been elected a member of the Irish National Literary Society unanimously. Soon after that we were introduced to a tall stately lady, whom I always thought rather austere, and that was Miss A. E. F. Horniman. She had come over in connection with the dressing of *The King’s Threshold*, and immediately took our measurements for the costumes, a few of which are still to be found in our wardrobe. It was not very long after this that we were told Miss Horniman was going to build us a theatre, and from then on till the Abbey was opened, we saw quite a great deal of her. Though she was, as I said, not very approachable to the members of the company – at least so it seemed to me – I only saw her lose her temper once during a rehearsal of one of Yeats’ plays, for which she had also made the costumes; which did not seem to please Mr Yeats too well, and during the rehearsal his mind seemed to be wandering from the play, and in those days he always carried a black stick which at this time he was swinging to and fro, so much that it got on Miss Horniman’s nerves – so much that she exclaimed, ‘For goodness sake, Willie! stop swinging that stick, or leave the rehearsal!’

**NOTE**

Udolphus (Dossie) Wright had been with the Abbey Theatre from the beginning until the 1950s serving as a small-part player, sometimes as a manager, at others as stage manager, occasionally as play director, more often as chief electrician.

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**Irish National Drama***

**W. B. YEATS**

‘The side of our work with which we have achieved our greatest successes,’ said Mr Yeats to our representative, ‘is undoubtedly the peasant comedy and tragedy. We have placed upon the stage for the first time the real Irish life as opposed to the traditional. The dialect of Lever and of Lover¹ was a composite thing, and displayed a very limited understanding of the peasant mind. The proper understanding of the peasant mind only arose with an understanding of Gaelic.

‘These peasant plays’, he continued, ‘are not primarily studies of


E. H. Mikhail (ed.), *The Abbey Theatre*

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peasant life. Synge’s plays, for instance, contain a philosophy of life just as truly as do the lyrics of Shelley. They express the ideas of the man in the symbolism of the peasant world he had studied so deeply and knew so well. His was not photographic art; it was symbolic. He used the Irish peasant as a means of expression, just as the painter uses the colours on his palette. His plays are the complete expression of his own soul.

‘Lady Gregory’s comedy is equally personal, but in a different manner. Both writers studied their symbols profoundly. Lady Gregory, I believe, wrote down over 200,000 words of peasant speech before she wrote a line of her dialogue. Synge, of course, lived in the cottages of the people as one of themselves.

‘That part of our movement represented by Lady Gregory, Synge and myself, is individualistic. We aim at expressing ourselves, they in dialect, myself in verse. But there is a new movement arising that is representative of the social life and the economic conditions of Ireland. We have just produced in Dublin, for instance, and we shall stage it in London, a play by Padraic Colum, in which one sees what one often sees in Ireland, a man whose whole life is a struggle to get free from his duty to his family. The hero, Thomas Muskerry, a workhouse master, is a sort of King Lear of the workhouse. Then we have Harvest, by S. L. Robinson, a powerful play, in which is shown the struggle of the farming classes to bring up their children in the professions, thereby ruining their farms. We have produced another play which is a study of the moral conditions left behind by the Agrarian war, the fear of public opinion and the like — The White Feather, by Wray [sic]. These men are the historians of their times in a way that we are not.

‘It is, of course, the poetical drama in which I am most interested, though until lately we have been unable to do very much in that direction because we have concentrated on our peasant work. Deirdre has lately been played in Dublin, however, and I am now going back with excitement to this work — and with scenery that will give me real pleasure. Mr Gordon Craig, after years of study, has at last created a method for the staying of poetical drama which suggests everything and represents nothing.’

Asked for some description of this creation, Mr Yeats said that the invention was Mr Craig’s patent, of which he had secured the Irish rights, and he could not enter into detail. ‘One sees upon the stage’, said Mr Yeats, ‘a vast Cyclopean place, where one can have the light and shade of Nature for the first time upon the stage. At last one escapes from all the meretriciousness, from the bad landscape painting, from the stage lighting which throws a shadow which in no way agrees with the painted shadow. At last we shall have a stage where there is solemnity and beauty, and where for all that, the verse is free to suggest what picture it will without having to compete with some second-rate painter.’