to be dismissed by me. . . . One actor, F. J. McCormick, sold all his books to keep himself alive’ (Lennox Robinson, *Ireland’s Abbey Theatre: A History 1899–1951* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1951) p. 120).

5. By Mackay and Ord.

6. A translation of *The Kingdom of God*, by Gregorio Martínez Sierra (1881–1947), was presented at the Abbey Theatre on 3 Nov 1924.

7. *Grasshopper*, a play in four acts by Padraic Colum and E. Washburn Freud, founded on a play by Keyserling, was first performed by the Abbey Theatre on 24 Oct 1922.

8. McCormick played the part of Seumas Shields in the first production of *The Shadow of a Gunman* on 12 Apr 1923.

9. *The Silver Tassie* was produced at the Abbey Theatre for the first time on 12 Aug 1935. It had opened at the Apollo Theatre, London, on 11 Oct 1929.


11. Cf. ‘McCormick’s untimely death in April 1947 was a shattering blow to our Theatre’ (Robinson, *Ireland’s Abbey Theatre*, p. 156).

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**The Death-watch Beetle***

DONAGH MACDONAGH

Visitors to Dublin, particularly those who are connected with the theatre, generally make a pious pilgrimage to the Abbey Theatre, and then sometimes wonder why.

The building itself has changed little since the Yeats fire burned behind those walls; the facade has been modified by the addition of a modern chromium canopy and the lobby is bright-walled and brightly lighted, which was dim and oak-lined in the old days. Over the box-office, which has a slot into which the ‘House Full’ notice neatly slips, is a portrait of the founder, an urbane work by Sean O’Sullivan,¹ which shows the Old Man in a rich, poetic garment, gazing with interest towards the money-changing below. Round the walls are other portraits, the best of them by the poet’s father, John Butler Yeats, which mirror the faces of those who made the Abbey great – Augusta Gregory, Miss Horniman, Frank Fay, Lennox Robinson. In the summer months visitors peer respectfully at these, and their progression from picture to picture is described by the Abbey staff as ‘doing the Stations of the Cross’.

An electric bell rings and the enquiring stranger follows the crowd down a few steps into the auditorium – should he be late he will find the door closed in his face, since the Abbey has in recent years imposed the

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excellent rule that the doors close at the rise of the curtain. Inside he will find as curious an architectural eccentricity as any in the history of the theatre, but so many famous voices have echoed from these walls that the oddity of design merely adds to the interest of the place.

The orchestra is playing the overture to *Oberon*, the curtain, a worn black with vertical gold strips and two obvious if symmetrical patches, is obscured by a safety curtain which slowly descends and rises to reassure the nervous. The house is full, the bewildered stranger is examining his programme, which bears on its face a huntress, and an elkhound from the William Morris kennel. He finds that he is now in *Amharclann na Mainistreach*, ‘The Theatre of the Monastery’, where people with Gaelic names, printed in Roman type, are playing the parts of characters with readily understandable English names. This curious linguistic ambivalence is symptomatic of the Abbey today.

The last patron slips down the steps, a head is withdrawn from a door beside the stage, a gong sounds, another, the house lights dim and go out; a third gong and the dusty curtain rises on a cottage interior. But no famous Abbey actor takes the stage – they are all dead or in Hollywood or Elstree.²

Ah, it is a poor thing when a great institution comes to the end of its days, and when those who saw it in its might mourn its decay and popularity. The Abbey in the days of its greatness was empty of the populace, but now, in its old age, ‘with flattering tongue it speeds the parting guest’.³

In the early days Yeats was sometimes furious if some meretricious quality in a play secured it a fleeting popularity, and the indiscriminate laughter of those whom he considered the mob would send him raging from the theatre. Today those who mocked and rioted at *The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Plough and the Stars* pack the theatre of his dream.

It was the theatre of Yeats. The plays, with the exception of those of Synge and O’Casey, were seldom great; the sets were never extraordinary, the lighting consisted of an unchanging amber, but the acting and the cold high integrity of the poet made for greatness. The Abbey was Yeats. While he lived it lived too, and when he died it died with him.

He had made it out of nothing, in a dead time in a moribund country, when English touring companies came to Dublin as one more step on their provincial Calvary, when the English domination of Ireland seemed complete. But in those frozen years at the end of the nineteenth century a new national movement was formed which was to sweep the English from the country, a new theatrical movement which was to make the name of Ireland famous in the intellectual world, and a language movement which in the end would help to destroy the Abbey from within – the resurgent Irish Republican Brotherhood, the Abbey Theatre and the Gaelic League, a strange and portentous triple birth.