

# Irish playwright

**S**EÁN Ó Tuama was a true Renaissance man and one of the most significant creative and intellectual figures in both his native Cork and in all of Ireland for a half century before his death in 2006.

As professor, critic, scholar, lecturer, broadcaster, language activist, and poet, he created a legacy that will long survive.

Ironically, however, his visibility and achievements in other areas may have obscured one of his greatest contributions to literature in Irish. Given the recognition he won for his plays at the time, Ó Tuama's career as a playwright was surprisingly brief.

His first play, in all probability his masterpiece, the history play *Gunna Cam agus Slabhra Óir*, had its first performance in 1956, while the last of his plays, *Deán Trócaire ar Shagairt Oga*, was first staged in 1970, so his active engagement with the stage lasted only 15 years or so.

Moreover, throughout the time he was writing his plays, he was, like most of his fellow Gaelic dramatists, very much a part-time playwright. He was, however, fortunate that he was involved with a highly competent Gaelic company, Cork's Compántas Chorcaí, of which he and Dan Donovan were founding members and leading lights.

Unlike many playwrights in Irish he could expect to actually see his work produced, and produced imaginatively and well. Compántas Chorcaí would stage all seven of his plays, usually producing the premieres and often later bringing the plays to An Damer in Dublin.

Another reason Ó Tuama may not get the credit he deserves for his work in the theatre is that a superficial glance at or a mere summary of his plays might suggest there was nothing special about them.

His works certainly seem to fit neatly into just the categories long associated with Gaelic playwrights: history plays, a play based on a tale from the early literature, a work featuring a literary figure from the Gaelic past, a play inspired by subject matter from the Bible, one about the challenges facing a Catholic priest, and one dealing with family tensions arising from the possibility of what is seen as an inappropriate marriage.

A closer look at the plays shows Ó Tuama engaged with all these subjects with a startling originality, in the process creating some of the most important — and in their time, popular — plays ever written in Irish.

His first two were drawn from Irish history, with the full-length *Gunna Cam agus Slabhra Óir* set in the 16th century and the one-act *Moloney* in the 17th. The former shows us Mánus Ó Domhnaill at-

In a new book, PHILIP O'LEARY examines five major playwrights from the golden age of Irish language theatre. Here he pays tribute to one of them, Corkman Seán Ó Tuama



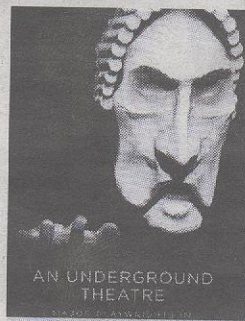
**TALENT:** Máirín Duraic and Seamus Ó Tuama in a scene from Ó Tuama's *Corp Eoghain Uí Shúilleabháin*. Inset: Seán Ó Tuama

tempting to find an honourable *modus vivendi* with the encroaching English, sacrificing some symbols of authority to retain enough of the real thing to protect his people and their way of life. The latter deals with the ethical tragedy that results from allowing such compromise to go too far. Of particular interest

in *Gunna Cam agus Slabhra Óir* is how Ó Tuama manages to unobtrusively introduce themes relating to the Civil War into a play about a far more distant past.

Ó Tuama's third play, and some might argue his best, is in a completely different vein. *Ar Aghaidh linn, a Longadáin* (1959) is set in early Ireland, but it is no reverent recreation of one of the nation's cultural treasures. Influenced by the theatre of the absurd, Ó Tuama creates what he himself called an 'extravaganza', a boundary-breaking romp, in which the famous Mad Sweeney appears in the court of the legendary king Labhraid Loingseach and turns the place upside down. Soon after his arrival, the arid and lifeless intellectualism of the court yields to an anarchic embrace of life, license, love and art.

Ó Tuama would use absurdist techniques again in his fifth play



*Corp Eoghain Uí Shúilleabháin* (1963). In this play, which he sub-titled 'a pathetic farce in which there are three different movements', the body of a contemporary poet with a resonant name from the past, one Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin, refuses to stay dead, much to the distress of the right-thinking people

who have to deal with his mysterious demise.

With a set we are told should look like something by Salvador Dalí and stage directions that instruct actors to at times move like characters in old silent movies or to imitate the Marx Brothers, one can get a sense of how far audiences at this show were from the traditional world of much Irish drama in either of the nation's languages.

Ó Tuama's other three plays all have contemporary settings, two in Irish cities, one in the Gaeltacht. The urban plays take on one of the most persistent challenges to writers of Irish — how to write credibly in Irish about Irish people who would be highly unlikely to speak that language in their everyday lives. *Both Is E Seo M'Óileán* (1963) and *Iúdás Iscariot agus a Bhean* (1967) simply take the language for granted, assuming audiences would be willing to suspend their disbelief if the play itself was worth that effort. Both plays were.

In the former, Ó Tuama stages a struggle between an old-fashioned father and his daughters, particularly one in search of greater personal autonomy. In the metatheatrical *Iúdás Iscariot agus a Bhean*,

we follow the mental and spiritual disintegration of an actor increasingly unable to distinguish himself from his role.

Despite its Gaeltacht setting and priestly protagonist, there is nothing stereotypical about Ó Tuama's final play, *Deán Trócaire ar Shagairt Oga*. Here we witness a priest's crisis of conscience as he tries to decide what to do after a penitent tells him he has molested a young boy. Torn between his obligation to maintain the confidentiality of the confessional and his duty to report the offender and thus prevent further crimes, the priest is forced to acknowledge and come to terms with his own homosexuality.

While Ó Tuama's realistic plays of contemporary life have not aged well, they remain dramas worth reading as milestones in the evolution of theatre in Irish.

In 1970, Uinseann Ó Murchú wrote that Ó Tuama's dramatic work was of 'great importance' for that theatre because he was 'trying to knock down old walls to find a new mould for the drama'. Whatever the reason, or more probably combination of reasons, that Ó Tuama stopped writing plays, his departure from the theatre was an enormous loss for Gaelic drama.

We can be certain that without him, plays of real and lasting merit were never written and that walls that badly needed battering remained — remain — standing. ■ Philip O'Leary is a professor of English at Boston College. This article is based on an extract from his new book, *An Underground Theatre: Major Playwrights in The Irish Language 1930-80* (above inset), published by UCD Press and available from [www.ucdpress.ie](http://www.ucdpress.ie).

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