

THE PLOUGH AND THE STARS; A HUNDRED-YEAR STAGE JOURNEY



By

ODILE VAN DEVENTER

ENGELSE TAAL EN CULTUUR

Teacher who will receive this document: Dr. Marguérite Corporaal

Second Supervisor: Dr. C. J.J. Louttit

Title of document: Bachelor Thesis Engelse Letterkunde

Name of course: Bachelor Werkstuk Engelse Letterkunde

Date of submission: 15 June 2018

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Signed

Odile van Deventer

Name of student: Odile van Deventer

Student number: s4597958

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by

Odile van Deventer

S4597958

Dr. Marguérite Corporaal

BA Engelse Taal en Cultuur

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Radboud Universiteit

15 June 2018

Abstract

This thesis will take a look at Sean O'Casey's most famous play about the Easter Rising, *The Plough and the Stars*, and how it has been produced over almost the past hundred years. This will be done by looking at the first production in 1926, the production of 1991, and the production of 2016. I will investigate what Sean O'Casey's original political message was, which made the play very controversial in 1926. After that I will focus on the production performed at the 75th anniversary of the rising and lastly at the production that was brought on stage at the centenary of the rising. By looking at the political situations of 1991 and 2016 this thesis will show how the directors of those performances endeavoured to tell their own contemporary political messages by using Sean O'Casey play.

Keywords: The Plough and the Stars, Sean O'Casey, Easter Rising, Abbey Theatre, Garry Hynes, Sean Holmes, cultural memory.

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1. The Covey and Peter in act three of the 2016 production. Screenshot from Holmes part 4 at 1:26.
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3. Jack and Nora Clitheroe in act one of the 2016 production. Screenshot Holmes part 1 at 0:13.

Introduction

The Plough and the Stars is the most famous play from Irish writer Sean O'Casey's repertoire. It is a critical play about the Easter Rising of 1916. The controversial play first premiered at the Abbey in 1926 and nearly one hundred years later in 2016 there were still performances of it being produced. With 80 productions between 1926 and 2016 it is the most performed play in the Abbey Theatre's history. This thesis is going to look at how these performances have changed over the past hundred years through the research question: What happens to the performance of *The Plough and the Stars* when it is reinterpreted by modern directors and audiences and what do these reinterpretations mean to the cultural memory of the play?

In this thesis I am endeavouring to answer that question by looking at three performances of this play through the theoretical framework of cultural memory studies. Cultural memory studies deal with the way we remember historic events and how that shapes the way we think about them. Memory can be seen as the emotion and sense around the science that is history (Miszta 3/4). Cultural memory is looking at memory on the one hand and the social context on the other. This can for example be done by looking at the way a group collectively views a certain memory or how the media portrays a memory (Erl, 4). So what this thesis does is look at the different productions through their own social contexts and the collective memory on historic events. Through this I try to establish how each production helped maintain or change that memory and how they relate it to their own social contexts.

Firstly I will consider the play's original 1926 production. O'Casey wrote the play with a certain opinion about the Easter Rising in mind. He did not agree with rising, nor with

the war of independence that followed as according to O'Casey the only war worth fighting was a communistic war, a war for the workers (Murray xxiv).). In 1926 Ireland had just come out of The Rising, The War of Independence, and a civil war, and through this the 26 southern counties of Ireland had become a free state. Because of this many people did not see The Rising, which was often seen as the starting point for the war of independence, as a waste (Higgins 6). The public's opinion about the play grew so vociferously opposed that by the fourth performance riots broke out in theatre. So Sean O'Casey, therefore, clearly purported what was at the time a very controversial political opinion.

The second and third performance that I will talk about in this thesis are, the one performed in 1991, which was directed by Garry Hynes, and the one from 2016 directed by Sean Holmes. Both of these plays took place during anniversaries of the rising and both were performed at the Abbey Theatre. The Abbey is Ireland's national theatre and therefore has a particular significance in Ireland's cultural memory, both in the building itself and by bringing to the stage productions that reflect Irish cultural memory. In a way it could be seen as how the cultural history is presented for and by the nation. Both plays were performed in a time that Ireland itself was not at war, but this does not mean that the play cannot still have an engaging and relative political meaning. In 1991 there the Northern Irish troubles were still going on just across the border from Ireland. These troubles had an influence on Ireland itself, because the question that was being fought over was whether or not Northern Ireland should be part of the United Kingdom or Ireland . Although it is not the main point of the play this is a question that is also raised during *The Plough and the Stars*. In 2016 there were, again, completely different issues disturbing society. The end of the Celtic Tiger heralded an economic collapse that saw soaring house prices and rising poverty levels, in Dublin in particular. Poverty especially is something that plays a very important role in the play. With

this is mind, my hypothesis is, is that the plays cultural memory changes over time to make the play and the events of 1916 relevant for each period the play is performed at.

To understand the cultural meaning of these performances I have first looked at the historical background of the Easter Rising and the role that writer Sean O'Casey himself played in those events. I have used these books to do that: *Transforming 1916 : meaning, memory and the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter rising* by Higgins, *Yeats and the Easter Rising* by Malins, the introduction to *The Plough and the Stars* by Christopher Murray and *Sean O'Casey and his world* by Krausse, and a chapter from *1916: the Easter Rising* written by Nevin. To discover the intentions of the directors of the other two productions I have used an interview with Garry Hynes from the *Abbey Archives* and a series of *YouTube* interviews with Sean Holmes. To understand Garry Hynes's production even better I have used Patrick Lonergan's article about the production in this thesis. To explain the cultural value these performances have had I have looked at how they were received by the audiences. For the performances of 1926 and 1991 I have used press cuttings from the *Abbey Archives* about the plays and for the performance of 1926 I have looked at online reviews from *The Guardian* and *The Irish Times*.

What is new about this research is that although many researchers have looked at the different production of the play separately or two plays close related to each other, there has not been much research done yet on the influence of the play over the span of a longer period of time. Patrick Lonergan's chapter *Globalisation and National Theatre: Two Abbey productions of Sean O'Casey's the Plough and the Stars*, for example, only looks at the productions of 1991 and 2001. Wei Kao's article *Staging the Easter Rising plays by W.B. Yeats, Sean O'Casey and Colm Tóibín* Nicholas Grene's chapter only look at the first production of the play.

Chapter 1 - The Play and its Historical Background

The Plough and the Stars is a play about the Easter Rising written by the Irish author Sean O'Casey. The Easter Rising was a military campaign that took place primarily in Dublin city, with a few supporting actions taking place in County Dublin, Wexford, and Galway, in 1916. The original idea was that the Rising would take place on Easter Sunday, but the German ship filled with weapons to arm the rebels was intercepted a few days prior to the Rising. This significantly weakened the position of the rebels, which is why Eoin McNeill, the commander-in-chief of the Irish Volunteers cancelled the Rising by putting an advert in the paper, letting all the men know the rising was off. Nonetheless the Easter Rising did take place, though on Easter Monday, a day later than originally planned. In the end the Rising consisted of approximately 1600 insurgents who belonged to groups such as the Irish Citizen Army, The Irish Volunteers, and the women's group Cumann na mBan (Higgins 6). Although it took many people by surprise it is not necessarily very surprising since James Connolly, the leader of the Irish Citizen army already said in 1915 that the Irish Citizen Army might start a rising on its own. He said this because he doubted that the Irish Brotherhood would stay true to their word and begin a rising during the first world war (Nevin, 127).

The mobilization of the Rising was chaotic. Because they were told the rising had been cancelled, many rebels slept in on Monday or were confused by the contradicting orders they were given by their superiors (Higgins 6). By then it had also become so natural for groups of men to march around the city that 60 British soldiers did not look up when a group of rebels walked past them. These were the rebels that attacked the General Post Office

(GPO), which became the rebels' headquarters (Malins 6). The British authorities, were also wholly unprepared for a rebellion within the city. Out of a garrison of 120 officers and 2265 soldiers only 400 troops were in a state of immediate readiness and only six men were defending Dublin Castle. For this reason, though there was much confusion among the rebels they still managed to get hold of some important sites in the city. On the second day, however, the British authorities did manage to get their troops organised and managed to get the upper hand again. The rebels held the GPO, until they surrendered on the 29th of April 1916. In the end 64 of the rebels, 132 British soldiers, and 230 citizens had died during the fighting. In a response to the Rising the British executed sixteen of the rebels' leaders (Higgins 6).

The immediate reaction of the Dublin civilians to the rising was a negative one. The city had been partially destroyed and due to the chaos in the streets many poor citizens had taken their chances to loot the shops. After some officers got wounded the police pulled back its forces and soon gold watches changed hands for a few pennies, working class girls walked around in the latest fashions and mobs seized drinks for the pubs (Malins 7). The rebels were initially blamed for this destruction, but the fast and brutal way in which the British responded to the rising changed their minds. The introduction of martial law, however, caused the Irish people's opinion to shift from opposition to the Rebellion to support. During the aftermath of the Rising 3500 people were arrested and of these people 2500 were being sent to prison in Britain. Even though many citizens had relatives fighting in the British army in World War I, support for the rebels and their nationalistic aims grew. The British response to the rising helped to create a cadre of future Irish soldiers. It is this reaction by the population that eventually caused for the Irish revolution and the establishment of the Anglo-Irish treaty in 1921 (Higgins 8).

The writer of *The Plough and the Stars* never fought in the Easter Rising himself. In the first act he even has The Young Covey, who resembles O'Casey's views most, saying: "I betther go an' get a good place to have a look at Ireland's warriors passin' by (O'Casey 23)."

Sean O'Casey was born as John Casey but changed his name early in life to sound more Gaelic. O'Casey was born in Dublin in 1880, but unlike other famous writers such as Synge and Wilde did O'Casey not have a high-class background and education, but instead was born into poverty and received little more than the most basic education. This is the reason why he always seems sympathetic with the poor and downtrodden in his stories. Even while writing *The Plough* O'Casey himself still lived a tenement building (Krausse 18).

O'Casey being born a protestant and being a unionist in politics could have tilted his working-class status into a lower-middle class, for being a protestant and unionist in Dublin in the late 19th/ early 20th century meant to be on the winning side, even if you were poor. Still with the help of his sister Bella, who had teacher's qualifications, he read every book that he could lay his hands on. O'Casey was a voracious reader, not just in dramatic literature, but also in poetry, religious studies, art and music. The characters O'Casey is usually most sympathetic towards are the characters in his plays that try to lift themselves out of a restrictive environment through reading (Murray x).

Regular office employment was impossible for O'Casey mainly because he could not put up with the grovelling to authority it seemed to require. Instead O'Casey became a labourer for the Dublin railways, but when in 1911 he insisted on his right to join a trade union he was dismissed. O'Casey's *The Dublin Plays* are partly based on the things O'Casey himself and his experiences as a young man involved in Irish political and cultural life in Dublin. His experiences with the strike for the right to be allowed to join a trade union for example are play an important role in the second play *Juno and the Paycock*.

At twenty-six years old O'Casey joined the Gaelic League where he learned Gaelic and became fiercely nationalistic and decided on changing his name from the Anglo to the Gaelic version. Not long hereafter Sean O'Casey joined the Irish Brotherhood and became a writer of anti-British propaganda. It was not until Jim Larkin came to Dublin, who was set on creating an active trade-union movement, that O'Casey decided to trade in his religious, cultural, and republican organisations for socialism. The Great Lock-Out of 1913 showed O'Casey that the cause of labour took precedence over the cause of Irish freedom. Soon after he was appointed secretary of the Irish Citizen Army, which Larkin formed in 1914 in the defence of the workers and for a while he was active in administration. But O'Casey resigned in 1914 out of protest against the middle-class nationalists who had been unsympathetic to the strike and were, according to O'Casey undermining the cause of economic freedom (Krausse 16).

Because he had left the Irish Citizen Army two years prior, O'Casey became a spectator of the Easter Rising instead of a participant. O'Casey admired the bravery of the men who fought in the rising, but he thought the events of Easter Week 1916 were a complete waste of life and effort. The biggest problem O'Casey had with the Rising was that James Connolly, who had taken over the command of the Irish Citizen Army from Jim Larkin, had seemingly defected the cause of labour for the struggle of nationalism. By making an alliance between the Irish Citizen Army and the Irish Volunteers under Pearse, Connolly had, in O'Casey's opinion, betrayed the true purpose of the Irish Citizen Army and taken part in a charade (Murray xi). O'Casey's opinion of Pearse is seen in the second act of *The Plough and the Stars* where the proclamation of the Irish Republic is being read. Although in the script it never says anywhere that the man is Pearse, the man is just named 'figure in the window' and 'voice of man' it was Pearse who read the Irish Proclamation on Easter Monday 1916. In the act O'Casey has his drunken characters react enthusiastically to the proclamation without

giving a second thought to what the words truly meant for their lives. O'Casey uses the unnamed character to voice speech originally written by Patrick Pearse such as: "Voice of man: Comrade soldiers of the Irish Volunteers and of the Citizen Army we rejoice in this terrible war. The old heart of the earth needed to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefields... Such august homage was never offered to God as this: the homage of millions of lives given gladly for the love of our country" (O'Casey 36). Pearse calls on the people to literally give their lives for Ireland and Fluther reacts to this while gulping down a drink with the line: "Come on, man this is too good to be missed" (O'Casey 37). Pearse calls on the people to literally give their lives for Ireland and Fluther reacts to this while gulping down a drink with the line: "Come on, man this is too good to be missed!"

O'Casey also gives his own reaction to the proclamation in the form of the young Covey. The Covey like O'Casey is a communist who does not believe that the fight for Ireland's freedom is the fight that matters, instead they should be focussed on a fairer life for the working classes. He voices his opinion loud and clearly in lines such as:

"Voice of Speaker: the last sixteen months have been the most glorious in the history of Europe. Heroism has come back to the earth. War is a terrible thing, but war is not an evil thing. People in Ireland dread war because they do not know it. Ireland has not known the exhilaration of war for over a hundred years. When war comes to Ireland she must welcome it as she would welcome the Angel of God!

The Covey: (*Towards all present*) Dope, dope. There's only one war worth havin': th' war for th' economic emancipation of th' proletariat" (O'Casey 43).

The Covey, in line with O'Casey's own views, responds to the words of Pearse by saying that the war for Irish independence is a wasteful one and the only thing the country ought to be

focussing itself on is the economic emancipation of the proletariat, in other words on the wellbeing, working conditions, and wages of the working classes.

Yeats described the aftermath of the executions of the Rising's leaders as 'all was changed, changed utterly by the executions and a terrible beauty was born (Malins 16).' O'Casey on the other hand did not see the Rising as a terrible beauty, according to him the Rising was the cause of a succession of wars and acts of terror succeeded by the Irish Civil War of 1922-23, when those who had accepted the Treaty were opposed by those who saw it as a betrayal of 1916's aims. In O'Casey's opinion the nationalistic ideals were both dangerous and romantic. Though he had been a fierce nationalist before he joined Jim Larkin, O'Casey had come to the belief after the rising that an alliance between labour and nationalism was a tragic mistake which abandoned the cause of the poor and the unemployed. Because of this view he was prepared to scorn the entirety of the 1916 Rising as fatally misguided (Murray xxiv).

He shows his scorn for the rising in his play *The Plough and the Stars*. In *The Plough and the Stars* O'Casey shows the lives of several members of a poor tenement in Dublin. The play does not have an actual plot, and instead O'Casey is more focussed on his characters and their developments. O'Casey designed a tenement for this play and placed a number of very different characters in this milieu who each experience the rising in their own way. Each family in the tenement brings with them their own theme and perspective about the rising that is developed throughout the play. Through Jack Clitheroe, O'Casey shows his own perception on the Irish rebels. Instead of really wanting to fight for Ireland, the audience learns in this first scene that the only thing Jack is interested in is making promotion: "Fluther How is it that Clitheroe himself, now, doesn't have anythin' to do with th' Citizen Army? To which Mrs Gogan answers: Just because he wasn't made a Captain of. He wasn't goin' to be in anything where he couldn't be conspihuous" (O'Casey 8).

But O'Casey does not only show the avaricious side of the soldiers, he also shows the faith and belief the rebels put in Patrick Pearse's words, and how easily they agree to lay their lives down for Ireland. He also displays their ruthlessness when they start firing on people looting shops in the second act and in how captain Brennan leaves Jack Clitheroe for dead in the last act to save his own life.

A contrasting viewpoint is given in the glimpses into the life of Bessie Burges who while from the exact same social background as the others, is a Protestant supporting Britain, rather than a Catholic like the other tenants. The character of Bessie raises the issue that many families, like Burges in the play, had people fighting for the British army in the second world war at the time of the rising. . Ultimately her character shows the universality of day-to-day lives of Dublin's tenement poor despite the disparity in their politics.

The other characters mainly display the various aspects of tenement life and the ambitions of the tenants. For example, Nora, Jack's wife, only wants to leave the tenement as quickly as she can and will try anything to get more money. Her views on the tenement are voiced by Mrs Gogan in the first act: "She's always grumblin' about havin' to live in a tenement house. 'I wouldn't like to spend me last hour in one, let alone live me life in a tenement,' says she. 'Vaults,' says she, 'that are hidin' th' dead, instead of homes that are shelterin' th' livin'" (O'Casey 7). Yet, in the final act it becomes clear that Nora will never find a better life. By the end of act four Nora has lost both her baby, through a miscarriage, and her husband, and is driven out of her mind. She herself has almost turned into one of the ghosts that haunt the tenement. Nora character puts the emphasis on the theme of the home in the play. The home is something that ought to be protect (Murray xxxix). In the very beginning we learn that Nora has Fluther installing a lock on her, which could be seen as Nora trying to keep trouble out of the home. It is also because she is not protected and been left behind by Jack that she collapses.

Although it is not spoken of much in the play, Mrs Gogan's family portrays the true hardships of what life in the tenements was like. Once as a fleeting comment it is mentioned that her husband had died of consumption. "th' mother out day an' night lookin' for work, an' her consumptive husband leavin' her with a baby to be born before he died" (O'Casey 80). This comment from *The Covey* makes clear that Mrs Gogan's husband died of tuberculosis before her baby was born and that she has to try and keep the family afloat on her own. At the same time she has another daughter who suffers from tuberculosis for most of the play before having died by act four. The daughter, Mollser, has hardly any lines in the play, but she is almost always on stage throughout acts one and three. It shows how tuberculosis is a problem that was always there in these tenements and by not responding to it, it was not going to go away, instead it would get people killed.

Chapter 2 - The First Production of the Plough and the Stars, 1926

From the very start *The Plough and the Stars* was a politically divide play. The first production of the play was 1926 which was only ten years after the Rising took place, only five years after the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed, and only two years after the resultant Irish Civil War had settled down. Ireland had become a free state and the men that had given their lives to establish that were seen by most, especially their widows, as heroes (*Evening Herald* 1976). The Rising which Sean O'Casey saw as the start of the Irish war for independence is not presented as a pretty picture in *The Plough and the Stars*. O'Casey did not see these men as heroes and did not try to write them as such.

Although there was some disturbance during the first three performances of *The Plough and the Stars*, the play was received relatively well and passed without any serious incidents. *The Evening Herald* described the first three performances passing by without any serious incidents, even though some hisses were heard and some women in the audience stamped their feet during act two when the prostitute Rosie Redmond appeared and when the tricolour flag was brought into a pub (*Evening Herald*). The commotion was not big enough to interrupt the play in such a way that it had to be stopped.

On the fourth night, however, hell broke loose as riots started in the audience during the second act. As in the earlier performances the first act did not meet with too much

resistance but as soon as the second act, which took place at a public house with prostitute, started the booing and hissing began again. The newspaper describes the phrases people yelled towards the stage and the actions they took against the play. “A man in the stalls screamed: Send out O’Casey! Another man shouted: We don’t want any more of this play ! Two women in the balcony tried to make speeches. Lumps of coal and pennies were thrown at Rosie” (idem).

But the disturbance did not consist of shouting alone. Fist fights broke out on stage between actors and audience, Barry Fitzgerald, who was playing Fluther, sent one of his assailants flying with a blow on the chin. Sheelah Richards, who portrayed Nora Clitheroe, tugged at the hair of one of the storming women. One girl even tried to set the theatre’s black and gold curtains on fire. In the meantime women on the balcony were screaming led by Mrs Hanny Sheehy-Skiffington, a widow of one of the martyrs from 1916. Yeats, a director of the Abbey, who was in the theatre by accident that night stepped onto the stage while the stalls filled with the smell of stink bombs that were set off by the rioters (idem). When on stage Yeats gave a speech that would later become rather famous and for which O’Casey allegedly needed to consult a dictionary: “You have disgraced yourselves again! Is this to be recurring celebration of the arrival of Irish genius? The news of the happening of the last few minutes will flash from country to country. Dublin has once more rocked the cradle of a reputation. From such a scene went forth the fame of Synge. Equally that of O’Casey is born tonight. This is his apotheosis” (idem).

Yeats referred back in his speech to the riots that took place during the first performances of Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*, in 1907. The riots made Synge’s play famous and Yeats rightly predicted that the same would happen for O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars*, for it eventually became the Abbey’s most produced play ever. After Yeats’s speech the police, arrived and the objectors left or were removed and the play resumed amidst

cheers and counter cheers. Still as the curtain rose for the third act the audience found that the stage had been left bare. Originally, the outside of the tenement was supposed to appear on stage, a large wooden construction, but it was deemed too dangerous to put the set up in case someone tried to set fire to it again.

On the Saturday morning after the performance IRA men even went to actor Barry Fitzgerald's house to try and kidnap him, but he was not at home. Suspicious knocking were also heard at the doors of the actresses Ria Mooney and Shelah Richards, but since both refused to open they were not kidnapped either (*Evening Herald*).

There were three parts of the play that audiences and critics had most problems with, namely, the appearance of the prostitute Rosie Redmond, the way O'Casey portrayed the Irish rebels, and the way he portrayed the citizens of Dublin themselves. Out of these three Rosie Redmond was the worst part according to audience and critics. As Kao writes: "The audience and critics, including Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington, along with other widows of deceased revolutionaries, were enraged by the depiction of the prostitute, Rosie. Her frivolous and sensual language and her jeers at male patriots, regardless of their political leanings, offended those who viewed the Easter Rising as a sacred object" (71). What made the discomfort at having a prostitute on the stage even greater was that a prostitute by the name of Honor Bright had been killed only months before the premiere of the play and the case against the two men that allegedly killed her had aroused an intense interest and concern throughout the city. So having Rosie Redmond on stage was not only an insult to the soldiers; it was also an extra reminder of the lives of the lowest class and the reminder of a heinous crime committed against one of them (*Evening Herald*).

With his creation of Rosie Redmond Sean O'Casey broke an important rule in dramaturgy, namely, never to create a character that has no influence or significance for the plot and thus technically will just be redundant on stage. Rosie Redmond only appears in the

second act and could easily be left out, without the play getting confusing. Therefore Rosie has no influence on the plot, a thing that is quite hard to do for any character in *The Plough and the Stars* since the play technically has no plot (Murray xxxv). The inclusion of Rosie in the play therefore can be seen as a statement about Dublin life. It presented a side of life that people of the time would have found unseemly and would not have appreciated such characterisation of one of their own. It is this statement that made the audience of 1926 so enraged.

The first time Rosie is presented on stage is at the beginning of act two and her very opening words already hit the wrong note with the widows in the audience.

“Barman: Nothin’ much doin’ in your line tonight, Rosie?

Rosie: Curse o’ God on th’ haporth, hardly, Tom. There isn’t much taken on a pretty petticoat of a night like this... They’re all in a holy mood. Th’ solemnlookin’ dials on the whol o’ them an’ they marchin’ to th’ meetin’. You’d think they were th’ glorious company of th’ saints, an’ th’ noble army of martyrs thrampin’ through the streets of paradise. They’re all thinkin’ of higher things than a girl’s garthers... It’s a tremendous meetin’; four platforms they have – there’s one o’ them just outside opposite th’ window. It’s no joke thryin’ to make up fifty-five shillin’s a week for your keep an’ laundhry, an; then taxin’ you a quid for you own room if you bring home a friend for the’ night... If I could only put buy a couple of quid for a swankier outfit, everythin’ in th’ garden ud look lovely” (O’Casey 34).

Outside the men are preparing for the rising and Rosie is complaining how her business as a prostitute is running poorly because of it. . According to her they are not holy or heroes but are feigning virtue. On any normal night all those martyrs and saints would be out seeking her services, but for the Rising they eschew her for pursuit of some game. Not only does Sean

O'Casey show with Rosie's role the influence of the rising on the lowest classes, but he also calls those heroes out for ordinary men with rather loose morals.

What made the performance of the seemingly unimportant character even more shocking for an Irish audience is the fact that Ireland is often portrayed as a woman. One of the most famous example of this is the story of Cathleen ni Houlihan, originally a poem, but turned into a play by Yeats and Lady Gregory at the beginning of the 20th century. Cathleen is an old hag who arrives as a stranger at a peasants house where the characters Michael and Delia are about to get married. Cathleen convinces the man to leave his bride for Ireland's freedom and as he leaves his bride and parents behind to die for Ireland Cathleen becomes a young beautiful woman again. Cathleen's sudden transformation after Michael left is shown in the last two lines when Peter Michael's father says to Michael's younger brother Patrick: "Did you seen an old woman going down the path?" To which Patrick replies: "I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen (Yeats, 11)." Cathleen is the personification of Ireland who needs to be protected and it is through the men's sacrifice that she can stay the young and beautiful example (Quinn 429-432). Viewing Rosie Redmond to have a similar role would portray Ireland as a woman with loose morals and little care for the men fighting for her, rather than the virtuous image the audience was used to seeing. O'Casey does not present a Cathleen ni Houlihan to fight for. And when Rosie Redmond leaves the stage with Fluther O'Casey is saying that Ireland might be greater than a mother, or a wife, but it is not greater than a drunken night with whore (Greene 144).

Rosie's statement is not the only time in the play that O'Casey shows a different view of the men who participated in rising than the one their widows preferred. The best example of this in act one is Jack Clitheroe. In the beginning of the act the audience learns that Jack was part of the Irish Citizen Army, but he quit because they had refused to promote him to captain. It shows that Clitheroe was only interested in being a part of the rising if he got a

fancy title and status. The play uses Clitheroe as an example meant to represent more rebels who fought in the rising, and it makes the suggestion that they did not fight for Ireland's freedom, but purely for their own selfish interests. At the end of the act the audience learns that Jack had been promoted to Commandant two weeks ago, but his wife Nora burned the letter.

“**Nora** (*Flaming up*) I burned it, I burned it! That's what I did with it! Is General Connolly an' th' Citizen Army goin' to be your only care? Is your home goin' to be only a place to rest in? Am I goin' to be only somethin' to provide merry-makin' at night for you? Your vanity'll be th' ruin of you an' me yet... That's what's movin' you: because they've made an officer of you, you'll make a glorious cause of what you're doin', while your little red-lippd Nora can go on sittin' here, makin' a companion of th' loneliness of th' night!” (O'Casey 32).

Nora burned the letter in the hope that Jack would stay with her instead of going off to the join the rebels. She, and indirectly O'Casey himself, accuses Jack of being vain for only wanting to join the army because they made an officer of him and warns him that it will be the ruin of them both. Sean O'Casey tried to show with the play what the Rising was like for normal, especially working class people, and that is exactly what Jack is not thinking of when he leaves Nora to go to the meeting. She begs him to stay with her at home, but Jack thinks the Rising is more important.

That the rebels care more about playing soldiers than the families they left at home, according to O'Casey, is presented again in act two.

“**Lieut. Langon:** Th' time is rotten ripe for revolution

Clitheroe: You have a mother, Langon.

Lieut. Langon: Ireland is greater than a mother.

Capt. Brennan: You have a wife, Clitheroe.

Clitheroe: Ireland is greater than a wife” (O’Casey, 53).

Neither Clitheroe nor Langon seem to care about the women they leave behind as long as they can fight their glorious war. However, it is the weaker and more silenced and powerless sex that bears the consequences of militant nationalism (Kao, 71). In the end Nora is right, because Jack joined the rising he ends up dead at the end of the play, and Nora ends up with miscarriage caused by looking for, and fighting with, her husband. The rising costs Jack his life, Nora her sanity, and through that also the life of Bessie Burgess. Mollser, Mrs Grogan’s sick daughter sums up O’Casey thoughts very well in the last line of act one.

“**Mollser:** *(after a pause and a cough)* Is there anybody goin’, Mrs Clitheroe, with a titthier o’ sense?” (O’Casey 32).

But it is not only the soldiers themselves that get blamed by O’Casey it is also the way they were recruited. This recruitment is shown in the play through the speeches of the figure in the window who reads the ‘Proclamation of the Irish Republic.’ In his speeches the silhouetted character promulgates disruptive yet romantic impressions of war to the young people of Ireland (Kao 71). This is one example of such a speech used in the play:

People in Ireland dread war because they do not know it. Ireland has not known the exhilaration of war for over a hundred years. When war comes to Ireland she must welcome it as she would welcome the Angel of God! (O’Casey, 43)

Kao goes on to explain how even though these speeches are historically accurate they could still enrage an audience seeing the play in 1926. “Although the bloodstained depiction of the revolution is realistic, it may seem to the audience that the reading of the Proclamation serves to ridicule Patrick Pearse and his stirring discourses. Specifically, Pearse, among other political orators, is known to have excelled in electrifying Dublin with the rhetoric of his oration at the graveside of O’Donovan Rossa’ and on various other occasions. Although O’Casey does not explicitly state his judgement of Pearse, the silhouetted reader stirs an

alienation effect that reveals how war heroes are made, particularly those who are eloquent in voicing extremist nationalist rhetoric” (Kao 71).

So what Kao’s article shows is that O’Casey did not only show the fault in the soldiers, but also in their leaders, and in particular in the rhetoric of Patrick Pearse. The responses to the words of Pearse in the play are that of mostly drunken men sitting in a bar, and what especially angered the audience of the first production of *The Plough and the Stars* is that following Pearse’s words drunken rebels bring in the flag of the plough and the stars into the bar. “The audience was incensed at seeing the flag of the Irish Citizen Army carried into a public house by a group of drinkers. Many saw the presentations of looting and young Irishmen slaughtering each other in a quasi-war situation in Ireland as dishonouring the heroes of the rebellion” (Kao, 71). But to O’Casey they were the ones that had already dishonoured the flag in the first place. The flag of the Plough and the Stars was a symbol of socialism, not war, as the young Covey voices in the first act.

“The Covey: They’re bringin’ nice disgrace on that banner now.

Clitheroe: (*remonstratively*) How are they bringin’ disgrace on it?

The Covey: (*snappily*) Because it’s a Labour flag, an’ was never meant for politics...

What does th’ design of th’ field plough, bearin’ on it th’ stars f th’ heavenly plough, mean if it’s not Communism? It’s a flag that should only be used when we’re buildin’ th’ barricades to fight for a Workers’ Republic!” (O’Casey 22).

The Plough and the Stars was originally a symbol of the working classes. People fought for that flag in the rising, but no one seemed to bat an eye towards what was happening to them during and after the rising. They were dealt with rather carelessly.

The last part of the play that the rioters were not pleased with was the way in which the working classes were being depicted were depicted in the play. While the fighting in Dublin was going on many people, especially those of the lower classes saw their chance to

loot the shops, instead of standing behind the men that were fighting for them. These events are illustrated by O'Casey in act three.

“Bessie: They're breakin' into th' shops, they're breakin' into th' shops! Smashin' the windows, batterin' in th' doors, an' whippin' away everything! An' th' Volunteers is firin' on them. I seen two men an' a lassie pushin' a piano down th' street, an' th' sweat rollin' off them thryin' to get it up on th' pavement; an' an oul' wan that must ha' been seventy lookin' as if she'd dhrip every minute with th' dint o' heart beatin', thryin' to pull a big double bed out of a broken shop-window! I was goin' to wait till I dhressed meself from th' skin out” (O'Casey 68).

The characters go out looting much like the citizens of Dublin did in 1916. Bessie describes in her speech things as big as pianos are being stolen by the people. In the fourth act O'Casey describes in his stage directions of Bessie Burges's room that the things that she stole are clearly visible in the room and show the audience the contrast between the things the people usually would own and the things that they managed to get their hands on during the looting (O'Casey 78). By making the contrast between the fancy things they managed to loot and their everyday items O'Casey shows even further the states and the poverty that the people had to live and most kept living after the rising. An uncomfortable truth to be confronted with for an audience.

The only character that initially dares to speak an ill word about the civilians and defends the rebels is Peter.

“Peter: Makin' a shame an' sin o' th' caus that good men are figtin' for... Oh, God forgive th' people that, instead o' burnishin' th' work th' boys is doin' today with quiet honesty an' patience, is revilin' their sacrifices with a riot of lootin' an' roguery!” (O'Casey 69).

This seems a very noble thing of Peter to say. He seems to condemn the people who do not stand behind the rebels and behind Ireland, but even for this noble speech O'Casey had an answer.

“The Covey: Isn't your own eyes leppin' out o' your head with ency that haven't th'gurs to ketch a few o' th' things that God is givin' to His chosen people?... Y'oul hypocrite, if everyone was blind you'd steal a cross of an ass's back” (O'Casey, 69).

According to the Covey Peter may sound holier than the rest of them, but that is only because he does not dare to go out onto the streets himself and steal. The play describes the people of the tenement according to a simple dichotomy, those that went out onto the streets to steal as much as they could, or people who wish they had the courage to go out and steal.

But it is not only the tenants who are painted in a bad light with regard to the looting, Sean O'Casey also showed the reaction of the people's 'heroes' to them stealing from the shops.

“Capt. Brennan: (*savagely to Clitheroe*) why did you fire over their heads? Why didn't you fire to kill?

Clitheroe: No, no, Bill; bad as they are they're Irish men an' women.

Capt. Brennan: (*savagely*) Irish be damned! Attackin' an mobbin' th' men that are riskin' their lives for them. If these slum lice gather at our heels again, plug one o' them, or I'll soon shock them with a shot or two meself!” (O'Casey 71).

In this scene Captain Brennan reprimands Clitheroe for shooting over the heads of mobs, rather than going for the kill. Brennan shows that his goal is to free Ireland, but that goal is unsympathetic to the Irish lower class in this case. The people Brennan wants Clitheroe to shoot at are his own people, the people they are allegedly fighting for, and he is ordering Clitheroe to shoot to kill them. O'Casey confronts the audience with the ugly truth of their own actions during the rising and the fact that their so called heroes did not solely fight the

British soldiers. When their own people rather chose looting over helping the rebels, they shot at them as well in their quest to save Ireland.

The Easter Rising and the war of Independence were seen as heroic acts in 1926. The people liked to believe that their soldiers had been heroes and that all was good now that Ireland was a free state. During the fourth performance they shouted that the play was disgrace to their heroes of Easter Week (*Evening Herald*). With his play O'Casey tried to show them a different side to the rebellion. He tried to ask them the questions what was it all for, were these rebels really heroes, and had the struggle been worth it? His answer to these questions seems from his text to be that this was not the case. This seemed to be a perspective that a lot of people in 1926 were not yet ready to credit. However, there were also praises by several newspapers such as the *Evening Herald*, the *Irish Independent*, and the *Irish Mail*, which praised the play for its well written dialogue (Ó hAodha). These reviews showed that even though not everyone might have agreed with the message, the play itself was a good and well written piece art. It is because of O'Casey's writing talent that the play did become a hit and with 79 other productions after the first run, it is the most performed play by the Abbey Theatre.

Chapter 3 - The Plough and the Northern Irish Troubles, 1991

The second time *The Plough and the Stars* came with a controversial message was in 1991 at the 75th anniversary of the Easter Rising. Twenty-five years before at the celebration of the Rising's 50th anniversary, the play was notably absent. The Abbey and Dublin were focussed on celebrating the heroes of the rising. By the Abbey this was done in the way of a brand new play written by Tom Murphy called *The Patriot's Game*, which was going to be broadcasted on television (Cleary) and there were several pro-nationalist events organised throughout Ireland. Such events would for example be a pageant in Cork where the boys were dressed up as Fenian warriors and performed a piece written by Patrick Pearse himself (Roche 309). The government created a special committee for the celebratory ceremonies to be held, which had started off with a parade through Dublin (Higgins, 35). The 75th anniversary, however, brought the famous play painfully back into the minds of the people under the direction of Gary Hynes. Hynes wanted to connect her production of the play to troubles that had been going on in Northern Ireland from 1968 onwards. *The Plough and the Stars* was the first production that Gary Hynes did after she became the artistic director for the Abbey Theatre. Where Sean O'Casey wrote his play as a tragi-comedy with small humorous fights, such as the ones between Peter and the Young Covey, occasionally giving some comic relief in between all the drama, Hynes decided to make her production as dark and tragic as it could possibly be. She did not cut the comedic scenes, but taking away their colourful outfits and

replacing them with sombre ones the play become a lot more realistic and less humorous. There was no room in her play for comedy, instead she focused on conveying a dark and sombre, but crucial, message to her audiences.

In an interview with May Holland, Hynes talked about her own remembrances of the 50th anniversary and why she thought it so important to change the play the way she did.

“The whole subject of the 1916 Rising and how to commemorate it has been a subject of intense debate in Dublin, a fact Hynes acknowledges. I’m old enough to remember 1966 when we were able to celebrate the people who gave us freedom in quite a relaxed way. It’s much more difficult now because of the violence in Northern Ireland, but I don’t believe you can solve or come to terms with these problems by trying to sweep them under the carpet. Theatres are important because they are relatively safe places to explore difficult, even dangerous issues” (Holland).

So what Hynes is saying is that she wants to acknowledge the difficulties with remembering 1916 in 1991. With her empty stage and characters affected by poverty and violence Hynes shows the darker side of the debate.

In the interview with *the Observer* Hynes talks about the difficulties the play presents and why she chose to stage the play in a rather unorthodox way. She wanted to reclaim the play for the Abbey theatre and wanted to give her view on the people’s stand about the Northern Irish Troubles. She achieved this goal not only through the words of her actors, but especially in the way she designed the set. The set was stark, almost completely bare save the essential props for the play, such as the cards and the coffin that are described in act four. Not only the staging was bare, the characters were as well. Even the women stood with shaved heads in monochromatic costumes on stage – a presentation that worked against the tendency to see O’Casey’s characters as ‘colourful’ expressions of working class life (Lonergan, 9). This was all to highlight the poverty of the people. Hynes seems to want to make their lives

appear as tragic as possible in order to show the audience that it is the pre-existing poverty of these people that is the worst cause of their hardship rather than the military conflict that develops on the stage. It is the women who are left behind in the play, and it were the women who were left behind by the men in the rising and again in Northern Ireland. In Northern it were men as well who left their homes to go fighting with the risk of not returning to their families again. Their barren clothes and shaven heads, accentuate this fact even more than O'Casey's colourful clothes might have done and would have brought Hynes's point across even better.

Although the play emphasized the dire situation of the tenants even without the military actions, the play does not shy away from portraying the violence that O'Casey had written into it. As Patrick Lonergan observed the production challenged many existing images of Anglo-Irish violence. Before the action began, the stage was draped in a large Union Jack; at its conclusion, the flag was again drawn across the stage, this time covering the body of Bessie Burges, the Irish protestant whose son is fighting in the First World War while rebellion is underway in Dublin" (Lonergan 9). This does not only imply Ireland to be quite literally under imperial rule, but it also implies Ireland being dead under this rule, since Bessie Burges gets shot at the end of act four. The republican rebels are not treated in a softer manner by Hynes. Looking only at the text of the play itself it does not necessarily mean that Nora's miscarriage is caused by the way her husband Jack treats her. In the original stage directions written by O'Casey it says Jack does roughly break Nora's grip around him and he does push her away from him, but this does not directly indicate that it is his fault she got a miscarriage. In Hynes's production there is little doubt left that it was Jack's fault. Hynes had Jack throw Nora across the stage in response to her begging him to stop fighting in the rising. 'Political violence in this production is thus evaluated in terms of gender with both British and Irish militarisms presented as arising from various forms of male inadequacy – and all of the

victims of that violence being female (Lonergan 9). What Lonergan show here that it is the women, who do not even take part in the fighting, who are left alone at home that are worst off in the end. The play was always already very focused on the misery of the female characters, but Hynes's designs and stage directions emphasized that point even more clearly what a war or rebellion could do to the women at home. This added to the emphasis on Bessie Burges' Protestantism, made the production very relevant to debates about the Northern Ireland Troubles (Lonergan 10). Bessie Burges's Protestantism is an especially important part in this production of the play since one of the main reasons for the Northern Irish Troubles was the divide between the Catholics and the Protestants, with the Catholics in favour of joining Ireland and the Protestants wanting to remain part of the United Kingdom (McGratten 7-10).

The most shocking part of the production came just as in *The Plough's* first production, during the second act. But this time it was not the prostitute or the Tricolour flag on stage that caused the outrage. Part of Hynes's bare design consisted of a mirror behind the bar. The audience was literally looking at themselves.

“In this part of Hynes's production, the back of the stage was dominated by a large mirror, in which the Abbey audience could see themselves. Suddenly, a member of the audience rose and began to speak while the action was underway, leading the other spectators to realise – after some moments of uneasiness – that what they were seeing on stage was not a literal representation of a mirror, but a window from the bar, opening out to a public arena in which a large crowd was being addressed by a speaker. The audience, therefore, was put into the world represented onstage; they were watching a historically significant event, while seeing themselves represented in it. This disruptive nature of this act evoked memories of the riots that greeted the premiere of *Plough* in 1926, while also making it difficult for the Abbey

audience to imagine that the people represented by O'Casey were different from themselves" (Lonergan 10).

As Lonergan explains in his article, by using the mirror and having someone among them stand up and speak, the Abbey audiences were all of the sudden pulled on stage with the actors. Instead of simply watching a show they suddenly felt like they were in the middle of it and that the actions and the words said on the stage could have an influence on them. Feeling that they had been made witnesses without saying anything for or against the rebellion made the audience members feel rather uncomfortable. In a way that was what Hynes was out to achieve, but she wanted this discomfort to spark consideration. Instead of asking them to choose a side she makes the audience think about and experience the rebellion so they can afterwards come to a conclusion themselves whether or not having rebellion at all will really gain them that much. In her interview with Holland Hynes said that in 1991 it was very complicated to be Irish and that people needed to try and understand what that meant for them. One of the things that made this conflict relevant for the people who lived in Dublin, and not in Northern Ireland, was that even though they did not fight in the current upheavals many people still thought of Northern Ireland as part of Ireland and in that belief endorsed the troubles. Seeing themselves in that mirror in the second act might have woken people up to the uncomfortable truth that, even though the troubles were taking places across the border, they did have a part in it.

The critical reviews of the play were very divided leaving little middle ground. Critics either loved or they hated Hynes' version of the play. Initially the controversy of the play damaged the production, but positive word of mouth meant that the final weeks of the run almost all sold out (Lonergan 11). One particular damaging review came from critic and playwright Hugh Leonard which he wrote after he saw the play in May 1991. He wrote in *Sunday Independent*:

“Life is full of hard questions and Gary Hynes’s Abbey production of what I can only refer to as the Plough and the Starved was an evening of catechism. Why, for example, was Uncle Peter first discovered lit from below staring at us with a face on which constipation was writ large? Why had Mrs Gogan less hair on her head than Fluther? Why did the Covey call Uncle Peter a lemon-whiskered old swine when there was not a whisker in sight? Why does Rosie Redmond refer to silk transparent stockin’s when she is bare of leg and of foot? And why does a bloody great mirror come down so that I can distinctly see myself in the stalls yawning my head off? Well of course I am being faux naive, and I know full well the reason for the non-scenery, the shaven skill and the white clown faces. This is not so much theatrical camp as concentration camp. Maybe Ms Hynes is making a statement, but in the process O’Casey’s greatest play has been squeezed dry of all its life and fun and passion. I admire Gary Hynes grit and gust, but there is nothing as jaded and dated as yesterday’s avant garde. This Plough is a great show for those who despise entertainment” (Leonard).

Hugh Leonard’s problem with the play seemed to be that Hynes, by making the play such an austere performance to get her message across, left a lot of things out that made the play entertaining. Leonard admires the boldness with which Hynes brought her version to the stage, but according to him a great message is not enough for an audience, they must be enticed by the promise of entertainment. Not only did the bare scenery make the play boring in the critic’s opinion, but it also caused for inconsistencies between the lines of the actors and the things that were seen on stage. Like many other people who went to see the play, the mirror in act two did not go well with Leonard, nor with his rather horrified English friends, and they left at the interval (Leonard). Leonard was not alone in his opinion. Several other papers were critical of the play as well. Linehan from *The Irish Times* called Garry Hynes’s experiment a total failure and Tim Harding from *The Sunday Press* said that some might love

it, but many will hate it. *The Plough and the Stars* is the greatest play by O'Casey according to Leonard and with her version Hynes changed it so drastically that instead of inciting new passion into an audience she took the passion out of the play, together with its life.

Not all reviews, however, were bad. There were also reporters such as Theo Dorgan who acknowledged the new take on the play as something good and freeing, rather than the defilement of the old play.

The present Abbey production of the *Plough and the Stars* is the first I have seen which takes as the play's starting point the language and actual values of the slums in which it is set. Garry Hynes's vigorous and combative setting has freed the play from decades of sentimental encrustation, hauled the characters out from under the essentially patronising orthodox view and set them trembling, bewildered and furious on the national stage.

It must have been obvious that there would be a price to pay for such an unexpected reading of the text but it seems to me more than a little unfair that the price should be reviews which when they are not savagely hostile, are merely damning with faint praise. The expressionist setting will have daunted some, the appearance of some of the characters other than only the mirror seems to have really upset Mr Hugh Leonard; but my own feeling is that the real cause of reaction varying from minor upset to outrage is that Hynes and her cast have stripped away a comfortable play down to its distinctly uncomfortable foundations" (Dorgan).

Dorgan does not deny that there are some flaws in the production, but he argues that the move of Hynes to present the play in a different light is a good and freeing one. The play was not comfortable for the audience the first time it was performed, it was confrontational. But in the 65 years that followed that production people had gotten used to play as something

entertaining and enjoyable to watch. Dorgan also states it is no surprise that when you go against the expectations people might have from a play, there might be repercussion. "It is an uneven production," he says, "but then the same must be said for the play itself" (Dorgan). Dorgan ended his article by wondering if the play had been produced by any theatre other than the Abbey would the backlash still have been that harsh. He thinks that because the Abbey is the National Theatre people might too much expect it to keep old classics pure and perform them in the way they were written. They might not expect the Abbey to have harsh comments about the state of affairs in Ireland and focus on a glorious past rather than a condemning present.

Chapter 4 - The Play a Hundred Years Later, 2016

At the centenary of the Easter Rising there were lots of happenings going on in Dublin and around Ireland throughout the year in order to commemorate the events of Easter week 1916. Some of these events were a commemoration of the women of 1916, on international women's day, and on the 15th of March there was a special day for all educational systems from pre-school to higher education. This day was called Proclamation day. The institutions were asked to put time aside to commemorate 1916. Students were even encouraged to make a video titled the Proclamation for a New Generation and send them in so they could be featured on the Ireland 2016 YouTube channel. On Easter Sunday ceremonies were held and soldiers re-enacted a bit of the revolution while the president laid down a wreath on behalf of the people of Ireland. That ceremony was followed by a Defence Force parade, a show by the Aer Corps flying over Dublin and a 21 gun salute. Specially for the centenary there was also a new visiting centre created at the General Post Office that gave people information about the social and cultural history of the rising. Throughout all branches of society the rising was remembered, and the GAA clubs of Ireland even held a special event to commemorate the role the GAA played in the rising (Murphy).

The Abbey decided to put on their 80th production of *The Plough and The Stars*, a production that did not stop running until May 2018. But where most people chose the centenary to glorify their heroes, like they had done before the troubles in Northern Ireland, director Sean Holmes decided to keep the critical tone of the play.

What's important when you do plays is that you also have to find contemporary references, and what's true when I did the play in Dublin that has real pressure on housing, real poverty in lots of areas of the city. I wanted to find a way to make a production that spoke to contemporary Dublin while honouring the events that happened in 1916 (Holmes, part 2).

Unlike O'Casey and Hynes, Holmes was not out to show what a waste a rebellion can be. Given that in 2016 there were no tensions in Ireland like during the Northern Irish Troubles, nor had it just come out of war as in the 1920s, the military aspects of the play were something that the audience that came to Holmes's production would have difficulty imagining. So instead he focused on the parts that a modern audience could relate to.

O'Casey wrote something that was really incandescent with rage and challenging all these orthodoxies, so I wanted to do the same thing. I wanted it not to impose that but find a way how today we could be challenged by O'Casey's challenge (Holmes part 2).

Holmes found such a challenge in the character of Mollser. Mollser, Mrs Gogan's daughter, suffers from consumption, nowadays better known as tuberculosis. Mollser does not seem to have a large part in the play, but she is actually frequently present on stage. What makes Mollser a strong character is this specific way that O'Casey wrote her. There is this child of only fifteen old dying of a terrible affliction, but everyone around her is too busy having their own opinions about the revolution to attend or care for her. So what O'Casey tried to say with Mollser's character, according to Holmes, was that there is a lot of energy, rhetoric and care for independence, but the fundamental problems of children dying from horrible diseases in poverty is not actually being addressed. This can be seen in the first time that Mollser speaks in the play, at the end of act one where she says to Nora:

“I do be terrible afraid I’ll die sometime when I’m be meself... I often envy you, MRs Clitheroe, seein’ th’ health you have, an’ th’ lovely place you have here, an’ wonderin’ if I’ll ever be sthrong enough to be keepin’ a home together for a man” (O’Casey 31).

In O’Casey’s stage directions he even describes the girl looking like ten even though she is fifteen, ‘for the ravages of consumption have shrivelled her up (O’Casey 31). Nora, an adult, is sitting with a dying girl who proclaims that she is scared to be alone, because she might die then, but Nora does not reply or even acknowledge Mollser’s presence. Mollser returns in act three where she has a conversation with her mother about the consumption, and, her mother especially pretends like she is going to be fine in no time. She is talking as if the only thing Mollser needs is a bit of fresh air and sunshine to get better. Barring one remark from Fluther and one from Bessie she is again ignored for the rest of the act. By the fourth act Mollser has died from her consumption and lack of care. Even after her death she is little talked of. She is shortly mentioned by Fluther and The Covey who are playing cards next to her casket as if it were nothing out of the ordinary.

“**Fluther:** It’s damned hard lines to think of her dead-born kiddie lyin’ there in th’ arms o’ poor little Mollser. Mollser snuffed it sudden too, afther all.

The Covey Sure she never got any care. How could she get it, an’ th’ mother out day an’ night lookin’ for work, an’ her consumptive husband leavin’ her with a baby to be born before he died!” (O’Casey 80).

The Covey’s words do not only show the hardship that Mollser went through, but also how common the disease is in the tenement and how hard it is for Mrs Gogan. She always has to find work to keep her children from starving, she has a baby, and a very sick child, who she cannot look after properly because she is so poor.

Even though children today in Dublin will most likely not be suffering from tuberculosis, there are still too many children that are poverty stricken and restricted (Holmes, part 2). After the Celtic Tiger collapsed in 2008 poverty rose and some people were even evicted from their homes (Barkham). Although the 2016 production takes place ten years later and the economy is doing better again, a lot of poverty and housing problems remained as a result of the collapse. So Holmes wanted to find a way to put that on stage. The normally rather overlooked character, by directors as well as the play's own characters, opens the 2016 version of *The Plough and the Stars*. As the opening imagine Mollser climbs out of the audience and walks on stage to sing the opening, but before she can finish the song she starts coughing. First just a little bit, to make the audience feels a bit sympathetic for her that she has to stop in the middle of her song, but then she starts coughing more and more until in the end she cough up blood all over the paper she is holding, and then the play starts.

So what I wanted to do was foreground the illness of this child and in act four she's in a coffin. She's dead and still nobody pays her any attention. Everyone is engaging in the play how Ireland could change or could be free from British rule, but very few people are really engaging in how you can make it into a country that can look after all its citizens more (Holmes, part 2).

So even though the play did not have a military foundation as the other two plays had, it still had a very political message.

To get this message across Holmes presented the play in a very modern way. The play stages a lot of costumes and uniforms, but faces covered in dirt and women wearing shawls is not something most people will recognise or identify themselves with. So Holmes decided to make his world recognisably modern, so people could identify themselves better with characters, even if the play is not set in contemporary times. This means that the world looks modern and most of the costumes are in contemporary dress, but there is for example no use of

mobile phones. So, for example, instead of having Fluther steal a ceramic jar of whiskey in the play they show him stealing two plastic bags full of beer cans, that spill, and split and break, and that he carries on drinking for the rest of the play. The ceramic jar means nothing to a modern, and especially a young audience, but the cans on the other hand are far more recognisable. Especially young adults can identify themselves with that since they will be the people that would more likely buy cans than spirits, because cans are a lot cheaper. The same thing is done with the sack of flour that the Covey steals. In the stage directions the situation is described as: "The Covey comes staggering in with a ten-stone sack of flour on his back. On the top of the sack is a ham." (O'Casey 69). Ten stone is about 63,5 kilograms and since O'Casey describes that Covey is staggering this means that the bag is far too heavy for him. Seeing the Covey stagger on stage balancing a ham on top of an already too heavy stack of flour, must have been a rather funny sight. However, stealing a sack of flour has little meaning to a modern audience. So what Holmes did was find something that is about as heavy as the stack of flour, but shows the audience how expensive it is as well. He found the solution in a washing machine.

So the audience understand that's a very valuable item he's looting, but it is also ridiculous because it is far too heavy. And I think that's the key that we find empathy and recognise ourselves in the images that are on stage. The conceptual frame of the show is a way that you recognise action or behaviour as something that's presented by the production (Holmes, part 3).



Figure 1: The Covey and Fluther in act 3.

This screenshot shows how the Covey looked on stage with the washing machine on his back. From Peter and the Covey's modern clothes, to the washing machine is a modern item, to the graffiti in the background, everything you see on stage is modern. The picture below shows the outfits of the cast, except for the soldiers' outfits, and a little bit of Jack and Nora's room. Just as in the picture above everything looks modern. Everyone is wearing clothes that people would be in the 21st century. The work clothes fit as well, you can easily recognise Tom as the bartender and Jack in his high visibility jacket as a construction worker. Looking at the pictures from the stage, it is evident that Sean Holmes managed to create a recognisable world for the audiences.



Figure 2: part of the cast posing at the beginning of act 1.

Still the modern production cannot completely leave out the actual rising and its violence completely, even when it is hard to imagine for a contemporary audience what that would have been like. So what Holmes does is throw emphasis on the colonial past and the idea that during the time of the rising the two countries were in fact the same one.

For example the British soldiers were in the streets of Dublin firing artillery at the General Post Office, but also indiscriminately blowing up houses full of innocent citizens next to them. And technically those people they were killing were also British citizens at the time. I didn't know that until I did this and there's a responsibility to be aware and knowledgeable about our history and this is an example and opportunity for us to do that. What O'Casey is saying in the play is challenging simplicities, orthodoxies, simple narrative, rewritings of histories, and he is saying this really ugly, messy thing happened, and you cannot ignore it. And what he does is , it's really funny, it's really daft, and it's full of the ridiculousness of human beings and it's about people having sex, and being drunk, and being greedy, and stealing things and it's also about people being really heroic, and it's about people being really smart. (Holmes, part 4).

So instead of condemning or praising the rising what the Abbey does is use the part about the actual rising as a way to educate audiences who may not know exactly what happened. For example, they use the original 1916 uniforms for the Irish Citizen Army with the slouch cap and green uniform.



Figure 3: Nora pleading with Jack in act 3.

In this still from one of Holmes's videos you can see Nora in her modern dress next to Jack dressed up like the rebels from 1916. This way they still honour the original uniforms, but at the same time have Jack look a bit ridiculous next to Nora in modern dress. It also shows how few resources the rebels had compared to the British soldiers who appear on stage in modern British battledress (Holmes part 2). Also, since the Abbey is Ireland's national theatre, it is the perfect place to educate their audiences through a play. And like Holmes says *The Plough and the Stars* is really the perfect play to do that with. It is very entertaining and it shows the revolution from many different perspectives. The play might revolve around very little plot, but O'Casey's well-rounded characters do resemble many different kinds of people that lived in Dublin during the rising. It revolves around the people who wanted to give their lives for Ireland like captain Brennan and Lieutenant Langon, around people who wanted to better themselves such as Jack, around the poor and sick families such as Mrs Gogan and Mollser, and about the people who were unionists and had family members fighting for the British in WWI such as Bessie Burges.

Even though the play had a rather political and critical message in the midst of all the celebrations in Dublin, it was still received rather well. *The Irish Times* described the play as a vigorous, pacy staging, involving an intermingling of periods rather than an update. The words are O'Casey's, but delivered in voices closer to our own. Catherine Fay's costumes are largely contemporary, with the past gradually seeping in. This has the stealthy effect of creating – as one character puts it – “a fierce an' fanciful idea that dead thins are livin' and livin' things are dead” (Crawley). Helen Meany from *The Guardian* described the play as a

refreshed, high-energy restaging of O'Casey's 1926 classic of political theatre that still had insistent question to ask about social justice. She applauded Holmes for asking his insistent questions about social injustice since that is a side of the play that is often forgotten by a directors of the same play. Yet at the same time it is not only focussed on the political, it is still very moving and entertaining.

Looking at the reviews Holmes ideas seem to have translated well. It is not necessarily an old production based off on O'Casey own time, but is not that new that there is nothing left of the original either. And even though it does not ask the exact same questions as O'Casey did in 1926 it is still very much a political play showing the truths about poverty. A cause that Sean O'Casey himself worked rather hard for in his lifetime. It is a mix that seemed to work rather well with the audiences, so well even that the play made a British and an American run after the original run, before coming back to Ireland to be played in the Gaiety theatre until 2018.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to answer the question: What happens to the performance of *The Plough and the Stars* when it is reinterpreted by modern directors and audiences and what do these reinterpretations mean to the cultural memory of the play? This thesis has shown that the view on historic events and the expectations people might have from a well-known play can change over time. The first example of this was already seen in chapter 2. What O'Casey endeavoured to do with his play was to challenge the common and orthodox opinions about the Easter Rising. O'Casey himself had a drastically different view on the rising than most people had at the time. This has become evident from the riots that ensued during the fourth performance, and some harsh criticisms written about the play. Yet, it had also caused for the rest of the play's run to be sold out. The play has been revived 79 times so far after the first performance, and the fact that it was revived again at all must mean that the play meant something to the people, that it invoked in them something to think about and form an opinion about. So O'Casey already started with the change on cultural memory. Using his knowledge about the rising and the ten years that followed, which had included two wars, Sean O'Casey formed his own opinion about the rising. He then used his own viewpoints to present a different perspective to the people of Dublin. Throughout his play he made them witness the events of 1916 in a way they might have thought about. In a way they might not have wanted to think about the rising. Naturally this does not automatically mean that all of Dublin

suddenly agreed with O'Casey's point of view, but it did mean that there was suddenly more than one way to remember the rising.

As predicted in the hypothesis the second and third productions use the play as reference to their own times. The 1991 production revived most of O'Casey's original message in the way that Hynes shows how war may not be the solution and the devastation that causes to the families, the women at home in particular. But Hynes's desperate wish to bring this point across colour out of the production and left the audience with nothing but a bare stage and an enormous confrontational mirror. This desperation, however, might be explained through the difference in time-frame between O'Casey's and Hynes's productions. O'Casey wrote his play ten years after the events of 1916 had taken place, whereas it was important for Hynes to make the people think about the political situation right then. At the same time as the play was being performed the Troubles in Northern Ireland continued, which is why she brought Sean O'Casey's version of the Easter Rising back to the public's attention in a rather controversial way.

The third production was performed in a time of peace and tried to talk about modern issues while at the same time paying homage to the people who fought and lived through the rising. The modern issue that was important to Sean Holmes was that of the poverty and housing problems in Dublin. Seeking to highlight the how this poverty affected some of society's most vulnerable, children, he gave Mollser a more central role. The play sticks to O'Casey's scripts and there is never a direct link or explicit link made with the collapse of the Celtic Tiger. It is, however, true that the poverty that still remains in Dublin today was caused by this economy crash. Even though the country is on the mend Holmes still wanted to show that it is not there yet there are still too many people struggling. On the other hand, the play seemed to have explaining the rising as another goal. While keeping the Irish rebels in their old uniforms to show how few resources the Irish Citizen Army had, everything else in the

production seemed to be modernised. Holmes explained in his interviews that they did this to make the rising understandable for a contemporary audience. Where a bag of grain means nothing to people in 2016 a washing machine does. By changing small things like that it will be easier for audience to imagine what the rising must have been like. Holmes goal was next to talk about the issues of poverty to make the people remember the rising in a way that they could really understand what it was all about.

Further research that could be done is by looking at more productions of these plays from the same years, but produced by different theatres and companies. Do they all show the same message at the same time or do some theatres, maybe because they do not have the brand of National Theatre, they decide on a different goal for their productions? This also involves looking at theatres from outside Dublin. Since these three productions were all produced by the Abbey and thus performed at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, the messages they try to convey could perhaps be seen as just relevant for Dublin. Not every city, for example, has a housing problem as big as Dublin has. Also because the rising took place in Dublin the city has a special connection to it, which is why a different city might remember the rising differently. With this expansion of plays one could also investigate the performances done in Great Britain. Sean Holmes's interviews were taken by the Hammersmith theatre in London. Britain played a very important role in the rising and O'Casey does not present them a nice light either. It could be very interesting to see how Britain remembers the rising over time compared to how Ireland remembers it. Another thing that could be done is to look at more productions over time, than just these three. I believe that research in more plays could give an even clearer explanation as to how this play and the cultural memory it carries with it changed over time.

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