 'as some ungracious pastors do, Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven' (Shakespeare Act I Scene III). The journey that began in Chicago was not one for the faint hearted, nor was it one that would leave those first pilgrims any richer monetarily, however, the richness of the theatrical scene was increased immeasurably. Between them they brought a brand of theatre to America that was presumed to be too 'highbrow', too difficult and often too scandalous for the American stage and created a market and an audience for a theatre that existed outside the Broadway system.

One Hull of a House

Another of the groups that took the ideas of community theatre and the benefits of non-commercial amateur dramatics was the Hull House Players, an offshoot of the Hull House settlement in Chicago that was co-founded in 1889 by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr. The two women bought a mansion in the city's tempestuous Southwest section and there created the Hull House settlement. The settlement consisted of a social and educational epicentre for the mostly immigrant community. The neighbourhood in which Hull House was situated reflected the worst of late nineteenth century urban conditions. The settlement served a complex mixture of ethnic neighbourhoods suffering from poverty, crime, and many social problems that seem to arise time and time again when new immigrants attempt to assimilate into their adopted country's culture (Hecht 172). Art and artistic endeavour were an integral concept in founder Ellen Starr's social philosophy; paintings, statues and other art works populated the environs of the newly opened settlement house (ibid 172). Many of the concepts that were introduced in the Hull House settlement stemmed from the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain and both Starr and Addams borrowed heavily from the concepts of social art and social interaction espoused by its creator William Morris (ibid 172). The settlement housed many art exhibits that were intended to uplift the lives of the local inhabitants by introducing ideals of beauty (Stankiewicz 36). Like Morris, Starr theorised that the worker's hands-on interaction in production led to individual expression, thereby creating their esoteric art. Industrialisation prohibited the worker from any defining involvement in the final output, therefore robbing him of his ability stamp his unique mark on it and make it his own (Hecht 172). The concept of art representing individuality against the encroachment of mass production is eloquently argued by Oscar Wilde in his essay *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. In it he contends that

the community by means of organization of machinery will supply the useful things, and that the beautiful things will be made by the individual. [...] An individual who has to make things for the use of others, and with reference to their wants and their wishes, does not work with interest, and consequently cannot put into his work what is best in him. Upon the other hand, whenever a community or a powerful section of a community, or a government of any kind, attempts to dictate to the artist what he is to do, Art either entirely vanishes, or becomes stereotyped, or degenerates into a low and ignoble form of craft. A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is. It has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want' (Wilde 1052).

The Hull House, just as the Abbey Theatre attempted to do in Dublin, tried to connect the people to themselves rather than a cheap imitation of themselves. People, who perhaps were labouring under a false consciousness⁴¹, allow themselves, subconsciously, to be subjugated by dominant forces in society that restrict their economic and cultural efficacy. The Irish theatre's focus on the peasant and the Hull House's reinforcement of the brilliance of the migrant's culture allowed the actors and audience to see themselves on stage rather than seeing actors playing cultural stereotypes. The two groups tried to use art as a lever to prise open a feeling of self-worth and self-determinism in people that did not usually sit at the table of social and artistic merit. Indeed, art and craft classes were offered as a worthwhile leisure activity and sometimes as vocational training in Hull House (ibid 36). However, as Jane Addams states in her account *Twenty Years at Hull House*, 'we had accumulated much testimony as to the power of the drama, and we would have been dull indeed if we had not availed ourselves of the use of the play at Hull-House, not only as an agent of recreation and

⁴¹ 'The concept of false consciousness concerns the relationships between power and knowledge and, consequently includes the premise that power distorts knowledge. Power instrumentally warps and obscures the truth in a direction which benefits the interests of dominant groups' (Haugaard 39).

education, but as a vehicle of self-expression for the teeming young life all about us' (Addams 387).

Long before the Hull House theatre was built Starr, Addams and the residents staged many plays in the drawing-room and, later, the gymnasium of the settlement (ibid 387). In her account Addams explains that, as there were quite a number of Greek immigrants in the environs of the settlements, the theatre was used to stage ancient Greek plays in the original language (ibid 388). This had the manifold effect of sustaining Greek culture in America, allowing the immigrants to access theatre, something that would not have been allowed on the commercial stage, and bestowing a sense of self-respect and self-worth to a population located on the social and economic periphery of society. The Greeks, although once again leading the community in its uptake of drama as a source of community and entertainment were not the only ones to take to the stage in an effort to solidify community relations and exhibit cultural output; Lithuanians, Poles, and other Eastern European citizens used the Hull-House stage to present plays in their own tongue (ibid 389). Addams recounts a play that was written by a local Italian playwright 'which depicted the insolent break between Americanized sons and old country parents, so touchingly that it moved to tears all the older Italians in the audience' (ibid 389).

Here, on the stage of the Hull House settlement, we see the same societal questioning and breakdowns witnessed on the early stage of the Abbey Theatre. Theatre utilised as a microcosm of society, theatre used as a diagnostic tool to examine a society that does not control its own destiny or cultural representation. Addams claims that 'through such humble experiments as the Hull-House stage, as well as through the more ambitious reforms which are attempted in various parts of the country, the theater [sic] may at last be restored to its rightful place in the community' (ibid 394). Addams is doing precisely that which Shelley

requested, placing theatre at the centre of the moral, social and artistic heart of the local population. Communities from different cultural backgrounds, speaking different languages and bringing different artistic sensibilities to the stage can all share one theatrical space to exhibit their art. These communities discovered that the process of producing a performance instilled distinct and strong bonds among tentatively formed social groups. Using what the Welsh academic, novelist and critic Raymond Williams called the 'formations' of cultural production, those 'forms of organization and self-organization' created by the individuals within these communities themselves, was in itself a practical goal of the Hull-House theatre (Jackson 216). Theatre, being a visual spectacle, has the unique advantage of being able to transcend language. Like music, sculpting or painting, plays can speak to many people on many different levels.

One of the desires of the Hull-House theatre was to stage plays written by someone from the immediate neighbourhood, particularly someone who may have attended classes run by the Hull House. This opportunity arose when Leroy Scott, a newspaperman residing at Hull House, published his book *The Walking Delegate* (Polacheck 118). The premise of the play is that there is not only a conflict between honest and dishonest elements of trade unions but that this situation is mirrored in the ranks of the employers. In essence wherever there was a bribe taker there was, *ipso facto*, a bribe giver (ibid 118). Scott's novel was dramatized by Hilda Satt Polacheck, another resident of Hull House. This was a perfect opportunity: a novel authored by a resident of Hull House being made into a play by a student of the Hull House and performed by the Hull House Players (ibid 119). The Hull House, attempting perhaps to follow the lead of the New Theatre, was looking for an American playwright to write meaningful plays for an American audience. The search was on, not before time, for an American that would be able to speak for the population. There was always the issue of multiculturalism, who can speak, simultaneously, from the point of view of so many cultural

experiences, yet, in *The Walking Delegate* Polacheck struck upon a universal theme that weaves through the human experience. This universality was something that the Irish Players managed to transmit during their American tour. The experiences of an Irish peasant looking out at the all devouring Atlantic ocean at the turn of the century, pining for the lives it has robbed, is, in the hands of Synge, transmuted into the experiences of anyone that has experienced loss. The expected yet inexplicable nature of death is laid bare on the stage throughout *Riders to the Sea*. The need to see and experience, the need to vent emotion and the cessation of the perpetuation of life is what audiences can take from the play. Likewise, since the story of Adam and Eve, corruption has often been intrinsically linked to the human condition. The American playwright must focus on the things that Americans share, experience and live through if they are to capture the soul and imagination of the people.

In the nascent Hull House theatre we again see the finger prints of the Abbey Theatre as Addams claims that

There have been times when our little stage was able to serve the theatre libre [sic]. A visit from the Irish poet Yeats inspired us to do our share towards freeing the stage from its slavery to expensive scene setting, and a forest of stiff conventional trees against a gilt sky still remains with us as a reminder of an attempt not wholly unsuccessful, in this direction (ibid 394).

The Abbey Theatre's ability to share cultural values and innovative methods of displaying their craft, born from necessity in Dublin, seems to have meshed perfectly with the needs of a small yet dedicated theatre arts scene in America. The amateur nature of the theatre, the paucity of elaborate settings, the importance of the word – written and spoken - and the universality of the message enabled the Abbey Theatre's approach to drama to be replicated by theatres that were looking to disentangle the stage from the box office. It is notable that in the Hull House the Irish Players found ready companions and friends. It is true that many of

the Hull House Players were Irish and maintained strong connections to the Abbey Theatre. When the Irish Players were in Chicago Lady Gregory reports that on Monday 12th February ‘The Hull House Players came and gave me a lovely bunch of roses. They have been acting some of my plays’ (Lady Gregory 250). The links between the Hull House Players and the Abbey Theatre extend further than the mere staging of some Abbey Theatre plays.

In 1900 the Hull House Dramatic Association installed Laura Dainty Pelham, a former actress, as adviser to the new society, a position that she held until her death in 1924 (Chansky 57). Pelham understood the importance of the audience and audience participation in the new realm of Little Theatres. The success of the Hull House theatre was based mainly on her skill of acknowledging the interests of the community and performing plays that would be widely popular (ibid 58). It was she that introduced new Irish work into their repertoire in 1912, and it was through Pelham’s influence that Lady Gregory saw her plays performed by the Hull House players (ibid 58). Indeed, when the Irish Players were in Chicago they attended plays staged by the Hull House theatre and the two groups attended each other’s work (ibid 58). The two companies were so close that the Hull House Players raised money in the hope of visiting the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in an effort to better understand the management and playwriting styles of the Irish theatre. In 1913 the Hull-House players visited Dublin and spent some time in the British Isles with the Abbey Theatre (ibid 58). On their return those that had travelled immediately sought more autonomy in the manner in which the company was managed, the methods of casting plays, the choice of play and decried Pelham’s ‘outdated style of direction’ (ibid 58). Addams sided with Pelham preferring her style of community theatre over the more avant-garde theatre that was being espoused by the returning artists (ibid 59). After the conflict, many of the actors left and one appeared on the roster of Browne’s Chicago Little Theatre.

This rebellion within what is rightly regarded as one of the most progressive theatres in America during the early years of the twentieth century points to the contradictory pressures pulling at the theatrical scene in America in the period. In one instance the Hull House theatre is becoming more like the *Théâtre Libre*, allowing art to roam free on the stage, regardless of cultural influences, and performing plays that stem from as wide a range as ancient Greece to local playwrights. However, in the midst of this free art the emergence of an avant-garde movement wishing to push the theatre into an even more non-commercial and artistic direction almost destroyed both movements. As Chansky states there is a deep irony that ‘the professional actress who has learned to work with neighbourhood actors is rejected by those same locals as they seek membership in the vanguard of their leader’s abandoned profession’ (ibid 59). In this act we see the issues that the Progressive Era had to bridge. We also are given a clear insight into the multifarious aims, goals and ambitions that is the Little Theatre Movement. Within both the era and the theatre fractious factions and oddly obsequious groups attempt to find a common ground, a single simple banner under which they can marshal their forces against a political, societal and theatrical landscape that has altered significantly during the previous half century. The meaning of art, the meaning of governance and the meaning of cultural belonging were changing faster than individuals could alter their political and social positions.

The next Chapter

Although the Little Theatre Movement’s spiritual home was Chicago it was in Provincetown where it was to mature into the new face of American theatre. It was here that America found its playwright theatre. It was here that, in many ways as a result of the Abbey Theatre, America

found its theatrical voice. It was in Provincetown that America discovered its first playwright. Here, among the dunes, twentieth century America discovered the man that would give voice to an American drama that would revolutionize the theatrical landscape. The 'peasant class' that was the medium through which the Irish were to examine their society was replicated in the down and outs in American dive bars. The dialect that was so important to the Abbey Theatre, the capturing of the 'true' voice of the people would be replicated in the street slang and African American idioms that populated the scripts that were produced by the Provincetown Players. The social criticism that abounded in the plays that were toured by the Irish Players in 1911 and 1912 was to be utilized by America's first great playwright (Bowen 212). Eugene Gladstone O'Neill, son of James O'Neill would, almost despite himself, change the landscape of American theatre, both on and off stage. Through his words America would discover itself, through his plays African American's would become more than two dimensional characters and stereotypes that were utilised to depict an African American that was acceptable to white America. The Provincetown Players was the first playwright theatre in America since the African Grove theatre played its role more than one hundred years beforehand. When O'Neill and his colleagues performed their first plays in Wharf theatre, a rickety old building at the end of a derelict wharf in Provincetown nobody could have guessed at the impact that they would have on the Little Theatre Movement and American drama. Just as it was through was through the Little Theatre management that was inspired by the Abbey Theatre, it was through an O'Neill that was inspired by Irish playwrights and it was through the acting style that was inspired by the Irish Players that toured America that the American theatre would become one of the most innovative and interesting theatrical

landscapes of the twentieth century. The struggle of the Irish theatre in Ireland would become the struggle of the American art theatre in its native land.

Chapter 5: Provincetown and the Abbey

Out Riders

In late 1911 when Liebler & Co. brought over the Abbey Players from Dublin for their American tour O'Neill attended every one of their productions (Sheaffer 205). It was here that he was to come in contact with the plays of Synge, Yeats, Lady Gregory, A.E. Russel, T. C. Murray et al. O'Neill said, regarding the Irish Players:

My early experiences of theatre through my father really made me revolt against it ... it was in seeing the Irish Players for the first time that gave me a glimpse of my opportunity ... I thought then ... that they demonstrated the possibilities of naturalistic acting better than any other company. In my opinion the Moscow Art Players could not hold a candle the original Abbey Theatre company' (ibid 205).

O'Neill, on viewing the rhetorical style of the Abbey Players, could only have been struck with the minimal settings, the minimalist acting and the minimalist cast that were involved in most of the Abbey theatre productions. Although having viewed Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* and the violence that it entailed, *The Playboy of the Western World* must have had an impact on O'Neill. The Irish, as stated before, were usually cast as buffoons and an over-emotional race that always allowed the heart dictate to the head. In this tour, the Irish players were playing characters with depth, with emotional sensitivity, with the capacity for thought and independent action. Perhaps it was in seeing the race being redefined on stage, witnessing a people attempting to de-reify themselves and assert their culture that O'Neill recognised the possibilities inherent in the African American community. Though it was *The Playboy of the Western World* that attracted most attention, notably through the riots that accompanied it across America, it was to two other plays that O'Neill was drawn, namely *Riders to the Sea* by Synge and T. C. Murray's *Birthright*.

In 1895 Irish wit and wisdom came to the stage in the guise of the Anglo-Irish Wilde and his dazzlingly witty and pleasing farce *The Importance of being Earnest*. This well-made play, whose core tenant was that the quest for truth and beauty was the epitome of English upper middle class decadency. Even before the play begins the set is described thus:

Morning-room in ALGERNON's flat in Half Moon Street. The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished. The sound of a piano is heard in the adjoining room. [LANE] is arranging afternoon tea on the table' (Wilde 252)

The Anglo-Irish author has thoroughly Anglicised himself, so much so indeed that it could be argued that he defined an aspect of British life more astutely than most Englishmen could. However, a mere eight years after Wilde's earnest play a different Anglo-Irish playwright looked west rather than east for his inspiration. Synge's play *Riders to the Sea* has its setting in

An island off the West of Ireland. Cottage kitchen, with nets, oilskins, spinning-wheel, some new boards standing by the wall, etc. CATHLEEN, a girl of about twenty, finishes kneading cake, and puts it down in the pot-oven by the fire (Synge 3).

The difference in topic is plain to see, however, perhaps most startling is the change in relationship the Anglo-Irish playwright has undergone when depicting culture. Synge was a consummate outsider, a man that, even in love, found the world an uncomfortable and undecipherable place. His position as 'other', however, led him, through Yeats's guidance, to create a uniquely 'Abbey form of theatre. The characters he sketched captured a deep humanity that the stage Irishman sorely lacked. His characters' minimalist emotion, the stoicism and the acceptance of all of life's vagaries in *Riders to the Sea*, make the stage a launching pad for a new discourse in Irish theatre. The nationalism that was espoused by Sinn Fein, the home rule that was sought for by the home rule party, the grass root activism that was led by Michael Davitt and Fanny Parnell in the Land League were all both represented and laid waste to by the simple depictions of Irish peasant life.

From the first encounter in the play we can see that this is something that encompasses a ‘new’ Ireland, or a new imagining of a stage Ireland. The characters are strong women, women that casually discuss turf, food and death – women that keep the hearth fires burning for men that may never return. All this is expressed in a new idiom – one that captures an essence of Irish, whether it was ever spoken off the stage or not. Nora, a young girl in the play discusses clothes that were found on a drowned man saying

The young priest says he’s known the like of it. “If it’s Michael’s they are,” says he, “you can tell herself he’s got a clean burial by the grace of God, and if they’re not his, let no one say a word about them, for she’ll be getting her death” says he, “with crying and lamenting” (ibid 3).

In this short piece of dialogue much of Ireland’s triumphs and foibles are casually discussed. The strong link between the Irish and the Roman Catholic Church, the interconnectivity between Gaelic and the use of God’s name in many of the greetings and expressed hopes within the language, the inherent care that the community have about the members within that community and the deep and sometimes cruel irony of the Irish wit – Maurya, Michael’s mother, will die lamenting death.

However, it is not merely the content of the speech which give the play a clear sense of location, time, and community - the rhythm of the play is defined by the rhythms of speech. The short powerful prose throughout the play drive the tragedy to its bleak minimalist conclusion just as the white horses of the waves drive Maurya’s children to their doom. In the end death takes all and *Riders to the Sea* has death a plenty. A mother laments the death of two sons, both claimed by the sea, yet she says

Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied (ibid 12).

In many ways the play lays to rest more than the bodies of Michael and Bartley. Just as the sea in *Rider's to the Sea* is both the provider and consumer of life, the English language that is spoken in the play is both the provider and consumer of culture. The sea nourishes the people in the community yet the cost for this bounty is a heavy burden for them to bear. The encroachment of English is a vehicle that will equip many of the people in that same community with the tools to succeed in Britain and America, whilst tearing the heart and soul out of it too. The play lays to rest many of the preconceptions that audiences had about Irish theatre and Irish theatrical subject matter. The rogue, villain, lout, lover or clown are all absent. Men, for the most part, are absent. Women are the last to remain standing on the stage and where there is woman there is hope of life. Perhaps Synge's hope was that through these women a new three dimensional Irish culture could be formed.

The representation of Irish culture was one of minimalism, almost primitivism, where people are not separated from the natural landscape. Even the title *Rider's to the Sea* evokes immediacy and movement – the crashing of the sea, the gallop of the riders, the 'White Horses' of the waves racing onto the shore washing up the bodies and unburdening the sea of its macabre burden. It creates images of sweat, salt and sea and soil – the people who live in this landscape are forever dominated by its muscular ferocity. The characters in the play hide deep emotions under a stony stoicism, the play echoing *Oedipus Rex* in its bleak acceptance of the journey on which the characters and audience must take. The prior knowledge the audience has of the tragedy, and the horror of a new heartache being visited upon the household do not allow the audience a moment of cathartic respite. Life in rural coastal Ireland does not allow such moments for its residence – the play underscores this by making the audience pity and mourn for the characters in a way that the play does not allow its own protagonists. The culture that Synge unearths in the stony soil of the Irish Atlantic coast is one as resilient and enduring as the landscape. That events like these occurred in these communities is undoubtedly true,

that women lost husbands and sons to the vagaries of the sea would have been common, all one needs to do is peruse the graveyards of Carraroe in Co. Galway to see first-hand the dispassionate cruelty of a life ruled by the ocean, yet this life is only a part of the appeal of the play.

The minimalist stage, the minimalist dialogue, and the lack of movement from the characters are all accentuated by the dialect in which all the play is couched. It is distinct, it is new and it is Irish – it is a touchstone that differentiates it from all the minimalist plays that were created anywhere else.

The language in *Riders to the Sea* and the subject matter was something fresh and new that was brought to the stage by the Abbey theatre. *The Playboy of the Western World* was the drama that caused most controversy due to its seeming taint on the purity and sanctity of the Irish peasant, however, it was an Irish comedy which encouraged the laughter that came so readily to the lips of many audiences. *Riders to the Sea* was something new, deep, painful and universally resonant. From the opening exchange

NORA: We're to find out if it's Michael's they are; some time herself will be down looking by the sea.

CATHLEEN: How would they be Michael's, Nora? How would he go the length of that way to the far north? (Synge 3)

We are greeted with a new voice and subject matter that would inspire playwrights on both sides of the Atlantic to reappraise their presuppositions of theatre.

Not only was this play revolutionary in its dealings with peasants and the language through which their lives were described, it also challenged the way American stage designers regarded setting and props. Robert Edmund Jones, a renowned American stage designer noted

The setting is very simple ... Neutral-tinted walls, a fireplace, a door, a window, a table, a few chairs. The red homespun skirts and bare feet of the peasant girls. A fisher's net perhaps, nothing more. But through the window at the back, one saw a

sky of enchantment. All the poetry of Ireland shone in that little square of light, moody, haunting, full of dreams, calling us to follow on ... By this one gesture of excelling simplicity, the setting was enlarged into the region of great theatre art (Flannery 254).

The lavish stage productions that were trundling out of New York, it seems, could not compare to a few square feet of perfect stage lighting. Indeed, the stage was only an enhancement for the dialogue and not a distraction was the goal of the Abbey theatre. Yeats, Lady Gregory, Synge et al were looking to propel their poetry into the realm of theatre, not to bring theatre into their poetry. The power of the play was centred in the ability of the playwright, not the stage props or lighting, however, anything that could enhance the supremacy of the poetry inherent in the language would be utilised. The simplicity of the stage was the visual cue to the audience of what to expect from the actors. Yeats proclaimed that

the extraordinary success of the Irish National Theatre Society owed as much to the acting style developed under the guidance of the Fays as it did to the plays that were performed. When contrasted with the bombastic extravagance to be seen on the commercial English stage, the simplified but focused stage blocking, musical delivery, and sincere unaffected deportment of the Irish players all combined to give the company and innocent, slightly exotic charm all of its own (ibid 215).

Just as the lighting and stage setting were used as an enhancement rather than a distraction, the acting too was of an understated nature so as not to detract from the oratory style which the Abbey theatre desired. Nothing in the Abbey theatre was to hinder the playwrights' words and everything was used to enhance the power and efficacy of the dialogue. The Irish accent, as stated before, a voice that inspired laughter from the first syllable, is transformed into the medium of painful urgency. The syntax of the sentence is disjointed, yet the meaning is enhanced.

In many ways it is this breaking of the English language and the reassembling of it as a foreign tongue that allows us to call Synge a 'strong poet' and 'ironist'. Not only is he collaging the language into something that fits the Irish brogue, he is shining a light and making 'art' out of a class of people that were merely background noise even in their own country. The brogue

that the play is written in, the accent that Synge claims is a 'rude and beautiful poetry that is filled with the oldest passions of the world' brought an authenticity to the play that few playwrights were able to match. That is not to say that the dialect in which *Riders to the Sea* is couched is an accurate representation of any dialect that was ever heard in Ireland. Synge claimed an authenticity to further the dramatic art rather than to further concern for the peasants. The language that is used to further the artistic form – it is a theatrical language that perhaps captures more than the sum of its parts. Rorty describes the construction of the language as someone like

Yeats [and Synge]... (a "poet" in [the] wide sense of the term - the sense of "one who makes things new") is typically unable to make clear exactly what it is that he wants to do before developing the language in which he succeeds in doing it. His new vocabulary makes possible, for the first time, a formulation of its own purpose. It is a tool for doing something which could not have been envisaged prior to the development of a particular set of descriptions, those which it itself helps to provide (Rorty 12).

In the United States also a new vocabulary needed to be observed and wrought to allow access to an America that, to that point, had remained a great undiscovered country. The African American culture, one that thrived under almost unbearable pressure was to find some small valves of release on the stage. The plays were not necessarily riot inducing, however, they were the site of small condemnations of the African American treatment. Although this was to blossom, the first pioneering playwrights that wrote three dimensional characters for the American stage were white. Ridgley Torrence and Eugene O'Neill were the first to bring African Americans to the theatre, indeed O'Neill was to bring him all the way to Broadway. Although the Abbey playwrights were, for the most part, drawn from Anglo-Irish stock and wrote plays about a culture that they were with but not of, the African American plays were written by people completely outside their race. However, the development of Eugene O'Neill's playwriting and the Provincetown Players, particularly Charles Gilpin, forced

mainstream American theatre to recognise the quality and potential of the African American on stage.

Provincetown Players

A likely starting place for the Provincetown Player's nascent activities is when a group of writers and artists who were vacationing in Provincetown presented their plays on July 15, 1915 on the veranda of Hutchins Hapgood and Neith Boyce's rented ocean-view cottage (Rust Egan 4). Two plays were staged, the first being *Constancy* by Neith Boyce, a spoof on the very public romance between Mabel Dodge, a wealthy socialite, and John Reed, poet, journalist and future revolutionary that is best remembered for his first-hand account of the Bolshevik Revolution, *Ten Days That Shook the World*. The second play, one that would later be staged by the Washington Square Players, *Suppressed Desires*, by husband and wife Jig Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell was a spoof regarding the dangers of Freudian techniques in amateur hands. Due to the overwhelmingly positive reception of the two plays by all present Jig arranged a second bill of two new one-act plays on Lewis Wharf (Rust & Egan 4). The two plays, *Change your style* by Jig Cram Cook, a satire about the feuds between different artistic schools, and *Contemporaries* penned by Wilbur Daniel Steele, a parable depicting homelessness in New York, were staged (ibid 4). After a winter break, where control over the new Playgroup was bestowed upon Jig, the new summer season opened on the 28th July 1916 with a play *Bound East for Cardiff* by a new playwright – Eugene O'Neill.

The play's action is on a ship, as the name may well suggest, and depicts the death of a sailor named Yank, originally played by Jig Cram Cook. The play was reviewed by Heywood Brown in the *New York Tribune* on 30th January the following year and he claims that the

Play owes more to the creation of a mood and atmosphere than to any fundamentally interesting idea ... the appeal lies in the successful approximation of true talk ...

Approximation, rather than faithful reproduction, must be the aim of the dramatist who deals with the looser talking sort of folk. Obviously it is impossible to set down the conversation of sailors word for word (Black 17)

Here, already we can see the deep impact that the Abbey Theatre had upon his concept of the play. His use of colloquialisms, his use of approximations rather than Received Pronunciation, his characters drawn from the dregs of society rather than the upper echelons, his use of mood and atmosphere, something that was implicitly important to Synge's plays, all reveal his allegiance to a new departure in American theatre. He was to bring realism, tentatively, this was far from a finished product, to an audience that would not have experienced anything like it before.

O'Neill co-directed the play with professional actor Edward Ballantine, and sought realism at every level of the play. The artists that were associated with the play had constructed abstract and art deco sets to accompany this and the other productions, however, O'Neill, over their protests, was adamant that the props and setting was true to his vision and insisted on realism (Rust Egan 6). One could only now imagine the impact that the play had, staged as it was on the edge of Lewis Wharf, with the sea lapping and crashing onto the shoreline not thirty yards away. The setting on

A rickety dock suspended over the Atlantic Ocean ... [where] ... during performances, ships' bells and foghorns competed with the dialogue. Rain, when it fell, could be heard on the roof. Fog engulfed the building ... floorboards were perforated with open knotholes. If the tide was in and it was, Susan Gaspell writes, for *Bound East for Cardiff* ... "it washed under us and around us, spraying through the holes in the floor, giving us the rhythm and the flavor [sic] of the sea" (Robinson 165)

Although this may seem to be bringing realism to a whole new level there is a poignancy in the departure that this makes from the frothy and shallow plays that were the American audience's usual fare. O'Neill consciously wishes to bring the audience into an emotional environment, he needs to make the audience feel rather than telling it something. This emotive plea is something that we can sense from *Rider's to the Sea*. The final, simple ending of that play appeals to the heart more than the head – the full effect of Maurya's stoicism is for later – the immediacy and all-encompassing nature of life and death and her acceptance of the latter is shocking and appeals to the audience to lament the deaths a mother cannot.

Due to the theatre's success, the uncovering of O'Neill's writing talent and the 'apparent reliability of their non-system of spontaneous collective creativity' (Sarlós 61) on September 19, 1916 Cook moved the enterprise to New York and rented a theatre at 139 Macdougall Street on Washington Square. On the insistence of O'Neill the Players dubbed this theatre 'The Playwright's Theater' (ibid 61). At this time the members decided to lay down a few guidelines by which the theatre would be run. The two main, and later most contentious of these were: One – the primacy of script and writer within the work of the collective – reflected in the name change of the theatre and, two – the view of amateurism as a stepping stone to professionalism (ibid 61). The other name that was suggested for the theatre was the 'Try Out Theatre', and the defeat of this proposal suggests that the members were not supportive of a constant try and fail attitude (ibid 62). After the move to New York the theatre became more involved in the artistic and intellectual scene that was centered around Greenwich Village (Richards 235). The arrival coincided with an explosion of interest in modernism as expressed through the arts and social and political philosophies (ibid 235). Indeed, it has been said by the historian Arthur Wertheim that the people who amalgamated around Washington Square at the time and were involved in a 'Little Renaissance' were 'linked together in a common cause to create a new American culture' (ibid 235).

This idea of creating a 'new' culture is again couched in the terms of 'strong poet'. The culture that was being created was not new insofar as it was arguing against nineteenth century genteelism. It was looking at things in a new way, describing what society was in a way that was both more inclusive and exclusive at the same time. The plays that were produced by the Provincetown Players, both in Provincetown and New York were introducing new societies to the stage. They were making the common language of the sailor, the peasant, the man on the street an art form – something to be studied, analysed, scrutinised and most importantly respected by a culture that a mere five years before had refused to acknowledge their existence.

The words, the language, the accents that were vocalised by these players were creating new vessels from the oldest of clay. The poet Patrick Kavanagh wrote in his poem *Stony Grey Soil of Monaghan*

You clogged the feet of my boyhood,
And I believed that my stumble,
Had the poise and stride of Apollo,
And his voice my thick tongued mumble (Kavanagh 68).

Here the hope was to give the ‘thick tongued mumble’ a place at the table, a pedestal from which it could articulate a meaning of being. Just as the Abbey Theatre attempted to give a voice to the mumbling masses so too the American artists of the time, including the work of the ‘The Playwright’s Theater’ was guided by the principles of allowing heretofore invisible people to live, momentarily, in a most public arena.

Although the triumphs of the Provincetown Players are almost too numerous to mention, their impact on the American theatre almost immeasurable, for the purpose of the thesis I will now skip forward to 1920 and examine the Provincetown Player’s breakthrough play, the first that they were to produce on a Broadway theatre and one of the first plays that would give an African American a two dimensional character which would allow him to express himself in a cognizant manner. It would also be the play that would give the world its first glimpse of Charles Sidney Gilpin, the first actor to play the title role of Brutus Jones in the play *The Emperor Jones*.

The Emperor’s new clothes

On November 1st 1920 O’Neill and the Provincetown Players staged, for the first time, the play *The Emperor Jones*, a production which was to take them from relative obscurity to the theatrical heartland of America. This play was to redefine the American theatrical landscape and was proof positive that America had found a playwright that could spearhead American

drama. The much sought-for American playwright's first tentative steps had now been taken, and O'Neill became the first playwright to capture some essence of the long ignored African American psyche and give it life on a Broadway stage. O'Neill had found America's long forgotten 'peasant' culture that Lennox Robinson had been told did not exist through his depiction of the African American community, and although his Brutus Jones was not necessarily a deep study of African American culture, it was the first successful play that gave its African American protagonist star billing and a layer of depth and humanity that was sadly yet inevitably missing from the vaudeville and minstrel shows that were popular in the early twentieth century.

Before the emergence of Brutus Jones O'Neill had attempted to portray an ordinary everyday American and made him the subject of a pathetic concern and, on occasion, a magnificent tragic figure in his play *Beyond the Horizon* (Bogard 134). However, through *The Emperor Jones* O'Neill uncovered the same theatrical gold that Yeats and Synge had unearthed in rural Ireland, although his interpretation of the African American dialect and character was more problematic than anything that Synge portrayed. The experiences of the everyday American was not necessarily furthered, however, the intellectual and capable African American was brought to the stage by O'Neill in his brutal rendering of the character Brutus Jones in *The Emperor Jones* (ibid 134). Bogard, in his book *Contours in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*, states that 'Not only the literate American drama, but the American Theatre came of age with this play' (ibid 134). Through the skilful acting of Charles Sydney Gilpin, and his handling of the character Brutus Jones, O'Neill had given the American theatre its first great African American protagonist and, arguably, its first great (modern) African American actor. In a 1922 copy of the text of the play C. E. Bechhofer, British author and journalist, states in the introduction that '*The Emperor Jones* enthral the listener ... even during the *entr' actes*

the audience continue to feel its dramatic quality ... the sound of the tomtom beaten by his pursuers is the antagonist in this drama of fear' (Bechhofer vii).

The play draws on both O'Neill's personal experiences and authors that he both admired and revered. His depiction of the jungle, so prominent in the play, could well have been a retelling of his own jungle experiences in Honduras (Sheaffer 151). His jungle experiences, miserable as they were⁴², were both condensed and distilled into the poetic fantasy and nightmarish beauty of Brutus Jones' environment. Perhaps most telling of all are the literary influences that inspired O'Neill's creation. The use of Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* can be seen throughout the play, as the study of a deteriorating civility and a descent towards feral and base animalistic responses are suggested in the racial atavism apparent in the last moments of Jones' life (Bogard 135). There is also an obvious similarity with its jungle symbolism and probing of primordial realms of consciousness between *The Emperor Jones* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Brashear 105). Indeed, F. Scott Fitzgerald, in a letter to H. L. Mencken, stated that as far as he was concerned *The Emperor Jones* was written in imitation of *Heart of Darkness* (Moore 223 – 241). There is also a hint of the *Nigger of Narcissus* in the text, and this is a novel that we know that O'Neill had both read and recommended to others (ibid 104). These stories stem from either side of the Atlantic, Conrad – the Polish turned English gentleman and Jack London – the firebrand author, journalist and social activist, seem to combine the exploring traditions of old Europe and the New World. This

⁴² He wrote many letters to his parents complaining of the bad food, the interminable nights filled with insects and noises of all description, the bites from said insects and most of all the malaria he contracted in Honduras (Sheaffer 154)

combination of staid and steady European colonialism and London's frontier-ism speaks to both O'Neill's and America's identity. O'Neill, a man who very much identified himself with his Irish heritage seemed to have that almost schizophrenic need to preserve old roots in new soil. Using authors that excelled and thrived in their separate fields, one in Europe, the other in America, adds to the internationalism and constant moving forward whilst looking over their shoulder that encapsulates the identity of both Eugene and his father James. This cultural tension allied with an African American protagonist seems to meld the totality of American experiences with one another. With one voice you speak of a stable past, with another you speak to an uncertain future, and with the African American voice you can relay the disconnect between the two.

Just as Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* and Buck, the dog-turned wolf in *The Call of the Wild* ostensibly explore an imaginative retrogression, Brutus represents a derogation of civilization and an acceptance of base goals and motivations. Like Kurtz, Brutus Jones, a former Pullman porter and ex-convict, has become emperor of a West Indian island by exploiting the primitive natives' superstition. Jones' desire to associate himself with white culture stems from his conflicting feelings of being both colonizer and colonized (Mendelssohn 20). This experience is the reverse of Kurtz, as he is the colonizer turned savage, yet in Jones the inner turmoil and immediacy of the action is much closer to the bone than in *Heart of Darkness*. Just a mere six years before the staging of *The Emperor Jones* Americans flocked to see the film *Birth of a Nation* and watched the undeserved and unearned denigration of blacks during the Reconstruction. The film got its first screening in the White House, the first film ever to be shown there, where afterwards it is rumoured that president Woodrow Wilson stated 'It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true' (Stokes 111). In Evansville, Kentucky critics of the film argued that the film would 'encourage the kind of racial hatred and violence that had recently led to the lynching of a black man in the

neighbouring town of Henderson' (ibid 160). Ralph Ellison suggests in his novel *Invisible Man*, that black people became invisible after the Civil War, at least as cognitive beings, in the relatively new technologies of media, photography, and film through which knowledge was increasingly disseminated. Here O'Neill is promoting an African American with emotional depth and agency that seeks to take advantage of people for his own gratification. Although his motivation is base and brutal, his on stage actions are far less worrying than the very real actions perpetrated in Henderson Kentucky.

The seven scenes in *The Emperor Jones* are carefully constructed with Brutus Jones the only voice from scene two to six. The play is 'practically a monologue spoken by the principle character; the other persons appear only in the first and last scenes, fulfilling the role of chorus to his tragedy' (Bechhofer vii). This cast back to the original theatre, a primordial theatre devised to display well known tales to an audience that anticipates the eventual downfall of the doomed but brave protagonist is well chosen and complements the primal narrative that is being displayed on the stage. Brutus Jones, the desperate dictator, the focal point of disgruntlement, hatred, wonder and respect from the cast of characters, like Oedipus, struggles against the fates whilst accepting his destiny, in his case death by a silver bullet. That a new African American drama should echo the symbolism of Dionysian drama is fitting. African American culture, as stated by Ellison, was invisible and unschooled in literature and art. Here, an African American man, given life by O'Neill and played with some aplomb by Charles Gilpin, transcends the years and draws a direct line between the bedrock of Western culture and the modern African American experience. The struggle against fate is mirrored in the struggle that African Americans were fighting to be recognised as members of the American community. Both aspirations seemed foolhardy, but seemed desperate and both seemed doomed to failure. Gilpin, in his portrayal of Brutus Jones, gave the African American

community a literal and figurative stage to rally around. James Weldon Johnson in his book *Black Manhattan* writes that

By his work in *The Emperor Jones* Gilpin reached the highest point of achievement on the legitimate stage that had yet been attained by a Negro in America ... Torrence and O'Neill were not the only playwrights ... to experiment with the Negro as a theme for the theatre, but they were the first to use the Negro and Negro life as pure dramatic material' (Johnson 185).

The play, although not without serious issues that will be discussed later, allowed Gilpin to play the role of master over his white underling Smithers. In the opening scene Jones exclaims 'Talk polite, white man! Talk polite, you heah me! I'm boss heah now, is you fergettin'?' (O'Neill 4). That an African American should talk to a white man with such authority and such disdain was revolutionary, as was the dialect in which he issued his commands. Gilpin gave a credence to O'Neill's words that could never have been expected from a minstrel show. Brutus Jones, although depicted as a brutal dictator with scant regard for human life does at least possess a sense of worth that would soon spread throughout the African American theatrical community. Perhaps tellingly, when Brutus Jones must flee his palace he claims 'Does you think I'd slink out de back door like a common nigger? I'se Emperor yit, ain't I? And de Emperor Jones leaves de way he comes, and dat black trash don't dare stop him—not yit, leastways (ibid 10). It was the beginning of African Americans being able to walk through the front doors of a theatre to see one of their own playing a serious role on stage.

O'Neill not only portrays through Brutus Jones a language that is readily associated with African Americans, and casts an African American in the role of Brutus Jones, he bestows the character with agency and the capacity for violence. Indeed, O'Neill, at times, depicts Jones meting out righteous and hostility towards white characters in the play. In scene five Jones is confronted by the spectre of a slave market and uses his agency to confront his enemies.

What you all doin', white folks? What's all dis? What you all lookin' at me fo'? What you doin' wid me, anyhow? [*Suddenly convulsed with raging hatred and fear.*] Is dis

a auction? Is you sellin' me like dey uster befo' de war? [*Jerking out his revolver just as the AUCTIONEER knocks him down to one of the planters—glaring from him to the purchaser.*] And you sells me? And you buys me? I shows you I'se a free nigger, damn yo' souls! [*He fires at the AUCTIONEER and at the PLANTER with such rapidity that the two shots are almost simultaneous. As if this were a signal the walls of the forest fold in. Only blackness remains and silence broken by JONES as he rushes off, crying with fear—and by the quickened, ever louder beat of the tom—tom.*] (ibid 15).

One can only imagine the impact that this would have had on the American stage a mere 55 years after the end of the civil war. It was scenes exactly like this that half the country lived in fear of for much of the lifespan of America, yet on Broadway O'Neill places a gun in the hand of an African American and exhibits him shooting an Auctioneer and a Planter. One generation removed from a bitter and bloody civil war where slavery and the future of the black American population was one of the most contentious issues at stake and Brutus Jones was, performance after performance, revenging himself on the Planter and the Auctioneer.

Despite the success which O'Neill and Gilpin enjoyed the relationship between the two men was fraught at best. Gilpin took exception to O'Neill's dialogue and his repeated use of the word 'Nigger'. He would adlib on the stage and substitute words that were not as racially charged. Many biographers have assessed Gilpin's performances throughout his time playing Brutus Jones.

Gilpin was criticized for changing the dialogue. He balked at what appeared to him to be an excessive and repetitive use of the term nigger, preferring instead to use the less offensive terms black-baby, Negro, or colored man. According to O'Neill's biographers Arthur and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill, bristling at the actor's audacity, was alleged to have said to Gilpin, "If I ever catch you rewriting my lines again, you black bastard, I'm going to beat you up" (Krasner 484).

Eugene O'Neill did indeed become the 'strong poet' and 'ironist' by constructing a new dialogue, a new vocabulary on the stage that was not there before. This was not the voice of

a minstrel's spoonerisms, Mungo, Zip Coon, Bones or any of the other usual African American suspects that populated the stage to that point. However, the vocabulary that he created was not the one that best 'fit' the African American psyche. The vocabulary was laden with descriptors that the African American communities were attempting to break. The schism between Gilpin and O'Neill became so vast that Gilpin is quoted as saying 'I created the role of the Emperor. That role belongs to me. That Irishman, he just wrote the play' (Gelb 450). The struggle for ownership of identity was not one that someone from outside the community would be able to fully engage with. *The Emperor Jones* was an important first step for the African American drama, having an African American dialect being taken seriously on stage for the first time, however, the victory would not come until the community had its own theatre.

Perhaps this is an example of the over-extension of the 'strong poet' and the contingency of language. To illuminate the problems that O'Neill encountered when trying to appropriate the African American dialect I must use a lengthy quote from Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* that seems to speak to the rift that opened up between Gilpin and O'Neill. Rorty discusses 'passing theory'⁴³ by which he means

"a passing theory" about the noises and inscriptions presently being produced by a fellow human. Think of such a theory as part of a larger "passing theory" about this person's total behavior [sic] - a set of guesses about what she will do under what conditions. Such a theory is "passing" because it must constantly be corrected to allow for mumbles, stumbles, malapropisms, metaphors, tics, seizures, psychotic symptoms, egregious stupidity, strokes of genius, and the like. To make things easier, imagine that I am forming such a theory about the current behaviour [sic] of a native of an exotic culture into which I have unexpectedly parachuted. This strange person, who

⁴³ Nothing to do with the African American 'Passing'

presumably finds me equally strange, will simultaneously be busy forming a theory about my behaviour [sic]. If we ever succeed in communicating easily and happily, it will be because her guesses about what I am going to do next, including what noises I am going to make next, and my own expectations about what I shall do or say under certain circumstances, come more or less to coincide, and because the converse is also true (Rorty 14).

It is obvious that O'Neill and Gilpin did not 'succeed in communicating easily and happily' (ibid 14) as they were at cross purposes as to the efficacy of the language that they were using. O'Neill, if we are to give him the benefit of the doubt, wrote the dialogue in presumably an effort for a realistic dialogue. Gilpin, to whom the dialogue was insulting, degrading and racist was an unwilling participant in the role and attempted to subvert the language whenever he could. With this in mind we can readily see the contingency of language and the cultural and social sensitivities that are associated with it. Words that are used readily within society may not be seen to be appropriate for the stage. A 'final vocabulary' that carries a heavy burden of exploitation and degradation may seem artistically accurate and expedient to a person to whom that vocabulary was never applied. In essence the language used by O'Neill in *The Emperor Jones* was contingent on the colour line.

Ironically, O'Neill, consciously or subconsciously already brought the concept of the contingency of language to bear on the stage. In scene one O'Neill has Brutus Jones say

Dere's little stealin' like you does, and dere's big stealin' like I does. For de little stealin' dey gits you in jail soon or late. For de big stealin' dey makes you Emperor and puts you in de Hall o' Fame when you croaks. (Reminiscently) If dey's one thing I learns in ten years on de Pullman ca's listenin' to de white quality talk, it's dat same fact. And when I gits a chance to use it I winds up Emperor in two years (O'Neill 4/5).

O'Neill is already pointing directly at the contingency of language. He outs the very words into Brutus Jones mouth and reveals to the audience the concepts of 'final vocabularies' and the power that they wield over society. All Brutus Jones had to do was adopt the vocabulary of white society and he was an Emperor within two years. O'Neill adopted the vocabulary of the African American, although like Brutus Jones he adopts a theatrical rather than an actual

dialect, and brought a small theatre in Provincetown to Broadway. The similarity may extend one step further as, just as Jones becomes too overbearing and too dismissive of his own 'final vocabulary' so too did O'Neill become recalcitrant when Gilpin attempted to alter his newfound African American vocabulary. Jones is not only literally bilingual but also culturally bilingual, though he has admittedly learned the natives' 'lingo' only in order to better exploit them (Mendelssohn 4). This too apes the exploitation that O'Neill is visiting upon the African American community. He has learned the natives' 'lingo' only in order to better exploit them on stage. To counter O'Neill's growing influence over the African American stage 'final vocabulary' Gilpin uses his own inherent African American social language, which is very much contingent on race, to ameliorate the worst excesses of Brutus Jones.

If Eugene O'Neill was the 'strong poet' in his attempted portrayal of the African American then Charles Gilpin was the 'ironist'. According to Rorty

For ... ironists, nothing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary; there is no answer to a redescription save a re-re-redescription. Since there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice between them, criticism is a matter of looking on this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with the original (Rorty 80).

If one looks at the actions of Gilpin, his attempts, on the fly, to subtly change the script it is the very essence of a 're-re-redescription' of vocabulary. Gilpin walked the line between artist and political actor, between a voice for his people and a voice reinforcing the language of the oppressor. His answer to this balancing act was to 'not of comparing both pictures with the original' but to attempt to artfully mesh both his and O'Neill's dialogue into something that could represent the ideals of both parties. However, despite his attempted subversion of the script it was the actual rather than the theatrical 'final vocabulary' i.e. the racist rant that O'Neill unleashed on Gilpin, that Gilpin could not disrupt. As Rorty states: '...[N]othing can serve as a criticism of a person save another person, or of a culture save an alternative culture - for persons and cultures are, for us, incarnated vocabularies' (ibid 80). Gilpin could

challenge artistic vocabulary as it was the effort of an individual. An individual challenging the incarnated vocabularies of a culture proved too difficult.

It is, through the reaction and counter reaction of O'Neill and Gilpin, evident that this 'passing' theory only works when it is constantly 'corrected to allow for mumbles, stumbles, malapropisms, metaphors, tics, seizures, psychotic symptoms, egregious stupidity, strokes of genius, and the like' (ibid 14). When one party is intractable and does not accept the contingency of language is exactly the point where language, culture and communication sunder. O'Neill, despite his success, despite his opening the door for future African American drama, despite giving Gilpin the role of his life and despite his breaking of a theatrical 'final vocabulary' failed in his attempt to mimic the success of the Abbey theatre. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the Abbey theatre did not come to the stage burdened with the history that the white American playwrights did, perhaps the Anglo-Irish playwrights were sensitive enough in a rabidly nationalistic Dublin not to add more grist to the anti-Abbey mill. The Abbey theatre playwrights may have understood the subject matter better, and certainly treated it with a little more kindness than O'Neill did with *The Emperor Jones*.

O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, along with Ridgley Torrence's *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre* have been credited with planting the first seeds that would blossom into the Harlem Renaissance (Krasner 2007 159). However, the African American theatre was thriving in the dance halls and vaudevilles throughout America, whilst the Minstrel show was at its zenith of popularity in the late nineteenth century (Kibler 113). Despite the success of the shows, and indeed some African American actors, before the 1920 staging of *The Emperor Jones* the actors and shows were, for the most part vehicles to show off the athleticism of the African American, plays that showed the weak intellectual capacity of the African American or plays that treated the African American as a political issue that needed to be dealt with by the

intellectual and conservative 'White America' (Johnson 186). Indeed most plays that dealt with the Negro and their communities 'were plays of propaganda; they were played by a wholly white cast; for them the Negro was merely thematic material. They did not contemplate him as an exponent' (ibid 186).

The construction of identity and the way that the African American actor used subterfuge to use the overtly racist dramatic depictions of them on stage will be examined in the next chapter. I will look at the minstrel duo of Williams and Walker, particularly looking at Bert Williams, and will examine the methods that he used to turn minstrelsy from a staid portrayal of societies diminishing expectations of the African American to a liberated and intelligent artistic movement that allowed the actors to not only dominate the stage with the best of themselves but gave them access to mediums outside the proscenium arch.

Chapter 6: Gilpin and Williams

Introduction

This chapter will appraise the role of the African American stage actor from the late 19th to the early 20th century through the examination of two of the most famous African American actors. These men would transformed the African American experiences on stage. The role of Bert Williams, one of the greatest, and arguably most influential, early African American actors will be discussed. During his career he would do more to subvert the ideals of minstrelsy and alter the perceptions of the stereotyped characters in America and beyond with the aid of his stage partner George Walker. The chapter will also discuss the career of Charles Gilpin. Gilpin, discussed in the previous chapter, and known for his portrayal of Brutus Jones in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* brought the angry, terrified, brave, stoic and above all human African American male to the masses for the first time. *The Emperor Jones* was the play that first catapulted any African American actor to play the lead in a Broadway play, it was the first mainstream play that allowed black Americans to be revealed as multi-faceted and complex human beings who could experience and relate the full gamut of emotions and struggles. It was the play that, Prometheus like, brought dramatic theatre to the African American actor, a stage that was regarded as the sole purview of white America. *The Emperor Jones* was also the first play that had an African American actor mentioned by, and winning the respect of, the Drama League of New York as they named him one of the ten people in 1920 who had done the most for American theatre. This, as will be discussed later in the chapter, would be a controversial decision and would mark the high water mark of Gilpin's career.

The two men are also a neat link between all the chapters that have preceded this. Bert Williams was on the books of the Shubert Brothers, the business that eventually crushed the Theatre Syndicate. Williams and Walker were also the most celebrated minstrel act at the turn of the twentieth century. Gilpin was involved in some of the Walker and Williams productions before entering the world of serious drama. He starred in *The Emperor Jones*, the breakthrough play of the Little Theatre Movement, and his performance of the main protagonist Brutus Jones was lauded wherever he went. Between the two careers they witnessed the transformation of musical, minstrel and melodrama being white America's remit to African Americans becoming more involved, and indeed excelling, at the craft. These two individuals would place African Americans at the center of the American theatrical world. Indeed Walker also recorded many records that were to become hugely successful in his own time, encompassing the musical and theatrical worlds and introducing both audiences to a black America that was hitherto an anathema to many American citizens. His success was not confined to the USA, his fame and popularity made him a well-known and highly regarded figure in Britain. Indeed, his renown led him to perform in front of royalty whilst touring Britain.

Walker and Gilpin allowed the African American artist a space to investigate and in many ways recreate African American culture. The stage was a conveyor belt of stereotypes and cheap imitations of cultures that resided just outside the sanctioned, respectable and recognized. Minority cultures were depicted in the same vain as the scarecrow, the lion and the tinman were in L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, having neither the heart, mind or courage to be anything other than a humorous, pseudo-passionate lackey that was a

source of fun and catharsis for the public in general⁴⁴. Gilpin, in his representation of Brutus Jones brought a sincerity, a rage and perhaps most importantly a flawed humanity to the character that drove home the point that the African American was not an inherently humorous subclass of America. Gilpin was to be the Shylock to the audience's Salarino⁴⁵. Through his representation the character, and black America is stating

If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? ... The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction (Shakespeare, 68).

African American artists were on the 'Great White Way' and like all pioneers the road that they travelled was not without controversy and danger.

Gilpin

Charles Gilpin, the undoubted star of O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, was a member of the African American acting scene long before his breakthrough role. His acting career prior to *The Emperor Jones* spanned almost three decades (Krasner, 193). Gilpin was born in Richmond Virginia in 1878 (ibid, 193). Perhaps his love of entertaining was born from the availability of an audience as he was the youngest of 14 children, thereby, one would presume, having at his disposal a readymade and highly critical spectatorship (Cullen & Hackman, 437).

⁴⁴ As an aside L. Frank Baum had an enormous passion for the theatre. His father built him one in Richburg, New York where the young Baum adapted William Black's novel *A Princess of Thule* into the play *The Maid of Arran*. The play was first staged in 1882. The play was set in Ireland and was, like most plays at the time, a melodrama (Abrams, 33).

⁴⁵ Characters in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

After attending school up to the eighth grade, Gilpin was apprenticed off to the printing trade, his first job being with the African American newspaper the *Richmond Planet* (ibid, 437). There are many varying stories regarding how Gilpin entered the entertainment industry, however, one history states that he started performing at a young age and started his lifelong association with acting through singing and dancing at local 'honky tonk' bars (ibid, 193). This first step led him to perform in saloons and theatres at night and work as a temporary worker for travelling shows. It is reported that even in his early teens his baritone voice was distinctive (Wintz, 434). He moved to Philadelphia with his mother in the 1890's and continued to hone his craft by working with many different troupes and companies there. Again there is conflicting, and sometimes a total lack of histories to follow; Gilpin either followed his mother to Philadelphia or stayed in Richmond and latched onto the touring vaudeville and minstrel players as they travelled through the city. There are also reports that while he was in Philadelphia he worked for a spell in the mechanical department of the white newspaper *The Philadelphia Standard* until the prejudices and racism that he experienced from his white co-workers drove him from his job and back into the theatres (Krasner, 194). Of the troupes that he did join most, if not all, of these companies staged vaudeville or minstrel productions and Gilpin worked with the likes of the 'Big Spectacular Log Cabin Company' and 'Perkus and Davis Great Southern Minstrel Barn Storming Aggregation' (Sudderth, 434). Gilpin's first breakthrough came in 1905 when he was hired by Messrs Bert Williams and George Walker to be a chorus singer in their production of *Abyssinia*. It was this connection, and the experience that he attained from working with Williams and Walker that allowed Gilpin access to the Pekin theatre in Chicago, a venue that was the stepping stone for many African American actors (Berresford, 41).

Gilpin came up through the ranks of the Lincoln and Lafayette Players. In 1913 the Lafayette Theatre became the first major theatre to desegregate (Gray, *NY Times*). By October 1913, a

troupe called the Darktown Follies, one which contained Bert Williams as a member, opened *My Friend From Kentucky* and the audience that attended was reported as being 90 percent black (ibid). Gilpin, even that stage, had a long association with the stage. His career began in Chicago where he developed his trade in the Pekin theatre. This theatre, founded by the Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a well-known anti-lynching campaigner at the turn of the twentieth century, was heralded by the *Chicago American* as ‘the only theatre in the country, probably the only regular playhouse in the world, owned, managed and conducted by colored [sic] people, presenting with a stock company of colored artistes, original musical comedies, farces and plays written and composed by colored men’ (Hill, 192). One of the main issues that the theatre had to overcome was the lack of an African American theatre going population (ibid, 193). Indeed, just as was reported by those that attended the African Grove theatre eighty years before, the ‘curious Whites and holier-then-thou Blacks, some of whom might have come to sneer ... stayed to cheer the clever performances (ibid, 193).

The idea of having to compose oneself, having to root out the particularities of one’s culture and then transmute those idiosyncrasies into entertainment is one of the hurdles that all cultures must overcome if they are to have a theatre that truly reflects the population which it hopes to both reflect and regale. In an effort to do just this Wells-Barnett, a woman who in truth deserves further study, the Pekin theatre pursued a rigorous and demanding schedule of plays, often changing shows every two to three weeks (ibid, 193). The Pekin provided a space where African American performers, writers, and musicians could operate and develop their respective skills without having to cater to European American audiences.

Williams

Egbert Austin Williams, born 1884⁴⁶ in Nassau moved from the Bahamas with his parents to the USA when he was ten, escaping the depressions that hit the Bahamian economy during the end of the 19th century (Forbes, 4). His family settled in Riverside, California, taking advantage of the citrus farming and the boom in railroads that was rocketing the Californian economy at the time (ibid, 4). From an early age Williams displayed a talent for mimicry and characterization (ibid, 11). Indeed Williams says of himself: ‘I always got a great deal of fun out of observing the game, whatever it happened to be and the various and varying human reactions upon the individuals who were active in it’ (ibid, 11). These observations, the physical and social aspects of those he observed were all later incorporated into his act (ibid, 11).

Bert Williams cut his theatrical teeth far from mainstream theatre, far even from the vaudeville theatres or the amateur theatres that were dotted throughout America. His first foray into the theatrical world was through an art form that has long since passed into the realms of history. At the age of sixteen (Forbes 4) he began his career as a caller for, and later an actor in, a medicine show (ibid, 11). These shows, although now seeming almost incredulous, were during the 19th century logical, popular and widespread in the American West (Agnew, 161). People came from miles around to witness the shows. There usually was no entrance charge

⁴⁶ Forbes lists the year as 1884 in his book *Introducing Bert Williams : burnt cork, Broadway, and the story of America's first Black star*, however, his date of birth is listed as 1874 in the *Encyclopaedia of the Harlem Renaissance* and Caryl Phillips lists it as 1873 in *Dancing in the Dark*. It is good to see that actors lying about their age crossed the colour line with the first African American to star on Broadway!

to see the show, however, the entertainment was displayed between periods of selling the medicinal wares that were the basis of the show (ibid, 161). There was a strict format to these medicine shows, an entertainment that dated to the middle-ages in Europe (ibid, 161), however in the American west the shows almost always finished with a minstrel act (Forbes, 15). The 'afterpiece' was played by a person in blackface, a straight man and a ghost (ibid, 15). The format dates back to a time when a medicine show would finish with an autopsy, however with the changing of social mores and morals the event became a play (ibid, 15). The decline of the medicine shows began in earnest after the 1906 Federal Food and Drugs Act that placed controls on food, alcohol and drugs, thereby significantly restricting the patent medicine business that was the sole driving force of these shows (ibid, 17).

Long before this steady and terminal decline in the medicine shows Williams had left to pursue other theatrical roles and to conquer new stages. Whilst in San Francisco in 1893 Williams, although still in his teens, landed a role in the 'Martin and Selig's Mastodon Minstrels'. It was at this time that he met his future acting partner George Walker and managed to get him a role with the company as an end-man in the minstrel act (Brooks, 105). During the next three years the two of them would appear in numerous companies and in a variety of acts in which the two men honed their skills (ibid, 105). It was not all success for Williams and Walker, however, and they were dropped by the company during a run of John W. Isham's *The Octoroons* during the winter of 1895-96 due to poor door receipts (ibid, 105). Despite this the two men were to find enormous success in New York when they joined a, to that point, poor production of the musical *The Gold Bug* (ibid, 106). The two men never looked back, however, it was Bert Williams that was the true genius in the duo.

Although his name is now unknown to many and has lamentably faded into near obscurity over the last century, Williams was once the darling of America and regarded as one of the foremost comedians in the late 19th and early 20th century in America. His career was one that not only brought African Americans to the mainstream stages in America, but also spanned varying mediums. He was a star on the American stage, a celebrated and popular singer on vinyl and a prominent and leading actor in film⁴⁷. His legacy is hard to overstate. James Weldon Johnson notes that ‘Bert Williams goes down as one of Americas great comedians. He has few equals in the art of pantomime ... In the singing of a plaintive Negro song he was beyond approach’ (Weldon Johnson, 108). The play *In Dahomey*, in which Bert Williams was the star, was the first full-length musical written and played by blacks to be performed at a major Broadway theatre. In the period before the Harlem Renaissance it was his voice that was the only black recorded artist that was regularly and consistently available to buy. His records included the hits *Good Morning Carrie*, his signature tune *Nobody* and many, many, others that spanned the period ‘from “coon” songs to “race records”’ (Chude-Sokei, 2). Between William and Walker they redefined the concept of minstrelsy, calling their act ‘Two Real Coons’. In doing this they carried out the subversive technique of the ‘strong poet’ and the ‘ironist’. Rorty describes the ‘ironists’ favoured method of engagement as a

⁴⁷ Reels depicting Bert Williams titled *Bert Williams Lime Kiln Field Day Project* by curators, was found in 2014. Excerpts from the previously unseen 1913 film, which is believed to feature the oldest surviving footage of black actors was unearthed by MoMA curators. In it they watched a depiction of middle-class black characters from an era when lynchings and stereotyped black images were commonplace (Lee).

form of argument [that] is dialectical in the sense that she takes the unit of persuasion to be a vocabulary rather than a proposition. Her method is redescription rather than inference. Ironists specialize in redescrining ranges of objects or events in partially neologistic jargon, in the hope of inciting people to adopt and extend that jargon. An ironist hopes that by the time she has finished using old words in new senses, not to mention introducing brand-new words, people will no longer ask questions phrased in the old words (Rorty 78).

In using the name ‘Two Real Coons’ this is exactly the process that Williams and Walker undertook. Rather than altering, changing or interfering with the already established ‘final vocabulary’ that was in existence in society they skilfully undertook a ‘redescription’ of language and began the process of ‘using old words in new senses’. Williams and Walker were both accurately describing themselves using the racist language of the day, differentiating themselves from white actors in burnt cork, especially when you consider they were using burnt cork themselves, and repatriating the expectation and norms that came with the minstrel from white society to African American society. An added complication for Williams was his audience was made up of many different races each of which had differing expectations of what his minstrel show should contain. Each section of the audience wished to limit the freedoms of the African American artist and corral him within a tight depiction of what they concluded was minstrelsy. ‘Whites did so by supporting depictions of the Negro as at best an indolent peasant and at worst a brutish menace; Negroes did so by insisting on promotion of only “nice” images of the Negro’ (Forbes 92). In essence Williams and Walker found themselves caught between the same horns that Gilpin found himself entrapped in *The Emperor Jones*. Can an actor be both true to themselves and the community whilst also giving credence to representations that damage your race? Both audiences, white and black, expected that Williams and Walkers ‘representation to be “real” or “true” to their notions ... for the whites the coon, and for the blacks the “New Negro” (ibid 92). Using Rorty’s ‘ironist’ to analyse this we find that the ‘ironists treat these people not as anonymous channels for truth but as abbreviations for a certain final vocabulary and for the

sorts of beliefs and desires typical of its users' (Rorty 79). The 'Blacks' concern about representation, and their efforts to recreate the image of blacks, developed in response to minstrelsy's legacy' (Forbes 92). This, however, as Gilpin found out with his portrayal of Brutus Jones, may have most efficacy if the author as well as the cast are sensitive to the cultural needs and aspirations of the community. Williams, although black, painted his face in burnt cork and played the roles that were part of the minstrel routine. In doing this he was carrying out the work of the 'strong poet', taking the concepts of preconceived language and expectation and redefining them, subverting and contorting their meanings until they very core of language, stereotypes, race, culture and stagecraft were altered to the point of being unrecognizable. Bert Williams and George Walker were to redefine what it was to be an African American actor and what it meant to be black on a white man's stage. The two actors entered a world of minstrelsy and stereotypes that had, like Greek theatre, predefined roles for all the cast on stage. The audience knew the characters that were trotted out on stage like so many show ponies, as well as they knew themselves.

The combination at play

One would presume that, given the paucity of African American actors that were on the vaudeville circuit at the time, Williams, Walker and Gilpin may well have shared a stage at some time in their career. However, the moment that Williams and Gilpin did act together on a stage is surely symbolic of a greater stage, a greater act and the greater role that these men would bestow to those that followed in their thespians footsteps. They both started their respective careers in the most popular and racially charged form of theatre, but the only avenue that was open to them to the stage. Bert Williams plying his trade in the medicinal shows on the east coast and Gilpin singing for his supper in the bars and nightclubs on the Atlantic side of the nation. Two men with two different experiences that would force the theatre to take the

African American seriously. Williams, although depicted as an unwilling participant in his field by Caryl Phillips in his novel *Dancing in the Dark*, did change the way that the African American could approach the stage, the way they could conduct themselves whilst being in the spotlight and the way that the audiences could regard the black man once they had left the theatres and returned to their prejudiced societies. That Gilpin, at such an early stage in his career should have acted with him is somehow representative of the shifting from the stereotypes, to the daring to the brutal, each step becoming more emotional, more savage, more civilised and more liberating. These two men brought the African American culture from reification to de-reification, from slapstick to an emotional punch.

Williams would allow the white American public a glimpse at black culture, albeit in the guise of minstrelsy. As Caryl Phillips writes

The first time he looked at himself in the mirror he thought of the embarrassment and the distress that this would cause his father and his heart sank. Down through his body like a stone, down towards those long, oversized boots that announced him as a clown ... No longer Egbert Austin Williams. He kept telling himself ... As I apply the burnt cork to my face, as I smear the black onto my already sable skin, as I put on my lips, I am leaving Egbert Austin Williams (Phillips, 57).

This picture paints the image of a soul tormented by his fated role, a man that knows his position and hates it. There is, however, an almost prophetic quality to the sentiment that is delivered by Phillips. Just as Jesus wept in the Garden of Gethsemane, just as he fervently wished that the chalice would be delivered to someone else, just as he prayed that if it was his destiny to destroy himself for the betterment of mankind then let God's will be done, Williams dons the paint, the shoes, the lips, the clothes and the idiocy that is expected of him so that he may raise his people to a higher state. It is perhaps this private torment that allowed Gilpin to explode with such ferocious power onto the Broadway stage. He is the outward face of Williams's private torment. His is the prophesied coming after Williams' role as messenger. Through Williams's act of self-effacement Gilpin was forced to recapture and redeliver the

African American soul to a nation that for so long wished to hide the fact that it existed. Williams the Baptist gave Gilpin his first voice, Gilpin was to use that voice to announce the coming of the African American to the Great White Way. However one historian writes that his success in *The Emperor Jones* helped to destroy him, for he realized, even when his popularity was at its height, that the road he had opened for others lay closed to him. He was too broken and too embittered to benefit from the new interest of playwrights such as O'Neill and Terrence in using the Negro and Negro life as pure dramatic material, or attempt Shakespearean roles such as Othello (Krasner, *Gilpin*, 483). The two men, Moses like, never managed to reap the rewards that their pioneering activities bestowed. The promised land of African American theatre spread out before them, a theatre that would allow African Americans to be depicted in a realistic manner, and even allow African American playwrights to sketch out their own depictions would not be open to them.

The theatrical world in which these two men made their mark was one in flux. The dominance of the American melodrama was on the wane and a new, character orientated, playwright theatre was replacing it. America was unearthing the first artists that could be called an American playwright. The Irish Players, through their tour in America, revealed the dramatic power that dwelled within the soil and roots of the lower classes of American. Unlike the old rush that dominated the American west in the late 19th century this golden seam remained unnoticed by the American population until the early 20th century. The people that are lauded by America, the average Joe (or Joe the plumber as the latest iteration is known), the people that dominated the American political debate in the late 19th century, the African Americans, and the people that were still attempting to become a voice in a country where their voice was still relatively unheard, the women, were all to enter American life through the proscenium arch and onto the streets.

The struggle for the African American actor or playwright was, quite obviously, a different fight than the Irish playwrights of the late nineteenth century had to wage. The Abbey Theatre was founded in Ireland, the Irish were in the majority in their own land, and the cultural pin-cushion that they stored their history and idea of themselves in was laden with racial and cultural memories from which they could draw many stories from which to hang a play upon. Be it the *Tinke's Wedding*, *Riders to the Sea*, *The Poorhouse*, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, or *John Bull's Other Island*, the stories that they told were steeped in a uniquely Irish consciousness. Douglas Hyde is quoted as saying “The Irish language ... is neither Protestant nor Catholic. It is neither a landlord nor a tenant; it is neither a Unionist nor a Separatist” (Mishkin 49). This claim for Irish culture left Irish representation not unlike the African American experience. The plays were written by a social group that were from, but not of, the prevailing culture, however, both Hyde and Yeats were adamant that the Gaelic language and culture was not the sole purview of the Gaelic language and, to extrapolate further, not solely owned by Catholic Ireland.

The African Americans path towards cultural recognition took a very different but no less ambitious and fraught course. Everett LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) in his treatise *Blues People* states that

The Negro as slave is one thing. The Negro as American is quite another ... if the music of the Negro in America, in all its permutations, is subjected to a socio-anthropological as well as musical scrutiny, something about the essential nature of the Negro's existence in this country ought to be revealed, as well as something about the essential nature of this country *i.e.*, society as a whole (LeRoi Jones x).

The journey from non-person to person, from slave to citizen, from foreign to domestic was one that the African American took from the moment of their arrival to today. However, in the coalescing of a culture many strands and strains of have to examined in the petri dish of society. LeRoi Jones focuses on, arguably, the oldest and most successful strand of African Americanism – blues and their impact upon the American mainstream musical sensibility.

There is another essence that defines a culture, in some ways more strongly than music, and that is theatre. Blues, although instantly recognisable, can be heard without being seen. Its intrinsic value is in its emotional resonance and its historic use. From slave work songs to gospel songs to Robert Johnson's songs there is a steady stream of sorrowful admission that there exists in society a force that is greater than the singer. The song exists in a state of flux, partly speaking to an African American audience, partly speaking to struggles that the lower tiers of society share. The singer can be divorced from the song, perhaps this is why there is a constant reinforcement and reaffirmation of the need to 'feel' the blues rather than merely play it. You must be a part of the blues before you can understand it, in essence you must have experienced lows before the music speaks to you. Theatre does not allow that divorce of aural and visual experience. As was discussed in previous chapters, white America had to don black-face before it could represent African American culture on stage. Already there is an overt recognition that there is a difference between white and black that transcends colour. White America needed to apply burnt cork to muddy not only the skin but the message, the actions and the meanings that were contained in much of African American culture. In post-civil war America it seemed that African Americans were either forced to, or chose to, wear a metaphorical mask, obscuring their tortured history and souls, their limited social mobility and their sufferance of societal violence, in order to serve the white population as the national jokers and born entertainers (Forbes 76).

In many ways the experiences of the African Americans on stage were similar to the Irish Players as they toured America in 1911/1912 as they played their tragedies to howls of laughter as the Irish were also regarded as figures of fun and ridicule. However events after the Abbey Theatre tour changed the landscape for, not only minorities on stage, but for American theatre. Lennox Robinson stated after the tour that

The Broadway successes in 1911 had been mostly copies of English or French drawing-room plays. Now all that was changed ... Synge and Lady Gregory, T. C. Murray and many another Irish playwright had shown them how from the lives of "humble" people, tragedies, problem-plays, and comedies might be shaped. Young America was not slow to catch the idea. The Negro became a subject, so did the tough Chicago newspaper man, and the Kentucky mountain man and the lonely farmer's wife in the Middle West' (Everson 7).

This comment is mirrored by Bert Williams's statements in an interview he gave in 1916 where he said

Minstrels are a thing of the past because there is no more minstrelsy. To cork your face and talk politics is not minstrelsy. There are no more men like 'Daddy Rice' ... The Caucasian believes every colored [sic] man is a 'coon,' that they are all alike, that they should not live in a modern way. This is a mistake. We have as many differences as the white man and no one characteristic covers us all (J.B., 19-22).

In these two statements we can sense the discernible impact that the Abbey Theatre had upon the American psyche. No longer will melodrama and vaudeville suffice, no longer will white actors solely the stages of Broadway. Robinsons 'lives of "humble" people' opened up a Pandora's Box through which the ills and triumphs of the young Irish nation swarmed onto the stage.

As the American plays became ever more in vogue the attitudes of the audiences changed accordingly. This is what Bert Williams was referring to when he claims that 'there is no more minstrelsy'. America, like Ireland had transformed their stages into temporary couches and discussed the conscious and subconscious aspects of their society on stage. Williams, although perhaps one could argue a little pre-emptively, was articulating the hope of the African American community that through the depictions of black America by black Americans the racist over and undertones of minstrelsy would be nullified. Minstrelsy would then be just another form of entertainment, an exploration of an aspect of historical misrepresentation rather than a topical critique of current attitudes. The Irish had to change the attitudes of the American audiences through the power of their rhetoric, the skill of the script and the subtlety of the performance. The African American had to negotiate the same passage from ridicule to

acceptance, however, perhaps the experience of the Irish in that 1911/1912 tour led to a change in the audience's acceptance of new concepts of race and culture. Between the Irish Players and Williams and Walker America was staged for a dramatic revolution.

Williams was not only noted for his excellence in America, his fame spread from America to Europe. Williams and Walkers' 1913/14 tour of Britain was met with considerable success. The plaudits rolled in, not only from the music hall reviews and the hoi polloi, but from the monarch himself. King Edward VII seemed to enjoy the show saying, 'To me ... the great attraction of this negro musical comedy is that the performers play with such zest. They seem to take as much delight in it as the children themselves' (Forbes, 124). Although this may seem the monarch is damning the players with faint praise, both eulogising and infantilizing in the same breath, Williams took the success of this performance, and the praise from one of the great monarchs of Europe as a clarion call for change in America. He would state that the treatment he received from the king confirmed blacks' need for an entitlement to better treatment than they had heretofore received in America (ibid, 125). It also confirmed in his mind his long held belief that the continued maltreatment and misuse of the black population in America was a backward and isolated instance of racial prejudice. Indeed the maltreatment of the African American could not have been far from the mind of the black community as between 1889 and 1902 the number of lynchings of African Americans average at roughly 100 a year (ibid, 46).⁴⁸ Williams and Walker, although playing the part of a comedian on stage were anything but in the matter of furthering the lot of the African American actor. To this

⁴⁸ See Equal Justice Initiative 'Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror' <https://eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america>

end W.E.B. DuBois stated in his article 'The Drama Among Black Folk' in *The Crisis* magazine that 'Williams and Walker lifted minstrelsy by sheer force of genius into the beginning of a new drama (DuBois, 169).

Williams, perhaps more than anyone before him, brought an African American theatrical character to the stage. His, along with George Walker's, initial task was to 'eradicate the 'darky' image without losing the value (and values) of the culture' (Ndounou, 78). However, although they were attempting to change the characters that were being depicted on stage there was a greater battle being fought over the ideology and concepts of African American theatre. Two men in particular would dominate this debate, both arguing for an African American art form, yet both with differing artistic philosophies and beliefs of the requirements of theatre. This aspect of the African American theatre will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 7: Locke and Du Bois

Introduction

The Little Theatre movement that swept through the American mainstream and revolutionised the concept of theatre was to have an enormous impact on theatre outside the mainstream. The African American theatre was one which specialised in musicals and vaudeville. By the 1910's jazz music had entered both the clubs and homes of many American citizens and Bert Williams' 'cakewalk' dance craze was already in vogue. However, other than the brief forays into minstrel theatre, African Americans had little impact on the serious dramatic front. There were precious few theatres that would have had the capacity, or indeed an audience within African American communities, for the drama that was being staged on the Great White Way. Indeed, Pinero, Wilde, even Ibsen were writing plays that, on the face of it, had little to say regarding the African American population, or anyone for that matter that existed outside the cosy middleclass cartel. However, there were lessons and examples from the Little Theatre Movement that were relevant to the furthering of African American theatre.

This chapter will look at the first tentative steps that the African American community made on the dramatic rather than vaudeville stage. Like the Irish theatre that was dominated by personalities that wished to create theatre for reasons both artistic and propagandistic the African American theatre would be all encompassing in their approach. Despite this seeming holistic approach to their drama there were two opposing opinions held by two leaders of the African American community that was to have an impact, not only on the stage but on playwrights and themes written by African American authors. I am going to focus on the two African American social, political philosophical and artistic heavyweights, Alain Locke and

W.E.B. DuBois, both of whom led the debate on African America theatre, what it is and, most importantly, what it should be. Taking this approach is to the disadvantage of the numerous theatres and theatrical pioneers that sprang up around the country, Bob Cole's Worth Model Museum that housed the Negro Stock Theatre on 6th Avenue and 30th Street in New York which was, perhaps, the first theatre where African American performers were able to gain 'anything approaching dramatic training and experience on the strictly professional stage (Berresford 41), or Robert T. Motts' famed Pekin Theatre in Chicago, which was the first step that many later African American actors took on the stage (Charles Gilpin among them), not to mention the numerous vaudeville theatres that entertained the masses in many of the large cities throughout the United States. However, these two individuals were to define the African American theatre experience more than any other. The artistic approaches that the two men undertook would be at odds with each other and the enmity that lingered between the two men would be brought to a head by their approaches to drama and the worth that they instilled on stage productions. Locke and DuBois, two leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, two men that eloquently verbalised African American socio-political ideologies and New Negro philosophies, two men that were staunch members of DuBois's theorised talented tenth,⁴⁹

⁴⁹ DuBois wrote an influential essay entitled 'The Talented Tenth' which he published in September 1903. It appeared in *The Negro Problem* a collection of essays written by leading African American. In it he stated 'The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth' (Provenzo 76).

would be frustrated by each other in their attempts to forge a theatrical identity for the African American.

The New Same

The beginning of the twentieth century seemed to deal with the African American presence on the stage in much the same way as they always had been dealt with. The African American's place in society was brought to the stage by the Rev. Thomas Dixon in 1905 in his play *The Clansman* that was staged at the Amsterdam Theatre in New York. The play focuses on the agitation and animosity that existed between the black and white populations during the Reconstruction era and was a vehicle to reinforce opposition to the black communities (Johnson 186). Indeed, many of the plays that were staged by white companies that attempted to depict African Americans were merely pieces of propaganda that lampooned and insulted the African American communities in equal measure. Plays dealing with the question of the taint of black blood in an outwardly white body were staged, aimed at a white audience and cast wholly by white actors. These plays almost fit into the Little Theatre movement's concepts of making theatre relevant, making it new and making it home-grown. However, the plays were written in a melodramatic style and were, in truth, looking back to a time before the civil war when life was simple and everybody knew their place.

In 1909 Edward Sheldon staged a play he wrote called *The Nigger*⁵⁰ which the papers reported had none of the racial prejudice, none of the 'large, natural endowment of malignancy' that

⁵⁰ made into the 1915 motion picture of the same name (aka *The New Governor*)

was evident in many of the plays and texts produced at the time (Isaacs 43). The hero of the play, Philip Morrow, was a Southern Politician who had been elected to 'keep the niggers [sic] in their place' but who, when confronted by the violence of race riots came to the realisation that his goal should be the prohibition of liquor (ibid 43). His cousin, a distiller, tells Morrow that his grandmother was a quadroon (one quarter African American) and he would make this common knowledge, ruining Morrow, if he did not desist from this path (ibid 43). Morrow retires and dedicates his life to the betterment of the African American community (ibid 43). However, the play, although having African American characters in it, did not cast any black actors for the parts. At the time there was no law banning the African Americans from the theatre, however, there a tradition that was enforced as rigidly as if it were a law meant that the theatre was a space to be occupied by white America (ibid 43). This tradition effectively hindered any aspiring actor or playwright from gaining essential experience in professional theatres. The play also points towards a future war on alcohol with Prohibition becoming law on January 16, 1920, when the Eighteenth Amendment went into effect. The play therefore dealt with two issues that were at the forefront of American minds at the beginning of the twentieth century but did not resolve either of them satisfactorily.

Something this way comes

The beginnings of the African American dramatic stage presence, rather than vaudeville or minstrelsy, was to be realised, not by African American authors, but by white playwrights attempting to uncover America's peasant society. The 1910 census of the United States listed over 100,000 Negroes in New York alone but only 1,278 Negroes engaged across the country as actors in the entertainments profession. Most of these lived and worked outside New York (Hill & Hatch 213). Indeed, as was pointed out in previous chapters, many of these actors would have been employed in dance or minstrelsy groups. The black American actor was

allowed to spread his dramatic wings through *The Emperor Jones* that brought a newfound complexity to African American character and took this role all the way to Broadway. However, seven years after the 1910 census and three years before *The Emperor Jones* was staged, a white playwright and poet, Ridgley Torrence, produced *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre* which was staged for the first time on 5th April 1917. Weldon Johnson called the premier of these plays ‘the most important single event in the entire history of the Negro in the American theatre’ (Gates Jr. & McKay 995). These three plays, *Granny Maumee*, *The Rider of Dreams* and *Simon the Cyrenian*, tackle many issues that were either neglected or ignored by members of the theatrical community, and the wider population up to this point. *Granny Maumee* depicts a conjuring woman plotting the death of a man who had lynched her son, in *The Rider of Dreams* an out of work man steals money from his wife, and in *Simon the Cyrenian* a black man helps Jesus carry his cross to Golgotha (Hill & Hatch 213).

The plays were performed by black actors and all the actors played the characters with African American dialects. The noted theatre critic George Jean Nathan, a member of the American Theater Hall of Fame, praised the acting and named Opal Cooper and Inez Clough among the top ten performers of the year (ibid 213). The *New York Post* also marked the importance of the event, and the possible advancements that theatre could make as it reported

The beginnings of something like a folk theatre, entirely domestic if not altogether national, and of an indisputable, if as yet incalculable, racial significance. Should it persist ... it will be doing better work in better plays. It might even rival the achievement of the Abbey Theatre of Dublin, which had a less propitious start (Hatch & Shine 214).

From the start of the move towards incorporating the African American experience into mainstream art the practitioners, critics and journalists all recognized a link between the Irish Players and the American Little Theatre movement, and thus between the Abbey Theatre and the nascent African American theatre. The theatre was ‘art’ theatre rather than commercial theatre, the expansion into the realms of African American life was, in essence, inviting people

to recognize the wrongs that had been meted out to the African American population. If the theatre is to be a sounding board for the mores and folkways of a society, if the stage is the setting for the exploration of a country's soul, then placing a 'real' African American on that stage, stripping them of their comedy and supposed innate gaiety forced a society to accept its role in the nation's history.

The fate of the plays seemed to be assured after a successful ten day run in New York, however, the production moved to Garrick on the 5th of April 1917, the eve of America's entry into the World War. The plays ran for several more weeks before the pressure of the war crushed the enterprise (Weldon Johnson 179). The actors that played the roles in the three plays were from a background of minstrelsy, vaudeville and dance shows. That is all but Opal Cooper, who had never graced the boards before as an actor; his only experience prior to his role in *The Rider of Dreams* was as an entertainer in a night club (Weldon Johnson 178). As with Charles Gilpin, some of the cast had worked with Walker and Williams before and others had worked for the Lafayette Players.

The plays were shown in the Garden Theatre in Madison Square Garden, New York and through their empathetic story and sensitive acting 'the stereotypes traditions regarding the Negro's histrionic limitations were smashed' (Johnson 175). This was the first time anywhere in the United States that African American actors were to command the serious attention of the critics, press and general public (ibid 175). Torrence infused the plays with African American dialect and presumed African American social issues. His use of dialect was, in ways, based on his experiences of seeing the Irish Players during their American tour. He had seen the Irish tour in 1911 and as he explained in 1917, 'The parallel ... with the Irish race and its national drama, made a deep impression on me. I wanted to make the experiment, and try

to contribute something, if I could, to a possible Negro drama, as vital and charming as the Irish' (Mishkin 14).

Torrence's depiction of the African American broke completely with the crude stereotypes that dominated the American theatres. The plays' initial success brought African Americans to the theatre to see 'real' African Americans on the stage, rather than the usual depictions of buffoonery and spoonerisms that was their lot on stage (Isaacs 60). The play also showed that the African American artistic community could appreciate the work of a white artist and recognize the contribution that a white author could make to their literary traditions (ibid 60). It also showed that the time was ripe to put the African American experience on stage and that, if it was done faithfully and poetically, both the black and white communities would support the art. This endeavor would be the launch pad, not only for other white authors, like Eugene O'Neill, to look towards the African American population for their inspirations, but also for African American artists to take ownership of their theatrical representations. Carl Van Vechten stated that he hoped the plays would not be forgotten and they were 'as important an event in our [American] theatre as the production of the first play of Synge was to the Irish movement' (ibid 15).

New World, Same Problem

That the Irish and African American peoples were so easily set side by side is something that historically may seem unlikely. The Irish and the African American people often found themselves at odds with each other. During the 1880's, a mere thirty years before the arrival of the Irish Players to America, Irish and African Americans clashed over jobs, housing and voting rights in Philadelphia, Memphis, New York and Chicago (Naylor 142). However, there has always been an undercurrent of understanding and empathy between the two people. In 1829, the same year that the Irish Catholics were emancipated, they formed the Dublin (later

Hibernian) Negro's Friend Society which attracted a lot of support in Dublin and Cork (Kinealy 38). Despite their differences both people had a long history of persecution and colonialism – Ireland, it could be argued, was the first modern colony. Is there any wonder that the Irish people entering the 20th century under English rule, a rule that had been in effect since the 11th century should have similar issues of race, language, ownership and agency that the newly liberated African American community was experiencing? Here we see the benefit of the strong poet in a time of flux, molding the language to new and fresh meanings, creating new circles of reference for language and new collision points for meeting and disengaging with a dominant culture.

Just as the world was shrinking in size, just as weapons of destruction on a scale heretofore unimaginable were being developed, indeed just as the world, for the first time, was able to go to war across every continent, the Irish and African American communities were looking in at themselves, trying to negotiate a path to a culture they could call their own. The plays that were staged by the Abbey theatre, even those, perhaps especially those, that caused riots and confusion were the communal events that allowed the Irish to garner some concept of who they were. Be they a baker in Camden street Dublin, an MP representing their people in Westminster or a farmer eeking a living in Dromahaire, the plays were attempting to tell the Irish people who they were and what was possible. In much the same way the Little Theatre movement was attempting to negotiate a path from rural to urban, from isolationist to global power, from white to multi-racial. The plays that they staged, be it Greek tragedy (in the original Greek), new avant-garde theatre that explored the space on the stage or small domestic plays that explored issues that were of relevance to households rather than nations, had as their goal the creation of American theatre. This, more than anything was the reason Weldon Johnson hailed the coming of the *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre*. For the first time the African American community would be able to examine their culture on the same footing as

their white counterparts. However, the means and ends of this theatre would be contested and debated by many of the artistic stars within the African American community.

New Negro, New Drama

W. E. B. DuBois defined African American theatre as a theatre about us, by us, for us, and near us, meaning in that last requirement that the theatre should be located in the black community (Hill 29). In this he echoes the ideals behind the Irish theatre that J.M. Synge claimed that the theatre's writers 'will appeal to that limited public which gives understanding and not to that unlimited public which gives wealth ... because the intellect of Ireland is romantic and spiritual, rather than scientific and analytical' (Synge 1988 54). It also builds on the ideals of the Irish theatre that the African American community must 'look around and recognize that what is unique to them is part of a universal transformation in which cultural evolution is becoming conscious (Flannery 65). Indeed, the Irish National Theatre was formed to ensure that Ireland would not suffer from the lack of 'no national institutions to reverence, no national success to admire without a model of it in the mind of the people' (ibid 66). DuBois was looking to create a space that was self-sustaining, and most importantly self-actualising. He was also going to have to learn from the Little Theatre Movement and set about creating an interested and engaged black audience.

African American audiences were, during the early twentieth century, just beginning to encounter dramatic theatre due to the traditions of it being the realm of white America. In 1915 the Anita Bush Stock Company, later renamed the Lafayette Players, was established. This group has been identified as 'the first major professional Black dramatic company in America' (Shandell 107). The Lafayette Players staged, alongside their usual fair of musical and vaudeville acts, a season of opera, perhaps nourishing the need that began during the African Grove Theatre's operatic productions. They also ran productions such as *Madame X*,

Paid in Full, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, yet although these were met with initial success, the audiences soon craved the musicals, melodramas and comedies that were their usual fair (Isaacs 44). For a time the Lafayette Theatre was making enough money and briefly established theatres in Washington D.C. and Chicago (Shandell 107) as well as putting some of their shows on tour, traveling to the African American Howard theatre in Washington D.C. and the Dunbar Theatre in Philadelphia, however, as the money dried up so too did the tours (Isaacs 45). There were many people that wished for African American drama to succeed, and there were African American owned and operated theatres in cities including New York, Chicago, New Orleans, Jackson, Memphis, Washington, Atlanta and Jacksonville yet all these theatres seemed to devote their time to imitating the white theatre of the day, which meant musicals and melodrama (ibid 45). There seemed to be no outlet for the African American playwright to delve into the communities which they originated from and explore the issues that they discovered there on stage. This almost Malthusian boom-bust theatre, flush one year and broke the next, depending on the fickleness of the audience and the plays that were produced, led to an inconsistent and worrying lack of both revenue and knowledge of their audience.

There was also a debate within the African American community as to the purpose of theatre. In his essay 'The Gift of Laughter' in Alain Locke's seminal work *The New Negro*, Jessie Fauset wrote, 'All about him and within himself stalks the conviction that like the Irish ... he has some peculiar offering which shall contain the very essence of the drama' (Fauset 161). Montgomery Gregory, in his essay 'The Drama of Negro Life', quotes Eugene O'Neill: 'I believe as strongly as you do that the gifts the Negro can – and will – bring to our native drama are invaluable ones. The possibilities are limitless and to a dramatist open up new and intriguing opportunities' (Gregory 153). It is obvious that across the racial divide there was an earnestness with which these men believed that the African American community not only

needed theatre, but desperately needed the type of theatre that DuBois yearned to introduce. Alain Locke, in his essay 'Negro Youth Speaks' in *The New Negro*, states that 'the fine collaboration of white American artists ... the work of Ridgley Torrence and Eugene O'Neill in drama ... helped in the bringing of the materials of Negro life out of the shambles of conventional polemics, cheap romance ... into the domain of pure and unbiased art' (Locke 48). Locke, although seeming to be in accord with DuBois on the need for African American theatre, is missing one of the crucial aspects of DuBois' beliefs. Locke advocates the ideas of a theatre about us, for us, and near us but seems to expand the concept of by us. Locke praises white authors, stating that through them the African American theatre has achieved a 'pure and unbiased art' (ibid 48). Without creative control the white man was still in control of the African American tropes and stereotypes. Black playwrights would be needed, if one supports DuBois, to break the stranglehold that the white community had on theatre and bring a reality to the stage that would be outside the knowledge and ability of white American artists.

In his hugely important essay "Criteria of Negro Art" DuBois lays out his concept of what an African American theatre would look like. He argues

all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent (DuBois 'Criteria' 295).

The message to the artist could not be clearer, art is only good art if it is used to further the advancement of the African American cause. DuBois states: 'suppose the only Negro who survived some centuries hence was the Negro painted by white Americans in the novels and essays they have written. What would people in a hundred years say of black Americans?' (DuBois Criteria 294). Like the Irish, like many of the minorities that were attempting to create an artistic space for themselves in which they could examine their culture through the lens of their own experiences, DuBois needed the black community to unite, to coalesce and

mould itself into an aspect that is truly representative of their culture. Just as Yeats drew inspiration from Celtic mythology, just as Synge gained an insight into the Irish psyche through his mingling with the peasant class, just as the actors that were cast were average people playing the role of actors rather than actors playing the role of the common people, DuBois wanted black Americans to be the African Americans that are on stage rather than merely stage African Americans.

The African American theatre needed to encapsulate some of the Irish theatre's agenda if they were to be freed from their theatrical representations. The Irish theatre project occurred at a time of revival in the concept of 'Irishness', indeed the use of folk culture and Irish dialect was created to counteract the depictions of the Irish buffoon that populated the stages of Britain and America at the time (Mishkin 12). This was a tag that the African American communities were all too used to experiencing in America, and, at times, the two races were depicted together as equals in society. The cover of the American publication *Harper's Weekly* dated December 6th 1876 depicts an African American sitting opposite an Irish man, both men are sitting on scales that are perfectly balanced. On the seat of the African American reads 'BLACK' and above him on the arm of the scales reads 'SOUTH'. The Irish man sits on a seat labelled 'WHITE' and above him the arm reads 'NORTH' (Mishkin 13). This brings the issues that both races experienced in America to a vivid point. The Irish and the African American communities were regarded as two sides of the same coin, both ne'er do well's that did not seem to fit in to the American dream. DuBois was adamant that any attempt at creating art to represent this demonised people should begin with the concept of elevating the culture and claiming an exclusive place for it in both black communities and mainstream America.

To this end DuBois, in 1911, wrote a historical pageant called *The Star of Ethiopia* which was not staged until the 22nd October 1913 when it opened at the Twelfth Regiment Armoury in

New York (DuBois 'The Drama' 169). This pageant caused immediate controversy by its portrayal of an African American history that countered the accepted history by white America (Krasner 106). In the pageant DuBois sought to place the African American experience in America as one that formed the nation every bit as much as the white man. Slavery in the pageant was shown as a representation of how resilient the African American was, and throughout black history was lauded and painted in a positive light (ibid 108). This pageant was also an introduction to DuBois's concept of 'a black aesthetic ... [and] ... his vision of a didactic folk theatre' (ibid 109). It is interesting to note, however, that he called his pageant *The Star of Ethiopia*. Just as the Irish did, DuBois seems to have reached back in time and bring a history that had long since passed to a modern audience. The pageant's name seems to skip slavery, ignoring the manner by which many African Americans reached the shores of the United States and draws a direct line from the 1910's to an African nation that, at that time, had still to be conquered by colonial powers. Yeats drew inspiration from Celtic mythology, DuBois seems to do likewise with Africa. The term Celt is an idea rather than a solid concept, a loose term of affiliation rather than a specific nation. DuBois attempts to invert this process by connecting a disparate diaspora to a single concept of place, time and being. Both men are drawing a line under the here and now and claiming the roots and routes of a people that predated the catastrophe that befell both people.

To give an overview of the *The Star of Ethiopia*, it consisted of a prologue and five scenes in thirteen episodes: Scene 1 – The Gift of Iron; Scene 2 – The Dream of Egypt; Scene 3 – The Glory of Ethiopia; Scene 4 – The Valley of Humiliation; Scene 5 - The Vision Everlasting (ibid 109). The pageant encompassed music, dance, re-enactments of African history, the middle passage journey – that hellish voyage between Africa and America where many Africans met their doom – slavery, the joy of emancipation and the work that was carried out by African Americans during the Reconstruction era (Krasner 109). Despite financial

difficulties and the extraordinary logistics of the show (there were over 1,000 participants in the pageant) it was hailed as a great success by DuBois (ibid 109). He intended that the pageant may 'get people interested in this development of Negro drama to teach on the one hand the colored [sic] people themselves the meaning of their history and their rich, emotional life through a new theatre, and on the other, to reveal the Negro to the white world as a human, feeling thing' (DuBois 'The Drama' 171). Just as *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was used as a didactic tale exemplifying Irish nationalism to the nation, *The Star of Ethiopia* was carrying out the same service for the African Americans. Just as *Riders to the Sea* pulled back the veil on a seemingly stoic Irish peasantry, so too *The Star of Ethiopia* humanised a population that, to that point, had been depicted as possessing only the crudest grasp of their social and historic antecedents.

DuBois's attempts to instil a vigour among the African American artistic population even predates the 1913 pageant. In his 1903 publication *The Souls of Black Folk* DuBois states that 'the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color[sic]-line' (DuBois *Souls* 4). DuBois was not simply making a statement, he was setting himself an agenda. He was not merely giving lip service to the ideas of racial struggles in America and, along with others like Ida Bell Wells-Barnett (Britannica Wells-Barnett), an African American journalist that was born into slavery and led a journalistic anti-lynching campaign, the white race equality advocate Mary White Ovington (Britannica, Ovington), DuBois set about raising awareness of race issues through the establishment of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in 1909. This organization attempted to raise awareness of and advocate against any and all forms of racial discrimination. The year after its foundation DuBois and some associates, in an attempt to further the aims and audience of the organisation, began to publish a journal that was to give voice to the African American community. In 1910 *The Crisis* became the official magazine of the NAACP. Due

to its importance and the excellence of its production *The Crisis* is still in publication today.

Its current website states

Published by The Crisis Publishing Company, Inc.- a for-profit enterprise that is legally separate from the NAACP, *The Crisis* is a quarterly journal of civil rights, history, politics, and culture and seeks to educate and challenge its readers about issues that continue to plague African Americans and other communities of color [sic] (*The Crisis*).

The Crisis also played an important role in promoting the art of the African American community. Indeed, the poet, social activist, novelist, playwright, and columnist Langston Hughes was first published in the journal. His poem 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' was his first publication and it appeared in the June 1921 edition (Johnson & Johnson 43). DuBois was interested in building a stock of artists, playwrights, poets and novelists that would both represent and be representative of a thriving and diverse African American art scene. His love of theatre was never dulled and due to the popularity of *The Star of Ethiopia*, despite its lack of commercial success, DuBois ran a drama competition through *The Crisis* which asked playwrights to send in their plays to the journal with the winner having their play published.

Locke and Key

Alain Locke, DuBois' contemporary and rival for leader of the Harlem Renaissance, desired the same ends for African American artists and drama but thought that art could and indeed should be allowed to express both group mentality and individual inspiration. Locke made the connection between the drama that the African American communities were creating and the Irish theatre directly when he stated 'Harlem has the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland' (Locke 'New Negro' 7). Placing the aspirations of black drama so closely with that of the Irish Players allows for a direct link between the two. Obviously, Locke was a fan of Irish theatre. It was the Irish tour in 1911/12 that encouraged American theatre to provide a space for African American theatre, where actors and lives to

be the basis of a play. It was Locke, along with his friend Jean Toomer that labelled Southern blacks as 'peasants', thereby infusing the idea of Southern blacks with all the pathos, naivety and gravitas that Synge poured into his Irish peasants (Hill & Hatch 216). Just as the people that populated the lowest rung in Ireland's ladder was where The Abbey playwrights may find meaning, culture and life, so too the southern black would symbolise the African American experience, perhaps more so than the jazz urbanite that populated the pages of McKay's *Banjo* or the protagonist in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.

Locke, in his essay 'Step Towards the Negro Theatre' published in *The Crisis* in December 1922 claims that 'it is the inauguration of the Negro art drama which is the vital matter, and the honor divides between ... DuBois, with his 'Star of Ethiopia' ... and Ridgley Torrence with his 'Three Plays for a Negro Theatre' (Locke 'Step' 67). Locke, unlike DuBois, advocates art that endeavors to raise the bar of African American drama regardless of who writes it. This flies in the face of DuBois' mantra 'about us, by us, for us, and near us' but that the two men's end goals were aligned is, with the benefit of hindsight, plain. James Weldon Johnson advised that black drama and literature should express a 'racial spirit' similar to what John Millington Synge 'did for the Irish' (Krasner 'Negro Drama' 59). Indeed, Montgomery Gregory, artistic director of the Howard University's theatre program along with Locke, wrote in *The New Negro* that the 'ideal is a National Negro Theatre where the Negro playwright, musician, actor, dancer and artist in concert shall fashion a drama that will merit the respect and admiration of America' (ibid 59). In this statement we can see the crux of the issue that resided between DuBois and Locke. Locke and Gregory were advocating artistic development that would be respected as a work of art. The creation, be it on canvas, on the page or on the stage would be able to speak for itself and be recognised as a successful piece of art. There was no need for propaganda art on this stage; it was art for art's sake rather than art with a message. Gregory continued, 'The only avenue of genuine achievement in American drama

for the Negro lies in the development of the rich vein of folk-tradition of the past and in the portrayal of the authentic life of the Negro masses to-day'. DuBois could only agree with the sentiments expressed here, there was indeed a unique path open to the African American artist, one that only they could fully exploit for artistic means if there was to be any aspirations towards authenticity.

Just as Synge lived among the peasants on Inis Meáin to reconnect with an Ireland that remained relatively untouched by the rigours of modernity, so too African Americans could probe into their American past and create an art that was both universal and unique to them. Perhaps the closest any African American author came to Synge's Island odyssey was Jean Toomer, the author of the seminal novel *Cane*, who left his home in Washington and took employment in Georgia in an effort to experience the culture and the life of the African American in the South. Toomer stated that 'a visit to Georgia last fall was the starting point of almost everything of worth I have done' (Scruggs & Van Denmarr 9). It has been said that Toomer's 'answer to the quest for Negro identity was to find one's roots in the homeland, the South, and to claim it as one's own' (Lemke 111). Seeing the life of rural blacks, accompanied by racial segregation and virtual labor peonage in the Deep South, led Toomer, a person of mixed race parentage, to identify more strongly with his African American roots. However, despite the enormous success of *Cane*, it is the genius of Toomer that is celebrated today. Toomer, a man of mixed race who chose to be associated with his African American antecedents, created a magnificent work of art that expressed his own sensitivity rather than that of the African American community, but through his novel the stock of the African American artist could only be enhanced. It could easily be argued that just as Yeats made Synge his protégé and encouraged him in his artistic endeavours, so too Locke nurtured Toomer's creativity.

Locke and Toomer designated the black population of the south ‘peasants’, untouched by urban commercialism (Hatch 216). The Harlem Renaissance, and in particular the black Little Theatre Movement, just like the Abbey Theatre, although using the peasant as a vehicle for social criticism and racial exploration, was led by an elite intelligentsia. Indeed, on both sides of the Atlantic the theatre was the play thing of ‘the talented tenth’. Yeats, Lady Gregory, Synge, Robinson, A.E. Russel and Shaw were for Ireland what DuBois, Locke, Weldon Johnson, Richardson⁵¹ and Hughes. Indeed, Willis Richardson, more than any was an impassioned advocate of the desperate need for African American authors to capture their society on stage. In 1919 his essay ‘Hope of the Negro Drama’, published in *The Crisis* he advocated that plays about African Americans should be penned by African American authors: ‘I do not mean merely plays with Negro characters ... There is another kind of play – the play that shows the soul of a people, and the soul of this people is truly worth showing’ (Hatch 216/7). Locke received support from many within the white theatre who supported the concept of black authors writing plays about the black community. Max Reinhardt, the manager of the *Deutsches Theater* ("German Theatre") in Berlin from 1905 – 1930 whilst speaking about Locke’s Art-Theatre asserted that African Americans should not look to ‘the drama of the past, to the European drama’ and that if there was to be an American drama then it would

⁵¹ Willis Richardson, a playwright whose experience in theatre began with a correspondence course in drama he took in 1916 and his attendance at Angelina Emily Grimké’s play *Rachel* in the same year (Gray xvi). He, like Hughes, was first published in *The Crisis* in 1919 and had his first play published in the same journal in November 1920 (for further information on Richardson see Christine Rauchfuss Gray’s *Willis Richardson, Forgotten Pioneer of African-American Drama*).

be an African American drama (Gray 38). He told Locke to ‘be original – sense the folk spirit, develop ... the folk-idiom’ (ibid 38). Eugene O’Neill had this to say about the state of African American play writing in 1925:

I have read a good number of plays written by Negroes and they were always *bad* plays ... *unoriginal – and what revolted me the most, bad imitations in method and thought of conventional white plays!* ...Be yourselves! Don’t reach out to *our* stuff which *we* call good! Make your own stuff and your good (ibid 38).

This attack on the African American playwright chimed exactly with what both Locke and DuBois were attempting to create. In their own ways both men were creating a foundation of authors and establishing a larder of theatrical ingredients that were necessary for the development of the black drama. Locke said the playwright should write about what they know, DuBois argued that they should write Protest-Plays but staged in a reality that all African Americans would instantly recognize. O’Neill seems to have hit the proverbial nail on the head when he lamented that black authors imitated white authors rather than devise a new and esoteric creativity.

Despite the two men agreeing on the need for African American theatre, whether it was for art or propaganda, the two men needed to instil within the African American community the need to produce and stage plays that could speak for the population. To this end DuBois’s *The Crisis* and another African American magazine, *Opportunity*, edited by Charles S. Johnson established literary contests with cash awards (ibid 218). It was with these contests that DuBois was able to articulate most fully the type of play that he deemed necessary for the enhancement of the African American community. In *Crisis* DuBois argued

If a man writes a play and a good play ... he may sell it commercially to some producer on Broadway, but in that case it would not be a Negro play, or if it is a Negro play it will not be about the kind of Negro you and I know or want to know. If it is a Negro play that will interest us and depict our life, experiences, and humor [sic], it can not [sic] be sold to the ordinary theatrical producer, but it can be produced in our churches and lodges and halls (DuBois ‘Pay’ 7)

Here, perhaps more than anywhere else, DuBois lays out his vision for the African American drama. The drama is for the African American community, it must speak for and to the African American community and must not stray from that reality in an attempt to create a wider audience. The vision here, it could be argued, is reductive, however, theatre, as was discussed in Chapter 5, needs to create an audience before it can be successful. The idea of staging the plays in lodges, churches, halls and, although not stated here, libraries, allowed the organic creation of a theatre-going public. If the audience would not come to the stage, the stage would come to the audience. DuBois was manufacturing, not only a foundation for future African American drama production, but creating a public that would be *au fait* with theatre. Drama would be staged in the buildings that were already at the centre of the African American communities. Once the population acclimatised to this brand of theatre it would be only a matter of time before more people would be able and willing to author, act in and support future theatrical productions. Unlike the 'art for art's sake' take on drama that was supported by Locke, this theatre was more akin to that of Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed' than European avant garde theatre. André Antoine's aforementioned Theatre Libre would stage plays for the people, taking it out of the theatres and bringing new, fresh and non-commercial concepts to the audience, DuBois would take simple plays, plays that could resonate with the population to them in an attempt to spark both pride and recognition.

Charles S. Johnson's Opportunity, perhaps to counteract the racial divide that DuBois' theatre seemed to insinuate hoped that

The Opportunity competition would elicit dramas which would further the movement for racial harmony. The plays were to be written by black dramatists, but these works were to affect white racial opinions. Johnson sought the approval of influential whites and, therefore, assembled play panels which were predominantly white (Hatch 218).

It is obvious how the two drama movements were indeed moving away from each other in their attempt to create a new and exciting African American playwright. Johnson, like Locke,

wished for African American playwrights to break through the colour line, to emancipate the African American artist from the community and let him stand as an equal with any white counterpart. You can see how Torrence, O'Neill et al. would fit snugly into Johnson's vision. Yes, they were white playwrights but their plays furthered the development of the African American drama. Under this guidance black playwrights were given a licence to write universal plays, plays that could well be situated anytime and anywhere and be cast by any race. The differing visions could not be any more at odds, even if they both desired the same end.

Locke, along with Montgomery Gregory, cultivated the drama students of Howard University in Washington D.C. into playwrights that would be representative of art rather than African America (Colbert 88)⁵². It was through the accredited Drama classes that were run by Professor Gregory that many of the early female African American playwrights got their initial training in the craft (ibid 88). Once the students had graduated DuBois' and Johnson's magazines would allow them to bring their work to the masses through the publication of prize winning plays. The playwright's Zora Neale Hurston, author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Eulalie Spence, the most well-known of the female playwrights during the Harlem Renaissance, author of many plays and member of DuBois' theatre KRIGWA, and Marita Bonner all studied under Gregory in Howard University. Locke and Gregory were hoping to,

⁵² Washington D.C. became the second hub of artistic undertakings when Georgia Douglas Johnson, a retired teacher and wife of the African American attorney Henry Lincoln Johnson opened up her home to black artists after the death of her husband in 1925. Her house on 1461 S Street became the home of the S Street Salon where the major artists of the day visited and discussed their current and future projects. It was the scene for many of the first readings of dramas written by Johnson, Grimké, Richardson etc. (Colbert 89).

and for the most part succeeded in, assembling a group of artists who would focus on folk plays and folk traditions. They were so successful that as the Harlem Renaissance was still in its nascence there was already a booming theatrical scene in Washington D.C. In many ways the D.C. emphasis was more in line with the Abbey Theatre as it still was rooted in the rural folk within the African American community rather than the urbanite that would come to the fore in Harlem. By keeping the art based in folk life the African American drama in D.C. could follow more closely in the footsteps of the Abbey Theatre, composing plays that came closest to depicting the Southern black as a ‘peasant’. Indeed, many of the playwrights of the Harlem Renaissance were keen to highlight the significance of the culture in the American south as an important font of inspiration as there, just like the peasant culture in Ireland is where mores and taboos collide and politics resides in every action and sentence (ibid 89).

The division between Locke and DuBois came to a head in 1916 when one of DuBois acquaintances, Archibald Grimké, invited Locke⁵³ to help judge one of the play writing contests which was sponsored by the Committee on the Drama of the Washington D.C. branch of the NAACP organisation (Hay 80). Initially Locke did not wish to be involved, however, after learning that the winning play was going to be staged rather than just published he reconsidered (ibid 80). Indeed, he recognised the importance of the NAACP becoming theatre producers. With their finances and social importance among the African American community Locke recognised that they could kick start the African American theatre that he wished would be established. His goal, once he joined the panel, was to lobby the ‘theatre for

⁵³ Locke was joined on the panel by his friend and Howard University director of Drama Montgomery Gregory (Hay 81).

propaganda' element of the NAACP to, rather than pick a propaganda play, select an 'artistic' play that could stand on its own merits. However, on the play selection night Locke and Gregory found that they were unable to persuade the majority of the panel to select a non-protest play. Locke tried, in vain, to get the selection of a play postponed so as he could have a little more time to lobby for a change in policy (ibid 81). Having failed that he attempted to have the group officially recognise 'the idea of the Negro theatre, as distinguished from the idea of race drama' (Locke 1969 67). In the end, having not convinced his colleagues of any of his artistic views he left the meeting stating of the protest play: 'One play no more makes a theatre than one swallow a summer' (Hay 81). The committee choose a protest play called *Rachel* authored by Archibald Grimké's daughter Angelina Weld Grimké and Locke immediately wrote a letter of resignation (Hay 81).

Rachel's Song

Rachel, was to be the first play ever to be staged that was written, performed and produced by a black theatre (Perkins 8). The play was billed as a 'race play in three acts' (ibid 8) and on the playbill was advertised as

The first attempt to use the stage for race propaganda in order to enlighten the American people relative to the lamentable condition of ten million of colored [sic] citizens in this free Republic (ibid 8)

The play deals with the psychological impact that racism has on the lives of African Americans. The Lovings, a black family that migrated from the south to escape racism and reside in New York find that conditions there are almost as unbearable as those they fled (ibid 8). The play confronts the practice of lynchings, the lack of economic opportunities for the black community and the harsh treatment that African American children suffer from their white counterparts. Rachel, the main protagonist, is left in a state of such disgust that she vows never to marry nor conceive (ibid 8). The play is important for more than just being the dove

sent out to look for dry land on which the black community could establish a serious theatrical tradition. It was to be the first play that established the concept that DuBois yearned for. The play was a piece of propaganda that allowed African Americans to legitimately point out the injustices visited upon them in a way that could also make the audience proud of the production and performance. The community could be both outwardly vocal whilst coalescing behind one banner, one voice and one performance.

The play, in stark contrast to O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, shifts the source of violence and social upheaval from the African American community and protagonists to the white American community. The continuing horror of systemic violence against the African American community is laid bare on the stage in a most terrible manner. Mrs. Loving, an elderly woman tells her children 'Ten years ago today your father and half-brother died' (Grimké 22), 'They they were lynched!! Yes by Christian people in a Christian land. We found out afterwards they were all church members in good standing the best people (ibid 23). Grimké has Mrs. Loving explain how

one night ten years ago a mob made up of the respectable people in the town lynched an innocent black man and what was worse they knew him to be innocent. A white man was guilty. I never saw your father so wrought up over anything ... he ... deliberately and calmly went to work and published a most terrific denunciation of that mob. That night, some dozen masked men came to our house. Your father was finally over powered and dragged out. In the hall my little seven-teen year old George tried to rescue him. It ended in their dragging them both out (Grimké 25).

Gone is the affected speech or the stilted vernacular so prevalent in *The Emperor Jones*. In its place an old woman tells her children, and the world, of the casual evil that can fall on a member of the African American community if they attempt to seek justice. DuBois believed that colour, not language, was the issue and that it was this that needed to be hammered home to the audience. DuBois considered that 'Locke was leading young writers to believe that "all would be well" if they simply "kept quiet" and wrote well. The tragic result of such notions, DuBois concluded, was that these writers let whites off the hook' (Hay 83). Her language is

not necessarily representative of the African American dialect, however, the vocabulary that her characters use challenges the 'final vocabulary' of society. Lynching, rather than an act carried out by hooded men in the Deep South is suddenly transported to a New York theatre. DuBois hoped that the play would 'force whites into the struggle by having them suffer along with the characters through the internal aftermath of the lynching' (Hay 84). The play's protagonist Rachel goes on to state

I am twenty-two and I'm old; you're thirty-two and you're old; Tom's twenty-three and he is old. Ma dear's sixty and she said once she is much older than that. She is. We are all blighted; we are all accursed all of us, everywhere, we whose skins are dark our lives blasted by the white man's prejudice. (Pauses) And my little Jimmy seven years old, that's all is blighted too. In a year or two, at best, he will be made old by suffering. (Pauses). One week ago, today, some white boys, older and larger than my little Jimmy, as he was leaving the school called him "Nigger"! They chased him through the streets calling him, "Nigger! Nigger! Nigger!". One boy threw stones at him. There is still a bruise on his little back where one struck him. That will get well; but they bruised his soul and that will never get well. He asked me what "Nigger" meant I made light of the whole thing, laughed it off. He went to his little playmates, and very naturally asked them. The oldest of them is nine! and they knew, poor little things (Grimké 94).

Rachel is the voice of the 'strong poet' and 'ironist'. Through her retelling of Jimmy's experience she is destroying the social norms of childhood, she is altering the presumptions of innocence and revealing the deep social cleavages that exist in her society. As Rorty claims, 'An ironist hopes that by the time she has finished using old words in new senses, not to mention introducing brand-new words, people will no longer ask questions phrased in the old words' (Rorty 78). In this scene Rachel is polluting childhood with a nightmare vision of fear and loathing, hatred and victimhood. Young children become old when still in childhood, souls bruise more readily than skin – a life lesson is taught to children by children and all is not right in the world.

Angelina Grimké was not only to have an impact on the stage through her own plays, she inspired others to use the play as an opportunity to express pride, doubt or propaganda furthering the black community's cause. Richard Willis possibly entered the M Street School,

later named the Dunbar High School, in Washington D.C. in September 1899⁵⁴ (Gray 10). Angelina Grimké was a teacher in the school and played a key role in developing Richardson's playwriting and poetic skills (ibid 11). It was Grimké's play *Rachel* that would give him the initial interest and inspiration to begin writing plays. She even got Alain Locke to review and critique the first play he wrote (ibid 11). His career would eventually eclipse all others of the era, yet the close knit artistic community, and the support that they gave one another, is revealed from the beginning.

Too many Cooks?

The two major characters in the Harlem Renaissance were W.E.B. DuBois and Alain Locke, and their approaches to theatre could not have been more at odds. DuBois advocated theatre as propaganda, as a method for pointing out injustice, promoting African American culture and bringing a new sense of purpose to the African American theatrical world. In many ways his approach to theatre is an amalgamation of Arthur Griffith and the Fay brothers in Ireland. His use of theatre as a social value system, the need for the promotion of something more than merely art dominates the drama that he oversaw. Locke, one could argue, takes a Synge/Yeats approach to theatre. It is first and foremost art, a vehicle for artistic endeavour and excellence and a play should be valued not through its didactic excellence but, as Henry James would claim of literature, whether it was good art or bad art.

⁵⁴ Willis claims that he entered the school on this date in his autobiography, however, he stated in a 1975 letter to a newspaper editor that he 'enrolled in the M Street School in September 1899'. It seems to be a case of pick a date – any date! (Gray 11)!

DuBois and the supporters of his Protest theatre regarded Locke's call for 'young Negro writers [to] dig deep into the racy peasant undersoil of the race life' underwhelming as it seemed to frustrate the development of Protest theatre (Hay 32). As much as DuBois was attempting to establish a new theatre for the black community that was laced with political and social import Locke was attempting to establish a stage art form that could be called African American. To this end Locke, who once reviled the musicals that continued the derogatory portrayals of African Americans re-evaluated them and called them the 'taproot of his Art-Theatre' (Hay 21). Locke hoped that his Art Theatre would encourage African American playwrights to create art of their choice, be it comedy, satire, musicals or farce. For him his Art-Theatre would have more to offer the stage and 'the flower of the Negro drama [would] probably be the folk play rather than the problem play. It will express beautifully the folk life of the race and beautify its nature' and that it would morph into a 'poetic and somewhat symbolic style of drama that will remind us of Synge and the Irish folk theatre ...' (Gray 50). DuBois feared that the black community were not far enough removed from Noah's portrayal of them in *The Clansman*, the minstrels and many other racist characters that were sketched by white authors to allow anything other than depictions of noble African Americans overcoming the obstacles that were daily placed in front of them (Hay 28). DuBois claimed that the characters in many of Locke's Art Theatre were 'lay figures whose business it was to be funny and sometimes pathetic' (Hay 28).

Locke hoped that his theatre illustrated the 'Binding Relationships' class of drama (Hay 29).

That is, as Locke states,

All classes of people under social pressure are permeated with a common experience; they are emotionally welded as others cannot be ... so in a day when art has run to classes, cliques and coteries, and life lacks more and more a vital common background, the Negro artist ... has to his hand almost the conditions of a classical art (Locke 1997 47)

This description of theatrical representation does not fit in with the Protest theatre ideal. Indeed, Locke does not take the idea of a socially united African American community as a starting point. His concepts seem to infer that, despite the differences within a social group, perhaps even despite the deep social cleavages that may exist, the community will hold together under social pressure regardless of their differences. Just as a seam of carbon can be altered from coal to diamond under enough pressure, so to dramatic jewels can emerge from a community that finds itself segregated and pressurised by the majority. The African American playwright is here asked to write from their own experiences, not to contrive situations that they can then invest with meaning. Locke promoted the concept that authors 'should not make characters into race models or types, but should allow them to be themselves' (Hay 29). This idea attacks the DuBois model directly. Of course protest plays could still emerge, there were plenty of obstacles that the African American had to overcome in their day to day life, however, theatre with a political meaning was not a forethought of the playwright. DuBois' response to this was simple, he predicted that the African American community's traditional enemies would not differentiate between this classic-art representations and simple stereotypes (Hay 29/30).

Sweet Home Chicago

Washington D.C. and New York were not the only cities that established African American theatre. Inevitably Chicago was also one of the centres of theatrical work within the African American community. In 1922/23 Raymond O'Neill, a white artistic director established, with

the sponsorship of Mrs. Sherwood Anderson, the Ethiopian Art Theatre⁵⁵ (Peterson 67). The theatre had connections with Chicago's white All-American Theatre Association and had access to a school and a rehearsal space where the actors were to receive training for one year before they took to the stage (ibid 67). The theatre was founded by 'a group of influential black and white Chicagoans [who] recognized a desire within the black community to develop its cultural institutions further' (Anderson 132). The goals of the theatre were threefold:

1. To 'attempt only those dramatic pieces which have a universal appeal and are as true for the colored [sic] people as for the white and yellow races
2. To 'do all that we can do to encourage both colored [sic] and white in the creation of a Negro dramatic literature'
3. 'if [this] venture succeeds ... to lend its experience to groups in larger Negro cities ... or any that wish to establish similar theatres in their communities' (Peterson 67).

The venture was to be non-commercial and both professional and amateur actors were to be used in productions (ibid 67). O'Neill was chosen as artistic director due to his interest in Craig Gordon⁵⁶, the English actor, director and scenic designer (ibid 67). The theatre presented three plays in its debut, Oscar Wilde's biblical drama *Salome*, Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* and Willis Richardson's *The Chip Woman's Fortune* (ibid 67). DuBois arranged for Richardson's play to be produced by the theatre after O'Neill wrote to him asking if he knew of any plays penned by a black author (Gray 17). *The Chip Woman's Fortune* was

⁵⁵ The Players were formerly Chicago Folk Theatre and latterly the Colored [sic] Folk Theatre (Peterson 67).

⁵⁶ Craig Gordon had collaborated with Yeats and the Abbey Theatre from 1909 – 1912 where he first experimented with a new set design – set screens – that would replace all other sets in the Abbey Theatre (Taxidou 100). Yeats wrote to Gordon claiming that 'Your work is always a great inspiration to me. Indeed I cannot imagine myself writing any play for the stage now, which I did not write for your screens (ibid 100).

one of the plays that was published by DuBois in *The Crisis* in 1922 and was staged, along with the other two plays on 23rd January 1923 in Chicago. The plays *Salome* and *The Comedy of Errors* were not well received, however, *The Chip Woman's Fortune* was received well by the critics (ibid 17). The Ethiopian Art Theatre then took the play to the Howard Theatre in Washington D.C. for a two week run where the attendances grew larger each night (ibid 17). The plays were then staged in the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem before, on May 15th 1923, opening in the Frazee Theatre in New York (ibid 18). This date is of great significance for the black community's drama as it was the first time that a play authored by an African American appeared on Broadway. Despite the magnitude of the event the play closed after a two week run after O'Neill absconded with the profit (ibid 18). Richardson noted that the larceny 'ruined the Ethiopian Art Players; they broke up after that' (ibid 18).

Even though the plays run was cut short the African American drama was becoming a force that must be taken seriously by the population. Richardson's play was so popular and his play writing skills became so well-crafted that Locke and Gregory staged one of his plays on the Howard University stage in 1924. Richardson said that after

The rave notices about my play in New York, Washington and Chicago, Locke and Gregory decided that the powers at Howard University could no longer deny a play of mine a showing on the stage of the university. So in 1924 *Mortgaged* ... was staged for the entertainment of the students and the community (ibid 18)

Indeed Richardson seems to have been able to bridge the gap between Locke and DuBois, both admiring his skill as a playwright.

Crisis Drama

DuBois, unlike Locke, became directly involved with the African American drama when it was decided that the NAACP and *The Crisis* journal should establish a Little Theatre that could stage the Protest Plays that DuBois encouraged. To this end they established the

KRIGWA Players in 1926 in the basement of New York's 135th Street Library in Harlem (Shandell 108). The company was originally known as the CRIGWA players which was an acronym of Crisis Guild of Writers and Artists, taking its name from *The Crisis* journal but changed its name a short time after (Whitmire 61). DuBois wanted to use the basement to stage 'three or four plays in 1926 and from four to six plays in 1927' (ibid 61). The plays that he wished to stage were the award winning plays from *The Crisis* literary competitions (Shandell 108). The company only lasted three years but the impact that the company had on African American theatre, both at the time and long thereafter, is difficult to overestimate. DuBois, on establishing the theatre wrote a manifesto that was published in *The Crisis* magazine setting out the agenda that the KRIGWA Players would follow. The most famous and important passage of this manifesto is the 'four fundamental principles' that a real African American must follow in piecing together its repertoire. These are

The plays of a real Negro theatre must be:

1. "about us." That is, they must have plays which reveal Negro life as it is.
2. "By us." That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continued association just what it means to be a Negro today.
3. "For us." That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval.
4. "Near us." The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro peoples. (DuBois 1996 447).

Perhaps the most important element of the manifesto is the repetition and emphasis on the 'us' throughout the principles. Just as Eugene O'Neill suggested DuBois was determined that an African American drama would be controlled wholly by the black community. Again we can see the differences in the Locke and DuBois philosophy here as Locke was much more open to white playwrights and universal plays, however, DuBois was unconcerned with white theatre until the black community developed a new style, new image and new narrative for itself. The African American on stage, as well as on the street, had to fight against the racism of diminished expectations, in a theatre of their own creation the African American community could create without this weight loaded on their shoulders. DuBois stated that '... some

excellent groups of colored [sic] amateurs are entertaining colored [sic] audiences in Cleveland, in Philadelphia and elsewhere. Almost invariably, however, they miss the real path. They play Shakespeare and Synge or reset a successful Broadway play with colored [sic] principles' (DuBois 1996 447). This passage reveals two important factors. First that the African American communities were engaging with, staging and viewing Abbey theatre plays throughout America, shows the impact that these plays had on the whole spectrum of American theatre. Second it reaffirms the need for a new theatrical culture, a new setting for a new play, but one that was slowly being developed by 1926. Perhaps DuBois' dismay at the continued borrowing of others plays is rooted in the fact that

the demands and ideals of the white group and their conception of Negroes have set the norm for the black actor. He has been a minstrel, comedian, singer and lay figure of all sorts. Only recently has he begun tentatively to emerge as an ordinary human being with everyday reactions (DuBois 1996 446/447).

Indeed, the historian Ethel Pitts Walker asserted that the KRIGWA's philosophy represents a landmark event in using the theatre to 'further ... the spirit of racial pride, giving support to the [black] nationalistic spirit of the Harlem Renaissance' (Shandell 108/109).

That DuBois established his theatre in the basement of a library shares some of the concepts behind the establishment of the Irish National Theatre. The library, just as the initial space occupied by the Irish National Theatre Society, a general purpose space behind a butchers and a shop, provided a space in which a people that had long been denied an understanding and appreciation of their own society, history and culture could explore what it meant to be black. The theatre became a sphere for public discourse, a location that the population were used to going to in their day to day activities before the emergence of the KRIGWA theatre. However, the establishment of the theatre in the library's basement was only allowed due to the active support of the supervising librarian Ernestine Rose and her assistant Regina Anderson, a woman that would go on to perform in some of the productions

(Whitmire 61). Rose's management of the library was also sensitive to the plight of the greater African American community. In an interview with the New York Times in 1925, Rose made the important distinction that 'Although work with the Negro is the outstanding feature of the 135th Street Library, Miss Rose is emphatic in saying that this library is not a "Negro branch." "We are a branch of the New York Public Library," said Miss Rose, "and our clientele is about 95 per cent Negro" (Anderson 2003, 390). She was acutely aware of the needs of the library, and indeed the main clientele. Speaking of the unique needs of the 135th Street library she commented that

The library must gain the interest and support of this social and professional, often wealthy, group before it can hope to become an integral part of Negro life. These people are among our best readers, and the books they read are similar to those of any cosmopolitan reading public (Anderson 389).

Rose immediately attempted to bring the library to the people as within her first five months she hired two black staff members and actively encouraged volunteers from within the African American community (ibid 389). The German social theorist Jurgen Habermas coined the term 'public sphere' to define that discursive space which exists between the private and governmental spheres (Habermas 243). In his discourse these realms were represented by 17th and 18th century coffeehouses which accompanied the development of the bourgeois public. In the early 20th century we might look at the library as an example of a 'black public sphere' (Anderson 409). Rose opened the doors of the library to the whole of the African American community and DuBois exploited this to the benefit of all.

Just as we saw before with the African Grove Theatre, the KRIGWA Players did not have a long lifespan, however, during its existence it debuted plays by Willis Richardson, Eulalie Spence and Georgia Douglas Johnson, among others. Many of the foremost black authors and playwright were first produced, or found their first audience in the basement of the library. It was here that DuBois and the KRIGWA was able to create its audience, ingrain its theatre in

a generation of African Americans that otherwise may never have had access to drama. The legacy of the enterprise can be seen in the establishment of the Negro Experimental Theatre (1929); the Harlem Experimental Theatre (1929-1933); the Harlem Players (1931); and the American Negro Theatre (1940-1949) in the space that KRIGWA occupied and brought drama to the public (Peterson 208).

Conclusion

That the African American theatre would have blossomed onto the American stage regardless of the Irish theatre's tour is not doubted, however, the Irish theatre encouraged American Theatre to investigate and explore the American psyche in a way that drama would not and could not before their arrival. The Americans went in search of their peasant, the unspoiled and unsullied innocents that could be held as a guiding star to the population in general. Just as the Irish theatre discovered, what they unearthed was a mishmash of foibles, strengths, weakness, strength, timidity, anger, innocence and experience that is the lot of all humanity. Just as Yeats, Lady Gregory, Synge et. al. encouraged the amalgamation of dialect and simple acting in an effort to portray something esoteric to Ireland yet universal in scope, Locke and DuBois demanded that the African American set to work sketching dramatic characters that were fit for purpose. That purpose was the diminishing, if not the total annihilation of the horrendous African American stereotypes that populated the American stage. They would never be able to eradicate it from the white stage, but DuBois led a campaign to end this unwanted presence within their own communities.

That Locke and DuBois were at odds with each other regarding the nature of African American theatre could have been a blessing in disguise. Both men had distinct visions of what African American theatre should be, both men had the intellectual capacity and energy resources to push forward with their projects regardless of interference from the other. In essence it left two strands of African American theatre that the future generations could exploit. Satire, farce, comedy and musicals could flow from the Locke and Gregory Art-Theatre whilst didactic, community based, political and realistic theatre was the legacy of DuBois and KRIGWA. That this mirrors the Abbey Theatre may be coincidental, although to write it off as such is to ignore the impact that the 1911/12 Irish tour of America had on the American theatre. DuBois pointed out that African American companies were staging productions of Irish plays, albeit badly in his opinion, which means that the plays had filtered through to the lowest levels of theatre in America. By that I mean they were staged by amateur groups in theatres that may not have had a regular or large audience. However, the two playwrights that DuBois mentions are Synge and Shakespeare. Thus one could suggest that the Irish playwrights had reached a level that they were both accessible to the African American theatre, yet were as highly regarded as the plays that were penned by the 'Bard of Avon'.

Throughout this chapter I have focused on the debate between these two men and examined the differing aspects of their theatrical aspirations. This is to the detriment of the many, many other men and especially women that populated the ranks of playwrights, producers, actors and directors in the African American theatre. However, just as in Chapter 4 and the Little Theatre Movement the overall thrust of

the movement, rather than the minutia of the Negro Little Theatre Movement could be examined.

Chapter 8: The Wrap Sheet

Conclusion

Tracy Mishkin explains in the Preface of her book *The Harlem and Irish the Renaissances* that

[A]n African American and Irish connection [...] [has] been little remarked since the Harlem movement ended [...] [it] seems at one time to have been well known in intellectual circles, both black and white (Mishkin, xiii)

There has been a lot of research into the concept of the 'Black Atlantic' and the cultural and social bleeding between the African, African American and African British societies. There have been some publications on the 'Green Atlantic' and 'Black and Green Atlantic' which look generally at the culture, politics, race, and economic overlaps between the Irish and African American societies. Many of the publications explore the often fraught relations between these two historically oppressed peoples, yet there is, in theatre, a direct link between the ideologies and concepts of Irish art and those that were debated and actualized by African American artistic endeavor during the Harlem Renaissance. The Irish Players, as they wandered through America were, almost by accident, leaving an indelible mark on the American theatrical landscape.⁵⁷ The plays that they staged, the manner of the production and their use of dialect would alter the opinions of many of the people who witnessed their productions as to the purpose of theatre. As mentioned in chapter 4 during William

⁵⁷ Wandered being the operative word. If one examines their tour route, a map of which is held in the Abbey Theatre archives in Dublin, their journey led them to double back on themselves, visit the same city twice, visit two cities with the same name and so on. The tour really was a dizzying enterprise, both artistically and logistically.

McKinley's presidential campaign of 1896, he promised the people a National Theatre (Rich & Seligman 53). This concept was at the core of the Abbey theatre – a theatrical institution that amalgamated various Irish identities into one, albeit sometimes not coherent, whole. The Irish 'strong poet' and 'ironist' playwrights created a new identity, a new language and a new focal point for concepts of 'Irishness' to be contested. Using Hyde's call for a unifying cultural identity as their clarion call they forged a theatre that could smudge political sanitization and faux nativism into something that was instantly recognizable as Irish yet new and exciting. This, in essence, is exactly the point of the 'strong poet'; to challenge the 'final vocabulary', to create new meanings from old concepts and to align a new 'mobile army of metaphors' against clichéd and stereotyped thought patterns. The Irish and African American 'strong poets' and 'ironists' devised a new manner of engaging with a culture that, either through the loss of their language or the systematic obscuring of their histories, have lost much of their original cultural endeavors. Theatre was a medium that could be used to merely entertain, it was a medium that could titillate through music and song, however, it was also an arena where uncomfortable truths could be uttered, where racist depictions could be both reinforced and altered and a nation could forge an identity. Through the actions of the Abbey Theatre Ireland established itself as a land of playwrights. J. M. Synge, Bernard Shaw, Lady Gregory, Lennox Robinson, Sean O'Casey, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, W. B. Yeats were all catapulted onto the international stage. The theatre became a medium through which the Irish could represent their cultural zenith and distance themselves from the cultural outputs of other peoples. The stage was an area where they could play out ideas and concepts that were truly 'Irish', even though such a concept may never have existed, in a language and dialect that was, on stage, uniquely theirs. The Irish theatre, through the benefit of the many 'strong poets' that wrote for the Irish stage, was able to accomplish during the 1911/1912 American tour more than merely capturing the American theatrical imagination. The idea of theatre, their concepts of

character, their concept of a playwright theatre and the way they managed their writing and acting talent was the wake their tour left in the American theatrical sea. The indirect effect the tour had on American theatre was almost instantly recognized by the theatres that plied their trade from Chicago to Provincetown. Eugene O’Neill and the idea of theatre as a form of social engagement, the Little Theatre movement, the subject matter of plays, the lionizing of the peasant, the deriding and disapproval of social complacency and nationalist axioms, the focus on stagecraft rather than props and the rejection of a ‘star system’ were all either introduced into the mainstream American theatrical scene or had their homegrown development accelerated by the tour. Their other major accomplishment, as has been argued in this thesis, is the realization that the African American population in America was not a background noise that needed to be dimmed or black faced for comedic purposes. African American art is a uniquely American vocalization, a culture that, through the years of slavery, hardship and privation became a monolith on the landscape of American history – a concrete reminder of the past and a long shadow which cast itself over the present. The African American stage was the solstice where homage was paid to the setting sun of slavery and questions were raised about the dawn of Jim Crow.

W. E. B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black* states

One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn assunder (DuBois, 8)

This thought process, one that was to define much of African American politics in the early twentieth century, is echoed by W. B. Yeats as he says

The “Irishry” have preserved their ancient “deposits” through wars which, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, became wars of extermination. No people hate as we do in whom the past is always alive [...] Then I remind myself [...] all my family names are English, and that I owe my soul to Shakespeare, to Spenser, and to Blake [...] my hatred tortures me with love, my love with hate (Murray, 15).

The mindset of the two men was similar, both describe the warring nature of their cultural identity, yearning to be a part of the thing that you distrust and, at times, despise. That Yeats and DuBois saw aspects of their cultural heritage as a duality, a binary, allowed simple concepts to be problematized by the theatre. The theatre seems like the most pertinent place to create an identity, a vernacular and characters that are at once metonyms for a culture whilst also being creations that never existed in that culture. Theatre is, first and foremost, a lie, a ruse, a game that is played by the playwright and the players on a willing audience. The stage only works when people are willing to engage and trust that the play will work both intellectually and emotionally, be its goal to titillate or shock. A play, in essence, is a duality, it exists in the space between creativity and reality – between surprise and expectation. It is, in true Brechtian fashion, a fantasy that tells you it is a fantasy, yet deals with material that may have social import. It holds the audience in the palm of its hand, encourages them to be judge, jury and executioner of the work, all the while revealing more about the audience than the performance through the play. It is, as stated earlier in the thesis, the psychiatrist's couch for a culture, yet its only prognosis is further self-diagnosis. The actor is in effect a Jungian archetype for something else, donning the styles, customs and culture of another in an attempt to be heard. The dual nature of theatre is reflected in the Irish and African American cultures and vice-versa.

There are, as one could immediately see, many differences between the Irish and African American Renaissances, however, there are, if one was to look a little closer, many overlapping themes that tie the aspirations of these two movements together. Both movements were realised in an environment that, if not openly hostile to the concepts behind the renaissances, were resistant to the ideologies of them. Both the Irish and the African American artists had to work in a tumultuous atmosphere where many of the main protagonists in their communities were at odds with each other over what their culture means, where it should go

and how it should be represented. The Irish had to contend with a strong British influence on the island as well as the disparate nationalist groups that fought to control the culture and meaning of being Irish. In America the black communities were split between Washington, DuBois and Garvey and the differing approaches to the future of the African American experience, that being economic freedom, economic and civil freedom or repatriation back to Africa. However, as these arguments blew through the African American political halls, newspapers and living rooms at the turn of the century, the ground where these debates raged was firmly white.

The thesis argues that a vital link that binds the two groups together was their treatment of language. Ireland, a colony of Britain for 800 years was, even for most of its history under British rule, a Gaelic speaking country. However, by the turn of the twentieth century less than fifteen percent of the Irish population were able to verbalise their native tongue (Wolf 7). The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that there is no conception of reality that has not its roots in the structure of language (Pradhan, 133). It is, therefore, interesting that the language that was used to best represent both cultures theatrically was itself a mishmash of different cultures, languages and lexicons. One could say that the stage idiom of both cultures was the misshapen pearl that formed around the grist that was their oppression – the stage language was, in essence, Baroque(n) English. In 1800 Ireland ‘the great majority of Catholics in the North spoke Irish as their native language’ according to Reg Hindley in his book *The Death of the Irish Language: A Qualified Obituary* (Hindley, 8). He continues that ‘the popular and technically illegal ‘hedge schools’ of the Catholic rural populations were already by then [1800’s] instructing their ragged and unshod scholars in the rudiments of English’ (Hindley, 12). By 1899 Bernard Doyle the publisher of ‘Fáinne an Lae’, an Irish nationalist newspaper published in the early 20th century, said of a theatrical production that would be staged in Derry and be spoken in the Gaelic language that ‘most of us at the Gaelic play will

be in the position of the retriever [his dog]. We will be dying to understand what is going forward, and will be most anxious to impress our neighbours with the intelligent interest we are taking in the performance. Yet we will be able to do no more than listen for some familiar word so that we may be able to wag our tails with effusion' (O'Leary, 298). Here we can see that in the space of a mere one hundred years the Irish language went from the dominant tongue to one in almost terminal decline.

The same could be said of the African languages and dialects that survived the middle passage and were brought to the United States en-masse. People from many different tribes and cultures were immersed in a foreign language and bade speak it. Their native languages and idioms became mashed together with themselves and English which in turn diluted and morphed into a unique and distinct lexicon that set itself apart from all those around it. Their use of language is almost the living embodiment of the Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran's statement 'One does not inhabit a country; one inhabits a language. That is our country, our fatherland – and no other' (Granger, 1). If language is the 'fatherland' then the first staging of Ridgley Torrance's plays on the 5th April 1917 in Madison Square Garden was almost tantamount to a declaration of independence. The words came from a pen nestled in a white hand, and the characters that were sketched was done so by a man that was not part of that culture, but through the process of verbalisation, through the medium of the African American dialect the black community, and the individual members of that community, took an important step out of minstrelsy and into legitimate theatre. Just as in Ireland the use of dialect was twofold. First it allowed a community to speak for and to itself in an idiom that was recognised and understood. Secondly it showed that beauty, sensitivity, emotion, ability, revenge, avarice and love are not the purview of the colonial/slave masters tongue. Indeed today, it could well be argued, through hip-hop and rap music the African American dialect is regarded as social capital, rather than the language of the oppressed.

Both cultures were at times, perhaps, a little over sensitive regarding the treatment of their cultures. Yeats once stated 'If the Irish had not lost the Gaelic she never would have had this sensitiveness as a *parvenu* when presented at Court for the first time, or of a Negro newspaper' (Mishkin 21). This, undoubtedly is true, however, it could be argued that it is difficult to be *laissez-faire* about your culture when you are trying to create it. *Having your language and culture misrepresented for so many years, the moment that you begin to self-examine and self-critique is not the ideal time for outside criticism. The public arguments between Locke and Dubois regarding the nature of an African American drama can be compared to the public spat between the Irish politician Arthur Griffith and J. M. Synge regarding the representation of the Irish peasant in his play The Shadow of the Glen.* That plays should be staged was not to be questioned, that the artists needed to take ownership of their respective cultures could not be denied, but what methods should be used to describe the population, what society could be represented and who should do the representing were still areas of debate. It has been suggested that Yeats was a 'dictator in the cause of art, ready to dominate, divide and rule' (Ferriter 94). The same could be said of DuBois. His propaganda plays and the KRIGWA Company fought to uplift the African American's standing in society through their depictions on stage. However, the use of propaganda plays utilised the concepts of a 'strong poet' and 'ironist' and demanded that, through the reinterpretation and re-examination of African American culture something new, interesting, historic yet contemporary could manifest on stage. The dialect that represented the African American and Irish characters set them apart from others attempts to integrate these cultures into theatrical productions. Control of their voice was paramount and led to control over their actions. The personality of the stock minstrel and Irishman was altered, not only through the deeds and sympathy that was displayed through their actions on stage but through their new-found lexicon. The fully formed minority had arrived on the American stage and nudged their stereotype brother into the wings. The

effect of this new personality on stage was two-fold; first it was to inspire the black community by seeing accomplished black people being portrayed on stage by African American actors; secondly it was to project a proud African American image to the world, showing that the black community was as sensitive, brash, sorrowful and dramatic as any other community. Indeed that very point was proven more than a century beforehand with the, albeit short, success of the African Grove theatre.

That the Irish culture shared an experience with the African Americans cannot be denied, indeed any race that lived under subjugation has, to some extent, a shared history, however, this thesis noted the similar ways in which these two cultures represented themselves on stage. The debates that occurred around the stage, the need that both cultures had to destroy the caricature of their culture that was paraded on the stage up to the beginning of the twentieth century and the need to put their own language into the mouths of their characters allowed these two theatres to bloom in an atmosphere that, for both peoples, was fraught with tension. The Abbey Theatre established itself in a well-documented era of militaristic and social upheaval in Ireland. The African American theatre came to the fore when the Jim Crow laws which mandated de jure racial segregation in all public facilities in the former Confederate States of America were in effect. The cultural emergence of the two people, the demand for artistic recognition and the right for artistic self-determinism, the necessity for a dramatic representation and the need for their voices to be heard in an idiom they could recognize and identify with draws the two movements closer together. That the black communities emerged, not only on the stage, but through the poetry of Langston Hughes, the novels of James Weldon Johnson, the emergence of Ragtime and Blues music reveal a far wider impact on American society than just drama. However, if, as Shelley stated 'the highest perfection of human society has ever corresponded with the highest dramatic excellence [and] men should arise capable of bringing back the drama to its principles' (Shelly, 23), then surely the rise of the

theatre the greatest exemplar of the lynchpin between the people and their culture. For two people that were, for so long denied a public image which they controlled, the idea of taking that back and de-reifying the concepts behind their image would be a good first step to a positive cultural recognition.

Throughout the thesis the terms 'strong poet' and 'ironist' have been used, and these concepts are key to the idea of de-reifying a culture and mobilizing a new set of metaphors that would better represent the people. Through their playwrights both the Irish and African American population fashioned a lightning rod that earthed a theatrical language and culture that was for too long stuck in the ether. Willis Richardson and Synge between them crafted a language that 'fit' in the mouths of their culture. The words that their characters spoke were both at once recognizable and strange. The 'broken' sentence structure, the mapping of one language onto another and the emphasis on the quality of silence, particularly in Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, brought a new sensibility and a new method of communication to the stage. Although, as stated before, these two cultures had a fraught history in America, both cultures shared more than differentiated them. They shared a common minority status, they shared a concept of being other than white, they shared a method of discourse that was alien to their tongue but, perhaps most importantly, they shared a need to repatriate the crude stereotypes through which they were represented in popular culture. That the Irish managed to do this first was, undoubtedly, due to their being able to connect to both a history and a location through which they could fashion a proud, although disputed, history. The African American population were cut off from history, their collective experience began in the middle passage and ended in America. However, through the experiences of their relationships with colonialism, through their interactions with cultures that were to dominate their own, and through their words, words that were capable of both being a part of and apart from the colonizer, both cultures were able to become a hybrid society that had a unique insight into a society that needed and rejected

them. Despite the many cleavages that may have occurred between the two cultures the Abbey Theatre tour of 1911/1912 opened the door to the flood of African American theatre that surged onto the American stages throughout the Harlem Renaissance.

Future Research

Throughout the thesis there were many loose threads and interesting tangential subjects that will be followed in future research. The prominent role that women played in the early Irish theatre and the corresponding role of women in the African American theatre is an area that is under-researched. Some of the characters that played prominent roles in the formative years of the African American theatre seem to have almost disappeared from history and their careers deem further research and scrutiny. There is also, perhaps, further application of the concept of ‘strong poet’ not only in theatre but in the development of the Blues music and the establishment of the Federal Theatre projects in the 1930’s.

Although it did not fit exactly into the timeframe the influences that Irish pamphleteers and politicians had on the abolitionist movement are topics that have need for more research. This research can only expand the growing debate of the Green and Black Atlantic.

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