The Abbey and the Future*

FERGUS LINEHAN. Well, we'll start with you, Tomás MacAnna, as a present member of the Abbey company. What effect you hope the new theatre will have on you, your work and the work of the Abbey in general?

THOMÁS MACANNA. Well, first we start with the big advantage of moving into a new theatre, designed specially for plays, a building without any of the handicaps which one associates with the theatre in the olden times. Of course, the Queen's was a variety theatre, which was meant to be only a temporary abode, an abode which lasted for years. In the new theatre the actual operating costs will be cut and, of course, the new facilities are going to make it easier for us to devise new and exciting productions.

LINEHAN. Are you satisfied with the theatre from a technical point of view, from what you've seen of it?

MacANNA. From a technical point of view, I’m going to talk now as one who hasn’t worked in the theatre as such, just gone along and seen it. I think it's going to be very satisfactory. There is the novelty of a new theatre, new paint, new walls. A theatre where the dust isn’t accumulating on your script when you leave it down for two minutes. I feel the main thing about moving into a new theatre is this: that you have an opportunity of breaking with a certain tradition of writing. You must remember to a certain extent, we have the players (there’s never been a shortage of good players in Dublin), set designers, technicians and so on. The question is have we got the dramatists who are content to devote more time and not give us once more a re-hash of themes and characters which we see over and over again?

LINEHAN: Could I ask you, Seamus, do you think this is what we’re going to get from the new Abbey, something new, in fact?

SEAMUS KELLY. Tomáš MacAnna spoke about need for new dramatists and the adequacy of current actors. I didn’t hear him say anything about need for new managements, need for a new directorial slant. In my quite honest opinion, until there is a complete overthrow of the people in power at the Abbey at the moment, and there’s no point in putting a tooth in this, the new Abbey will offer us nothing better than the old Abbey outside the mechanics it has.

LINEHAN. Hilton, what do you think about this question of management—do you think it’s essential?

HILTON EDWARDS. I would say it’s not only a change of policy. I’m very impressed by what Mr MacAnna said about the promise of new techniques and so on. As I see it at the moment, not knowing the new theatre, I have to bear in mind that the theatre is only an instrument. Now I would say that the first experience of this instrument would be a rather awkward one—there would be a period of trying to get used to it. Against this, there is the great novelty of an audience coming into a new building, and I think that the first six months will be a sort of research as far as the audience is concerned by which time the company should have got used to the new instrument. On the other hand, I don’t think any theatre, or any theatre movement, is dependent on an instrument, any more than the public is really dependent on it. I’ll put it another way. I understand that very, very fine photographs can be taken with a very, very primitive camera, and I’d like it better to see a very fine photographer moving a very primitive camera, than a less skilled photographer getting tied up with the more complicated machine. Therefore I’m still concerned with the company, the two Ps, the policy and the personality, more than I am impressed necessarily with a theatre.

JIM FITZGERALD. One thing I’d like to say. What astonishes me about the architecture is that it seats 600 plus people; this to me expresses an immense pessimism about the theatre, that a national theatre in a country whose theatrical traditions are enormous should be built in such a manner that large space is given to the stage and the auditorium is cut down to such a size. Is it actually possible that a management of a national theatre should build what amounts to only 250 seats more than the Gate, which was built out of nothing?

MacANNA. I myself would be quite happy to have an auditorium of 1000, 1200. But I think this was discussed pretty thoroughly and I would agree with an audience of approximately 700. What we are concerned with particularly is the intimacy of the play in this auditorium and we feel that the whole point of the old Abbey— one of its advantages was that it was a most intimate theatre to play in.

FITZGERALD. But architecturally nowadays, this problem has been solved.

BARRY CASSIN. Chichester, Nottingham, I think.

MacANNA. Quite possibly so, but nevertheless I do think that a 700 maximum auditorium is to my mind good for Dublin.

KELLY. I don’t think the physical dimensions of a theatre matter all that much. Let’s get back to policy. I think the Abbey, certainly the new