

An underground theatre: major playwrights in the Irish language 1930–1980, by Philip O’Leary, Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 2017, 350 pp., £63.50 (hardback), ISBN 9781910820155

In the conclusion of *The Abbey Theatre, 1899–1999: Form and Pressure* (2003), Robert Welsh declares, “There has been no sustained creative activity in Irish-language theatre since 1985. It may even be said that the performance of the National Theatre, in seeking to foster an Irish-language dramatic tradition, has been lamentable since 1966” (250). Yet, as Philip O’Leary’s choice of title and topic suggests, Welsh’s assertion is somewhat reductive. Rather than a lamentable lack of Irish-language drama being produced from 1966, this form has remained an invisible or neglected aspect of Irish scholarship and culture. Until recently, with the exception of Padraig O Siadhail’s *Stair Dhramaíocht na Gaeilge 1900–1970* (1993), only a small selection of scholarship has challenged the assertions made by Welsh and the perception that Irish-language theatre “remained almost entirely a part-time amateur venture” (300). As such, O’Leary’s latest monograph, *An Underground Theatre: Major Playwrights in the Irish Language 1930–1980* (2017), is a thoroughly welcome contribution to the subject of Irish-language drama. Additionally, given recent public debates concerning theatre politics and practice in Ireland, this study is timely and provides an outstanding analysis that will encourage fresh discussions about the role of the Irish language in modern and contemporary Irish theatre.

Writing in the “Foreword”, O’Leary states:

The goal throughout has been to show that theatre in Irish has been a living if often invisible art form, with its companies, venues, prizes, and, of course, critics. [. . .] [M]y aim here was to study the work of playwrights who created a body of significant work in Irish rather than to examine a series of individual plays by disparate writers (xiii–xiv). By sensitively employing a methodology that combines an authoritative and extensive amount of research, O’Leary is able to astutely reconcile the political and cultural contexts, as well as the linguistic and aesthetic challenges facing playwrights working in Irish. The introduction provides an outstanding historical overview that contextualises the emergence of Irish language drama from 1899 with the publication of “Young Dunlaing and his fairy lover” (1898) by Seamus O Fiannachta to Eoghan Dobhair’s reproduction of Áine Nic Giolla Bhríde’s *Cor na Cinniuna* (1961) and Thomas Mac Giolla Bhríde’s *Banu an Lae* (1961). Coupled with his exploration of such works are O’Leary’s discussions of the development of Gaelic theatre companies like *Na hAisteoirí* and *Na Cluicheoirí*, and how they impacted the later stages of Irish theatre. As O’Leary argues, the existence of these two groups also fostered the emergence of new playwrights in Irish like Piaras Béaslaí, Gearóid Ó Lochlainn, and Séamus de Bhilmot.

Each of the five chapters that follow open with a biographical and critical introduction; a chronological account of the respective playwright’s dramatic works, production and reception histories, and detailed plot summaries of each play under discussion. Chapter One is devoted to a discussion of Máiréad Ní Ghráda, the most well known of O’Leary’s chosen authors. Demonstrating with ease the reasons for the canonical status of Ní Gharada’s *An Triail* (1964), a play that explores Irish society’s attitudes towards unmarried mothers, O’Leary contends that as this play has been staged regularly over the last 50 years, it remains one of the most prominent works of Irish language theatre. Furthermore, O’Leary’s analysis of Ní Ghráda’s *Lá Buí Bealtaine* (1955), a one-act play on the theme of dementia, and *Breithiúnas* (1968), a political satire that offers a hard-hitting critique of the cult of personality in Irish political culture is exceptional in its awareness of the broader issues facing Irish language politics.

Moving forward, the remaining chapters follow the trajectory of much scholarship concerning the Irish language; namely the divide between native speakers from *Gaeltacht* and speakers who acquire their knowledge educationally. Discussing the works of Séamus Ó Néill, O’Leary focuses on O’Neill’s choice of historical subjects. Ó Néill’s treatment of historical subject matter in *Feall ar an bhFeart* (1966) and *Iníon Rí na Spáinne* (1976) is worthy of attention, if only as a basis for comparison with the treatment of similar historical themes in modern Irish fiction. Moreover, although O’Leary is keen to stress O’Neill’s short-comings as a playwright, he does argue that at least *Iníon Rí Dhún Sobhairce* (1953) and *An tSiúr Pól* (1960) “should be part of any

Gaelic dramatic canon" (106). In a similar vein, writing on Seán Ó Tuama, O'Leary describes *Gunna Cam agus Slabhra Óir*, (1964) as "his masterpiece, the finest history play ever written in Irish" (188). Exploring the cultural and political ideologies, the conflict between idealism and realism at crucial junctures in Irish history, O'Leary provides rich insights into the challenges of political negotiation and compromise. Equally fitting is O'Leary's likening of Ó Tuama's play to that of Brian Friel's *Translations* (1980) and perhaps more subtly, *Making History* (1988).

In his chapter on Eoghan Ó Tuairisc, O'Leary argues that O'Tuasirisc provides a significant insight into the complex dualism of Irish drama in English. For example, O'Leary reveals that O'Tuasirisc was compelled by An Damer's language policy to keep the use of English to a minimum in his musical drama *Carolan* (1978). As a result, the advantages of using a bilingual script to represent the cultural reality of the eighteenth-century Ireland inhabited by the harper Turlough O'Carolan were lost on audiences.

Continuing his exploration of the issues relating to translation and bilingual writing, O'Leary, considers Christopher Ó Floinn's *Mise Raifteirí an Fil* (1973), a consciously bilingual dramatic study of the nineteenth-century blind poet Raifteirí and his influence on writers of the Revival period.

Much of the pleasure of this study comes from the thorough research conducted by O'Leary and the examples taken from a varied array of sources provide thought-provoking discussions. The time period discussed in this study may puzzle some readers given the emergence of drama in the Irish language began with Douglas Hyde, Patrick Pearse and Padraic O Conaire, and continues to this day. O'Leary addresses this issue directly by stating that the works of Hyde, Pearse and O Conaire are "primarily of historic rather than literary interest" (xiv) and 1980 marks the end of "the Golden age of theatre in Irish" (xiv), which he argues stems from the closure of the Damer Theatre in Dublin and *Compántas Chorcaí* in Cork. Along with the works of individual playwrights, O'Leary, foregrounds centres which hold a significant sway with regard to the movement of the Irish drama, notably *Taidhbhearc*, *Comhar Drama*, *Dublin Actors* and *Ghaioth Dobhair*, to name a few. In doing so, O'Leary emphasises the inseparable nature of drama from theatre, the interdependent nature of performance and audience. At times, however, the amount of information offered by O'Leary can be a little distracting. Additionally, the somewhat brief "Afterword" does not do justice to the magnitude of this study, or the contributions of Amharciann de hÍde, or playwrights such as Antaine Ó Flatharta and Celia da Fréine. These issues aside, O'Leary's study offers scholars a series of substantial points from which to expand and further consider the development of Irish language drama, and it is a valuable resource that will be a staple of Irish studies for decades to come.

Robert Finnigan
Nottingham Trent University