

The Biography in Performance

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Since the 1950s, Sean O'Casey's own life has repeatedly been a source of fascination for dramatists, and there have been a number of dramatic reconstructions of his life, often based on his own autobiographical writings. In 1956, Paul Shyre adapted the first of O'Casey's autobiographies in a production staged at New York's Kaufmann auditorium. David Krause and Patrick Funge followed with theatrical versions of O'Casey's autobiographies staged at the Lantern Theatre in Dublin between 1965 and 1972. The best-known example of these dramatisations was the 1965 MGM film, *Young Cassidy*, directed by John Ford and Jack Cardiff, starring Rod Taylor as O'Casey. Other, more recent, dramatisations include Harold Prince's *Grandchild of Kings*, which appeared off Broadway in 1992, an episode of the popular ABC Television series *Young Indiana Jones* (1992), covering the events of the Easter Rising, and Colm Tóibín's *Beauty in a Broken Place* (2004), which pictures O'Casey working at the Abbey during the 1920s. This chapter focuses on a selection of these dramatisations to show how an adapted version of O'Casey's life may bear little resemblance to the lived reality, but has been created to suit the ideological needs of a particular historical moment.

O'Casey wrote extensively about his life in autobiographies, that like the subsequent dramatisations mentioned, contain many historical inaccuracies. The playwright's account of his life from birth to the age of seventy-three spans over six volumes, covering his struggles with poverty as a young boy in the slums of Dublin, his political activities, his collaborations with the Abbey, and his later life in England.

Critics have since debated the accuracy of O'Casey's accounts, with some condemning the works' merits as autobiography due to O'Casey's tendency to combine fact with fiction. For instance, Anthony Butler questions O'Casey's descriptions of his working-class background, concluding that O'Casey never lived in the slums and that his father came from 'a good strata of society'.¹

While O'Casey undoubtedly experiments with aspects of traditional autobiographical writing, dismissing this work for a lack of historical accuracy is a misinterpretation of autobiography. As Georges Gusdorf argues, we must 'give up thinking about autobiography in the same way as we do an objective biography, regulated only by the requirements of the genre of history'. The protagonist of an autobiography, the author, 'does not show us the individual seen from outside in his visible actions but the person in his inner privacy, not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been'.² The half-truths, inaccuracies, and silences in an autobiography can thus be as revealing as the verifiable historical events and people depicted as they expose insights into the innermost thoughts and feelings of the work's subject. The protagonist of O'Casey's autobiographies is also contradictory, elusive, and mutable. This fictional quality of the autobiographies 'O'Casey' is heightened by the author's decision to write in the third person about a figure who 'is ever shifting, from "Johnny Casside", to "Irish Jack", and then "Sean O'Cathasaigh", before eventually arriving at "Sean O'Casey"'.³ As we will see, when examined together, the dramatisations discussed also offer multiple O'Caseys depending on their focus and the artistic decisions made by adaptors. In the autobiographies and the dramatisations, then, a fascinatingly diverse, fragmented, and varying O'Casey may be discerned.

Young Indiana Jones

In 1992, ABC television broadcast *Young Indiana Jones*, a small-screen spin-off from the popular *Indiana Jones* film franchise, with one episode focusing on the events of the Easter Rising. In line with the rest of the series, this episode offers a ‘somewhat simplistic’ account of a moment of historical significance.⁴ O’Casey is central to the episode’s narrative: he functions as a guide that helps Jones, and by extension the audience, navigate the complexities of Irish politics in this period. To that end, O’Casey is situated as an outsider, a visionary untouched by the idealism motivating the nationalists participating in the uprising. O’Casey offers a panoramic view of occurrences, forming connections and a coherent narrative through which the events can be explained.

O’Casey’s role as an outsider is firmly established for viewers as early as their first encounter with the dramatist. We first meet O’Casey, played by actor John Lynch ‘as a bespectacled and hunched thinker’, sitting reclusively in a pub reading whilst a brawl breaks out between a Republican and a soldier of the British Army.⁵ O’Casey seems equally out of place at the Abbey at a point in which Yeats is rejecting his plays as ‘too realistic’. O’Casey on the other hand, views Yeats’ work as ‘having nothing to do with Ireland as it is now’. This portrayal of O’Casey as an outsider is consistent with accounts of his meetings with Yeats and other key figures in the autobiographies. O’Casey emphasises class differences, referring repeatedly to Yeats and others as ‘gods’, not to show reverence but to remind the reader of this elite’s otherworldly failure to grasp reality. Unlike the remote Yeats, O’Casey sees things as they really are.

Through exploring and problematising the dichotomy between theatre and real life, the show offers weight to O’Casey’s side of the debate. This episode opens with

the older Indiana Jones defending his interest in TV dramas to his daughter, who describes them as ‘trash’ despite his assertion that ‘there are times when life is just like theatre’. To illustrate his view, the lines between real life and theatre are repeatedly blurred in subsequent scenes. O’Casey explains to Jones the power of live performance to join the actors and audience in communion, a moment in which the ‘theatre becomes life and life becomes theatre’. The audience is then shown instances of this: young Jones plays the role of a wealthy American millionaire to impress Maggie, an Irish girl he meets, and he later uses O’Casey’s words to explain the Easter Rising as a theatrical spectacle in which life once again becomes theatre. These help to bolster O’Casey’s claim that theatre needs to reflect life off-stage as there is ample dramatic material to be found outside the theatre, rendering Yeats’ use of legends and myths unnecessary. Thus, although *Young Indiana Jones* focuses on O’Casey’s ‘youthful failures’, the show presents O’Casey as possessing an acute, and distinctly un-Yeatsian, intellect and vision.⁶

Young Cassidy

MGM’s 1965 feature film *Young Cassidy*, unlike *Young Indiana Jones*, emphasises O’Casey’s physical appearance and sexual prowess over his intellectual abilities. This commercial movie simplifies and romanticises relevant religious and political contexts to focus on the sexual aspects of the autobiographies. The film downplays O’Casey’s radical politics to present the dramatist as a charming and likeable womaniser, as reflected in the film’s advertising tagline: ‘Bellowing, Brawling, Womanizing Your Way! He’s in action morning, noon and night – after every woman and wonder in sight!’. Far from the reclusive and bookish O’Casey in *Indiana Jones*, the muscular Australian actor, Rod Taylor, portrays O’Casey in *Young Cassidy*

as a Hollywood action hero; physically athletic and popular with women. Despite this emphasis on O'Casey's physical strength, *Young Cassidy* also makes significant changes to his familial relationships as depicted in the autobiographies. While in the autobiographies, O'Casey is annoyed by the presence of his sister and children when they return to the family home after the death of Ella's husband, *Young Cassidy* shows O'Casey stroking Ella's hair and buying gifts for her children, creating a more sympathetic and empathetic protagonist for the film.

This focus on O'Casey produces largely two-dimensional supporting characters, particularly the female figures, who exist solely to further the plot or to shed light on the film's hero. O'Casey's first love interest in the film, Daisy Battles, whom John Ford described as a 'poor little tart', lacks much of the nuance of the autobiographies.⁷ The encounter between O'Casey and Daisy in the film obscures the relevant historical context. In the autobiographies, O'Casey and Daisy meet during pro-Boer demonstrations in Dublin in 1899, where Daisy offers an eloquent defence of the nationalist position in an argument in a pub. *Young Cassidy* moves the encounter to a confused representation of the 1913 Dublin lockout, as Daisy falls into O'Casey's arms, laughing hysterically amid the chaos before spitting in a soldier's face. In keeping with the film's emphasis on O'Casey as a womaniser, the film then turns O'Casey's first somewhat awkward sexual encounter into a passionate love scene between two evidently sexually experienced individuals. These changes reduce Daisy from an articulate and politically conscious character, from whom the O'Casey of the autobiographies 'learnt a lot', to little more than the focus of O'Casey's erotic appetites (*PH* 372). This simplistic characterisation of Daisy is reflected in reviews of the film where one critic refers to Daisy as a 'lustful chorus girl', and mentions of Julie Christie's attractive appearance are reoccurring.⁸

O'Casey's other love interest, Nora Creena, is equally one-dimensional. She is a timid and 'self-effacing' bookseller with little agency, whom a drunk O'Casey aggressively grabs and kisses before later falling in love with her.⁹ When his friend describes the incident as 'indecent', O'Casey, shirtless, confirms his status as a womaniser by educating this friend on how to attract women, describing Nora as 'afraid' in the process: 'She is afraid, like you, of taking a risk. It's a timid man's way. Not God's way'. This fear is never explained to the viewer and Nora's character undergoes no progression by the end of the film, where she ends her relationship with O'Casey, fearing that she will hold him back.

O'Casey's collaborations with the Abbey are also simplified, eliminating the complex interrelationships that existed between the real-life Yeats, Lady Gregory, and O'Casey. The founders of the Abbey are mainly shown bestowing advice upon O'Casey, and thus fulfilling little purpose in the plot other than to push the hero on his journey. In direct contrast to O'Casey's use of 'god' to describe Ireland's theatrical elite as explained earlier, Yeats and Lady Gregory are presented as unearthly guardian angels of O'Casey – one critic blasted the portrayal of Yeats as the film's worst feature with 'Michael Redgrave [...] dashing off his couple of scenes like someone's part in a fancy-dress charade'.¹⁰ In this volume, Christopher Morash has shown the collaborative way in which O'Casey's Abbey plays came to the stage, but in MGM's film, those collaborators are pushed to the margins, and O'Casey's endeavours become largely a 'sole affair'.¹¹

Grandchild of Kings

In February 1992, director and playwright, Harold Prince, adapted for the stage the first two of O'Casey's autobiographies, *I Knock at the Door* and *Pictures in the*

Hallway. The play premiered off Broadway in a production involving singers, jig dancers, and a cast of twenty actors from New York's Irish Repertory Theatre Company playing more than eighty roles. The production received mainly lukewarm reviews with critics commending the play's staging but questioning its dramatic merits, an issue some connected to the play's source material. Frank Rich claimed that Prince 'simply has not succeeded in transforming those books' prose into drama',¹² while John Simon concluded that the play did not work: 'O'Casey's life, though turbulent, is not especially epic'.¹³

Arguably, the autobiographies possess distinct dramatic qualities. James Moran highlights the 'playful, ahistorical, and allegorical elements of those writings', which he argues are 'suited to the realm of dramatic presentation'.¹⁴ The many political, social, and religious discussions between characters in the autobiographies are also reminiscent of the debates fundamental to early twentieth-century problem plays. Carmela Moya reads the autobiographies as not only dramatic, but specifically epic, summing up the 'epic quality' of the books in their ability to communicate 'a national as well as a psychological evolution' in addition to 'a historical sweep which gives breadth to the narrative with all its shifting perspectives and structural tensions'. In Moya's view, 'the epic quality is further enhanced by the panoramic effect, innumerable characters and the intensity of vision'.¹⁵

While Prince's adaptation maintains aspects of the qualities Moya notes, specifically in offering a 'panoramic vision', it fails to connect individual moments to larger national debates, offering a coming-of-age story that mostly focuses on O'Casey's personal evolution divorced from relevant socio-political contexts. Eugene Lee designed the sets for the production in his signature 'environmental mode' with a 'six-level space, full of ramps and stairways' that 'enfolded the audience in a tumult

that represented the streets, shops, hospitals, theatres and riverbanks of the young O'Casey's world'.¹⁶ This setting offered viewers a wide perspective, helping them to situate O'Casey's life-events in their larger physical environment. The levelling of the stage, which extended the performance space, and minimalistic staging used – Prince's notes insist on 'the barest minimum of obligatory furniture' – cleverly allowed for the inclusion of, in Moya's words, the 'innumerable characters' featured in the autobiographies.¹⁷

The play's portrayal of Dublin, however, undermines elements of the political context of the original autobiographies. *Grandchild of Kings* opens with a direct address from Old Sean – the play includes three O'Caseys at different points in the dramatist's life – addressing the audience and referring to the Dublin of his childhood as 'a city of song': 'You hadn't very far to go from where you happened to live before you met somebody singing a song in the street'.¹⁸ The play continues with this emphasis on music, featuring a number of songs, which the promotional material for the 1992 production highlighted and described as 'traditional Irish music'. The music, which helps to create, in line with Prince's vision, a 'joyful play' ideal for school productions,¹⁹ presented a 'cartoonish' and romanticised Dublin.²⁰ This aspect of the play and production obscure the nuances of the political and religious conflicts of early twentieth-century Ireland – despite the script including lines and scenes from the autobiographies that relate to these issues – not to mention O'Casey's own tumultuous relationship with his country of birth.

In this context, the primary focus of the play becomes O'Casey's personal growth through his struggles with poverty and experiences with women. The play takes from the autobiographies many of the moments O'Casey recounts of his life in the slums of Dublin. Amongst the many events depicted, two stand out as decisive

moments that shape O'Casey's character and life trajectory. Both acts in the play end with one of O'Casey's romantic encounters: the ending of act one presents O'Casey's first kiss with Jennie Clitheroe and towards the end of act two the audience sees a representation of the scene between O'Casey and Daisy also featured in *Young Cassidy*. Old O'Casey describes his younger self following this encounter as a 'newly baptized Sean O'Casey' who runs through the streets remembering his days with Jennie. O'Casey is now 'resolved to be strong; to stand out among many; to quit himself like a man'. The reference to Jenny frames O'Casey's growth from a young boy to a man around these two romantic experiences. From life, now O'Casey 'had learned much', and, pointing to O'Casey's later success in the theatre, the play ends by revealing that O'Casey would 'create things out of his own life' worthy of 'hanging in the hallway for other people to see'.²¹ The life from which O'Casey draws his inspiration as depicted in *Grandchild of Kings* is mostly focused on O'Casey's personal relationships. This interpretation, of course, neglects the political and religious commentary so deeply embedded in O'Casey's own writing, but does offer a narrative of personal growth that chimes with American notions of individual responsibility and self-improvement.

Beauty in a Broken Place

Beauty in a Broken Place is a memory play in which O'Casey narrates the events surrounding the 1926 premiere of his play, *The Plough and the Stars*, at the Abbey Theatre. Tóibín was invited to write the play following the publication of his historical essay, *Lady Gregory's Toothbrush*, and the drama was performed as part of celebrations marking the Abbey's centenary celebrations in 2004. Through dramatising some of the responses to O'Casey's controversial play, *Beauty in a*

Broken Place asks key questions about memory, history, and legacy formation. Put simply, the play is about, in the words of the fictionalised Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington (one of the key figures opposing O’Casey’s portrayal of those participating in the Easter Rising) ‘how we remember’, as ‘this defines more than anything who we are and who we will be’.²² By bringing together two key moments in the history of the Abbey, the premiere of O’Casey’s play and the theatre’s one-hundred-year anniversary, Tóibín ponders not only Irish history, politics, and culture, but also the Abbey’s involvement and role in these debates.

Tóibín attempts to correct O’Casey’s own account of the 1926 riots, as depicted in the autobiographies, by offering a more ‘objective’ account of the events.²³ In Tóibín’s version, the opposition to the play is much more than ‘a mass of moving, roaring people’ (*IFTW* 150). This group consists of grieving widows with a claim to Ireland’s past, which they are given ample opportunity to defend in the play. The weight of their defence is such that even O’Casey is moved as he finds himself unable to explain his position when confronted with Sheehy-Skeffington’s conviction and sincerity. O’Casey mentions this episode in the autobiographies but blames his failure to speak on his illness. The multi-rolling in the play, a ‘distancing effect’ that encourages audiences to ‘form their own personal perspectives’, further highlights the validity of Sheehy-Skeffington’s concerns.²⁴ At the Abbey, the same performer played Lady Gregory and Sheehy-Skeffington, two women on opposing sides of the argument, emphasising their shared loss of men close to them during the war years. By drawing these parallels and giving the opposition a reasonable case to defend, *Beauty in a Broken Place* prompts the audience to consider the different ways in which history is subject to manipulation, and asks how, and by whom, past events can and should be retold.

O'Casey's presence on stage is key to highlighting the play's concern with the significance of the past and how that past is remembered. Indeed, there are multiple O'Caseys in the play. We see the dramatist participate in the events depicted, whilst also acting as the narrator. This narrator speaks lines from subsequent sections of the autobiographies – for instance when expressing his regret for not accepting an invitation to see Lady Gregory for one final time before her death – as an older O'Casey looking back on the past.²⁵ There is one other O'Casey in the play who is more difficult to situate temporally. O'Casey delivers his final speech as a more shadowy figure awakened to reflect on his collaborations with the Abbey, sharing his experiences with a contemporary audience gathered on the theatre's centenary. This simultaneous representation of multiple O'Caseys blurs boundaries between the past and present, showing time as non-linear to remind the audience of how the past may echo in the present, and celebrating the continuing relevance of O'Casey (and the Abbey) to modern Ireland.

Tóibín uses an eclectic mix of material to compose his version of events, which in addition to O'Casey's autobiographies, also includes 'Yeats's speeches and poetry, Lady Gregory's notebooks and diaries' amongst other material.²⁶ Indeed, in constructing the character of O'Casey, Tóibín claims not to have relied on the autobiographies, as 'they're written in a style which is now dramatically impossible – full of word-play, full of jokiness'. Instead, Tóibín aims to create a more vulnerable and seemingly honest O'Casey, who could be 'slightly melancholy, rueful, sometimes angry and sometimes funny'.²⁷ By combining multiple source materials, Tóibín 'desacralizes the texts' not only to reimagine the key figures of his story but also to construct a play that asks questions about the authority of different forms of historical evidence.²⁸ Just as with the characters who defend their authority to retell the history

of the Easter Rising, the audience can also query the play's version of events and the suitability of various materials used to tell of Ireland's turbulent twentieth-century history.

In a move away from idealising objectivity in historical accounts, Tóibín's play presents a case for the value of testimony, and consequently emotions and subjectivity, in remembering the past. Sheehy-Skeffington claims that she 'knew the heroes', and that her 'own husband died', implying that her account should be considered seriously because it is based on direct experience of the events and on the pain that she has herself endured.²⁹ O'Casey remains unmoved by Sheehy-Skeffington's arguments, 'by what she thought or that she was right', but is affected by her 'great voice' and 'her hurt'.³⁰ O'Casey feels stunned by Sheehy-Skeffington's presence, the emotions expressed in her voice, in other words the delivery of her arguments. This is a direct response to Lady Gregory's exasperated questioning of the Abbey's legacy in a conversation with Yeats earlier in the play: 'I need you to answer me now if it has mattered what we have done, if we will leave behind nothing but a few play-scripts'.³¹ O'Casey's encounter with Sheehy-Skeffington draws attention, not to the words on the page, but to the affective power of performance. Although transitory, the moment of performance is powerful and significant. The plays are flickers of light that, in O'Casey's words 'glitter', temporarily to illuminate the darkness.³² This light may fade or disappear, but its impact may long be felt. *Beauty in a Broken Place* highlights the significant role the Abbey has played in forming Ireland's emotional memory, a feat that the play presents as a collective effort of which O'Casey's endeavours are only one part.³³

Like *Beauty in a Broken Place*, the afterlife of O'Casey's autobiographies in this and other dramatisations also reveals insights into key aspects of history and the

practice of historiography. Firstly, this legacy highlights the significance of one's positionality when looking to the past – who tells a story and from what vantage point. Secondly, the echoes of O'Casey's autobiographies in these dramatisations demonstrate the retelling of the past to be significantly collaborative – a coming together of multiple voices. Ironically then, despite their many historical inaccuracies, O'Casey's autobiographies and their dramatisations not only shed light on how O'Casey wished to be remembered and how he has since been reimagined, but also on how, more broadly, we might access, recall, and understand the past.

¹ Quoted in Robert G. Lowery, 'Introduction', in Robert G. Lowery, ed., *Essays on Sean O'Casey's Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), p.xiv.

² 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography', in James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.45.

³ James Moran, 'Moving-Pictures in the Hallway: Dramatising the Autobiographies of Seán O'Casey', *Irish Studies Review*, 20. 4 (2012): 389-405 (p.391).

⁴ Pádraic Whyte, *Irish Childhoods: Children's Fiction and Irish History* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), p.6.

⁵ James Moran, *The Theatre of Seán O'Casey* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.191.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Peter Bogdanovich, *John Ford* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p.107.

⁸ 'Young Cassidy', *Kinematography Weekly*, 25 February 1965, p.10.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ 'Young Cassidy, Great Britain, 1964', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1965, p.37.

¹¹ 'Young Cassidy', p.10.

¹² 'Pipsqueak's Progress, Playwright's Regress', *New York Magazine*, 9 March 1992, p.76-7.

¹³ "'Grandchild of Kings' Lets Prince Work on Big Canvas, New York Times, February 1992 <<https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1992-02-19-9201160171-story.html>>.

¹⁴ Moran, 'Moving-Pictures', p.393.

¹⁵ 'The Autobiographies as Epic', in Lowrey, ed., p.205

¹⁶ Carol Ilson, *Harold Prince: A Director's Journey* (New York: Proscenium Publishers, 2000) , p.371.

¹⁷ Prince, *Grandchild of Kings* (London: Samuel French, 1993), p.vii.

¹⁸ Prince, *Grandchild*, p.11.

¹⁹ Maureen Levins Boyd, and Harold Prince, 'An Interview with Harold Prince on "Grandchild of Kings"', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 19.1 (July 1993): 79-85 (p.85).

²⁰ Moran, 'Moving-Pictures', p.400.

²¹ Prince, *Grandchild*, pp.118-19

²² Colm Tóibín, *Beauty in a Broken Place* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2004), pp.69-70

²³ Wei H. Kao. *Irish Drama and War in the Twentieth Century* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2022), p.85.

²⁴ Kao, p.87.

²⁵ Tóibín, *Beauty*, pp.3-4

²⁶ Anders Olsson, 'The Broken Place: Memory, Language, Traditions, and Storytelling in Colm Tóibín's Texts', in Hedda Friberg et al., ed., *Recovering Memory: Irish Representations of Past and Present* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), p.137.

²⁷ 'In the Shadow of a Playwright', *Irish Times*, 7 August 2004 <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/in-the-shadow-of-a-playwright-1.1152487>>.

²⁸ Olsson, p.137.

²⁹ Tóibín, *Beauty*, p.59.

³⁰ Tóibín, *Beauty*, p.73.

³¹ Tóibín, *Beauty*, p.54.

³² Tóibín, *Beauty*, p.77

³³ Moran, *The Theatre of Seán O'Casey*, p.192.