

The Playboy of the Western World

By J.M. Synge



Table of Contents

- 3 Cast of Characters
- 4 About the Play: Synopsis
- 5 A Biography of J.M. Synge
- 6 A Timeline of J.M. Synge's World
- 7 Location: County Mayo
- 8 J.M. Synge and The Playboy of the Western World
- 10 W.B. Yeats, Molly Allgood, and The Abbey Theatre
- 11 English Language Arts: Glossary
- 13 Visual Arts: Erskine Nicol and the Irish Shebeen
- 15 Music: The Sea Shanty
- 16 Resource Guide
- 17 About Theatre Arts
- 18 About A Noise Within

FUNDING FOR A NOISE WITHIN'S EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS IS PROVIDED IN PART BY:

The Ahmanson Foundation, Alliance for the Advancement of Arts Education, The Annenberg Foundation, Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich, B.C. McCabe Foundation, Anonymous, The Catherine C. Demeter Foundation, Disney Worldwide Outreach, Employees Community Fund of Boeing California, The Green Foundation, Kiwanis Club of Glendale, Lockheed Financial Credit Union, Los Angeles Breakfast Club Foundation, Los Angeles County Arts Commission, Metropolitan Associates, National Endowment for the Arts- Shakespeare for a New Generation, The Kenneth T. and Eileen L. Norris Foundation, The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, Steinmetz Foundation, The Waterman Foundation, Weingart Foundation, WWW Foundation, Wells Fargo Foundation, The Capital Group Companies Charitable Foundation.















Setting

The play is set at the turn of the 20th century in county Mayo, Ireland in a rural tayern. Christopher "Christy" Mahon – a young man. At the beginning of the play, Christy shows up as a stranger in the small pub owned by Michael Flaherty. Tired and bedraggled, Christy tells a tale of past bad deeds that earn the astonishment and admiration of the townspeople.

Margaret Flaherty – Called "Pegeen Mike" after her father. "Peg" or its pet name variant "Pegeen" is a nickname for "Margaret", and the Irish convention adds the father's first name after—"Mike". Pegeen is the pretty, quickwitted daughter of Michael Flaherty. She immediately takes a liking to Christy, casting aside her intended fiancé Shawn Keogh.

Shawn Keogh – a plain young farmer who has earned the consent to marry Pegeen, his second cousin.

Old Mahon – Christy's father, who follows him to the small town, having survived his previous attempt to kill him.

Michael James Flaherty – Pegeen's father, mostly offstage during the play.

Widow Quinn – A widow of about thirty. Lonely, she takes a liking to Christy and seeks his affection, competing with Pegeen.

Philly Cullen - a farmer.

Jimmy Farrell – a farmer.

Sara Tansey, Susan Brady, Honor Blake, and Nelly – The village girls who become Christy's best admirers.

A Bellman

Peasants

About the Play: Synopsis



Theatre Lore

Why do actors say "break a leg"?

Perhaps the saying comes—in a complicated way—from the use of "leg." In theatre, a "leg" is a part of the mechanics that open and close the curtain. To break a leg is to earn so many curtain calls that opening and closing the curtain over and over during final applause causes the curtain mechanics to break. At the outset of theatre tradition, players acted outdoors, where there were no stages or curtains. Applause came in the form of foot stomping, which could indicate another origin of this phrase.

IN RURAL COUNTY MAYO, Ireland in the early 1900's, a small town receives a new mysterious visitor. Christy Mahon, a young man who claims to be the son of a wealthy farmer, gains the immediate interest of the town. This is especially true of young barmaid Pegeen Mike, whose infatuation with Christy's tall tales of past misdeeds threatens to unseat Shawn Keogh as her suitor. Christy claims to be on the run from the law, having murdered his father, but his story changes and becomes more far-fetched with each retelling.

Threatened, Shawn attempts to unseat Christy by enlisting the support of the Widow Quinn, who does her best to seduce him. However, the plan fails. Just as Christy attracts even more affection by winning a donkey race (using the slowest donkey,) Christy's father arrives in town, very much alive. Old Mahon was indeed wounded in an altercation with Christy, but quickly dispels Christy's bad-boy image. Once the mystique is gone, so too is Pegeen's love and the affection of the townspeople. In order to reclaim Pegeen's love, Christy attacks his father a second time. This time, he is determined to commit the murder about which he once boasted

However, as Christy returns to report his crime, the townspeople turn on him. Instead of rekindling her love, the confession spurs Pegeen to lash out. Christy is imprisoned and all prepare to hang him. However, Christy's life is saved when Old Mahon, beaten and bloodied, crawls back onto the scene, having survived the second attack. Having lost Pegeen's love and suffered humiliation, Christy and Old Mahon prepare to leave the town in order to wander the wide world. ❖

A Biography of J.M. Synge

JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE—née

Edmund John Millington Synge—was born on April 16, 1871 in rural Rathfarnham, Dublin County, Ireland. Synge had deep Protestant ties on both his maternal and paternal sides, and spent much of his childhood hearing the teachings of his maternal grandfather, a rector in the Church of Ireland. His

earliest writings were greatly influenced by this Protestant doctrine as well as his rustic surroundings. He developed an intense interest in ornithology and crafted several Wordsworth-esque nature poems and a full scale "nature diary" in collaboration with Florence Ross during his youth.

Synge attended several private secondary schools as well as The Royal Irish Academy of Music, where he studied music theory, piano, violin, and flute. He received his B.A. from Trinity College in 1892. While at Trinity, Synge joined the Dublin Naturalists' Field Club, where he was exposed to the writings of Charles Darwin. Darwin's work resonated deeply with Synge and the playwright began to doubt his Protestant, creationist upbringing. He is quoted as saying, "Soon after I had relinguished the kingdom of God I began to take up a real interest in the kingdom of Ireland. My politics went round ... to a temperate Nationalism." He was a short-lived member of the Irish League but left following a disagreement over their militant behavior. He did, however, maintain a strong sense of nationalism, which was reflected in his later writings.

Following two failed proposals of marriage to Cherrie Matheson—she cited religious differences as her reason for rejecting him—Synge left Ireland. He first moved to Germany to become a professional musician, then to Paris to study literature at the Sorbonne. Subsequently, he moved to Italy to study romance languages. During his travels, he befriended William Butler Yeats, who encouraged Synge to move to the Aran Islands. While on the islands, he wrote his first play, When the Moon has Set, which was rather unsuccessful and went unpublished until after his death. However, his first fulllength book, The Aran Islands, an account of his time there, was received quite well. Due to portrayals in his later plays, Synge was accused of painting Irish women in a derogatory light. Synge claimed that the women and dialogue in his plays were all drawn from actual



conversations between peasant women, which he overheard through a crack in the floor while living on the islands.

Upon returning to Dublin, Synge, along with Yeats, Lady Gregory, and George William Russell, founded the Irish National Theatre Society, which later founded the Abbey Theatre. *The Playboy of the*

Western World premiered at The Abbey in January 1907. The perceived inflammatory portrayal of Irish stereotypes galvanized the audience to riot, causing the third act to be performed in dumb show. As a result of the riots, Yeats returned from Scotland in time to address the audience of the second performance. Yeats' speech was so impassioned that the media turned against the rioters and gave Synge fantastic reviews, to which the play's reputation as Synge's masterpiece can perhaps be partially attributed.

Synge wrote a few more plays before his death of Hodgkin's disease in 1909, including *The Tinker's Wedding*. Synge's widowed fiancé Maire O'Neill (aka Molly Allgood,) along with Yeats, finished the play he was writing at the time of his death, *Deidre of the Sorrows*. *Deidre of the Sorrows* opened at The Abbey in 1910, with Allgood playing the title role. Synge is buried in the Mt. Jerome graveyard in Harold's Cross, Dublin. ❖

PUBLISHED WORKS:

When the Moon has Set, 1901
In the Shadow of the Glen, 1903
Riders to the Sea, 1904
The Well of the Saints, 1905
The Aran Islands, 1907
The Playboy of the Western World, 1907
The Tinker's Wedding, 1908
Poems and Translations, 1909
Deirdre of the Sorrows 1910
In Wicklow and West Kerry, 1912
Collected Works of John Millington Synge 4 vols., 1962–68

Vol. 1: Poems, 1962 Vol. 2: Prose, 1966 Vols. 3 & 4: Plays, 1968

A Timeline of J.M. Synge's World (1817-1909)



James Mahoney's 1847 illustration depicting a scene from the Great Famine of Ireland.



Vincent Van Gogh's 1887 painting "The Potato Eaters".

"When I was writing

The Shadow of the Glen some years ago, I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen."

—J.M. Synge

is buried in Dublin at Mount Jerome

Graveyard

1817	John Millington Synge born on April 16th	1895	Synge moves to Paris to study language
	 Henry David Thoreau born 		and literature at the Sorbonne
	 James Monroe begins his term as 	1896	 Synge meets William Butler Yeats, who
	President of the United States		encouraged him to travel to the Aran
	 The Erie Canal bill is passed, paving the 		Islands to find inspiration for his work.
	way towards construction of the project		Synge, the playwright Augusta, Lady
1819	 Alabama becomes the 22nd state 		Gregory, and George William Russell form
1820	 The HMS Beagle, which later carries a 		the Irish National Theatre Society, which
	young Charles Darwin on a scientific		later establishes the Abbey Theatre
	voyage, is launched for the first time	1897	 Synge has his first brush with Hodgkin's
1822	Brazil declares independence from		disease, and undergoes surgery to remove
	Portugal		a gland from his neck.
1845	 The period known as the Great Irish 	1898	Synge spends the summer in the Aran
	Famine — or the "Potato Famine" begins,		Islands, and the following five, collecting
	and persists until 1849. During this period		Irish stories and folklore. He writes his
	the chief staple crop, upon which some 30		first play, When the Moon has Set, which
	percent of the population depend as their		is rejected by Lady Gregory, but later
	only source of nutrition, is affected by a		published.
	devastating disease. Known as the "potato	1902	• Synge writes The Shadow of the Glen and
	blight", the disease kills potato crops and,		Riders to the Sea. They are performed the
	coupled with social and political upheaval,		next year. Both plays are based on his
	causes widespread starvation. The		collected stories from the Aran Islands.
	population of Ireland drops by 20-25	1907	 Playboy of the Western World first
	percent, as more than one million people		performed at the Abbey Theatre, inciting
	die, and an additional one million emigrate		audience riots.
	to other countries including the U.S.		Synge becomes engaged to Maire O'Neill
1872	• Synge's father dies of smallpox at age 49		(Molly Allgood)
1889-92	 Synge studies at Trinity College in Dublin, 	1909	• Synge dies of lymphoma on March 24, and
.00, ,2	Syngo studies at Timity Conego in Dubini,	.,,,,	of ingo also or if in priority on that the Z+, and

A College Miscellany

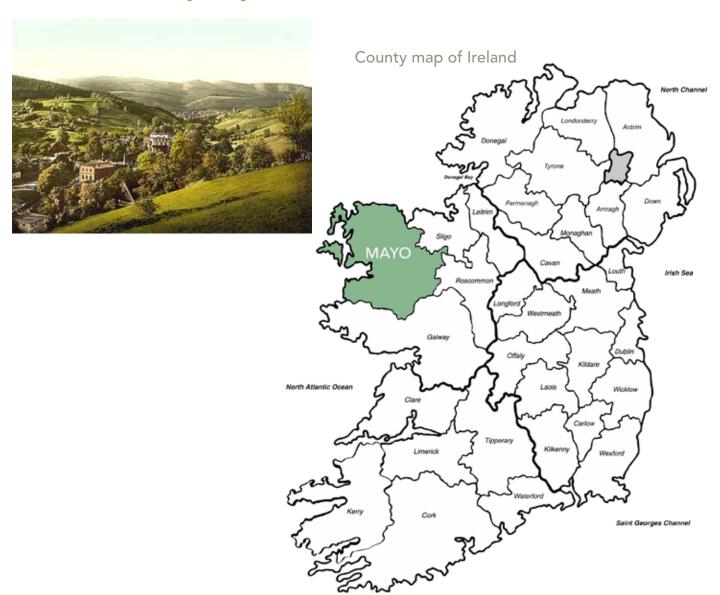
1893

earning a Bachelor of Arts degree

• Synge, now residing in Germany, publishes

his first work — a poem called Kottabos:

Location: County Mayo



THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD is set in a rural area of Ireland called County Mayo, the third largest region in Ireland. During JM Synge's time, this area would have been thought of by most city-dwelling English to be an isolated region with poverty-stricken, uneducated inhabitants. Poverty was indeed endemic to the area during the early 20th century, due to the Great Famine of Ireland, which caused a massive population reduction. County Mayo was especially hard hit by the famine, as approximately 90 percent of inhabitants were solely dependent on the potato crops that were decimated by disease. County Mayo is widely believed to have been hit hardest by the waves of emigration that accompanied the famine. Synge would likely have been influenced at least somewhat by the stereotype of County Mayo as a great void—an uneducated region populated by gossiping small town farmers, and doubtlessly chose the county as

the setting for *Playboy* because of the small town atmosphere which he could disrupt with the arrival of his main character, Christy Mahon.

The rural community's two largest towns of Castlebar and Ballina hold only 17,000 and 10,000 people today. Most residents are farmers, whose dialect of the Irish language — Connacht — is spoken throughout the counties of Mayo and neighboring Galway.

However hard-hit by poverty the region was during the great famine, and however small the towns may be today, modern travelers will likely find County Mayo to be replete with natural beauty and rich musical, linguistic, and cultural traditions. For more information on County Mayo, search online at: http://www.mayohistory.com/ *

J.M. SYNGE AND THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD



"In Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery, and magnificent, and tender; so that those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers in places where the springtime of the local life has been forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned into bricks."

—J.M. Synge

ON JANUARY 26, 1907, Irish drama was brought suddenly, rudely, into the twentieth century with the first performance at Dublin's Abbey Theatre of John Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*. To say that the crowd went wild would be to understate the situation: in fact, they rioted. At a time when the Irish Literary Revival was attempting to propagandize its audiences with genial tales of the noble Irish character, in service of the larger goal of Irish independence from British imperial domination, Synge had the audacity to suggest that all was not in order at home.

John Millington Synge (pronounced "sing") was born in 1871 in Rathfarnham, near Dublin. His father died the next year, and Synge was raised by his mother. By the time he was ready to enter the university, having read and wrestled with the writings of Charles Darwin and others, Synge had renounced Christianity—not an easy position, even for a Protestant, in turn-of-thecentury Ireland. Synge later recalled how his decision "laid a chasm between my present and my past and between myself and my kindred and friends. Till I was twenty-three I never met or at least never knew a man or woman who shared my opinions." In 1888 Synge entered Trinity College, Dublin; he studied Irish language and civilization, as well as music, and upon the completion of his studies began traveling in Europe, writing poetry and searching for ideas for plays.

By 1897 Synge had joined the Irish Nationalist movement, and though his association was very brief, it did reawaken his interest in Celtic cultures. A few years later, while in living in Paris, Synge completed a play, When the Moon has Set, and sent it to the founder of the Irish National Theatre, W. B. Yeats, for consideration; it was rejected. Though Synge spent some time trying to revise the play, it was neither published nor performed during

"On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy..."

—J.M. Synge

his lifetime. He then turned to the format that was to prove his proper milieu: "peasant work." Yeats recounted meeting Synge in Paris and counseling him: "Give up Paris. You will never create anything by reading Racine, and Arthur Symons will always be a better critic of French literature. Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression."

Synge followed Yeats's advice, and never looked back. He visited Aran several times, beginning in the summer of 1898. What he learned there was something of the power of the stripped-down lives, and beautifully spare language, of the native Irish speakers; "we do wrong to seek a foundation for ecstasy in philosophy," Synge was to write later, "or the hidden things of the spirit—if there is spirit—for when life is at its simplest, with nothing beyond or before it, the mystery is greater than we can endure." Amongst a people, and a language, which for him carried none of the paralyzing weight of literary tradition that he found in Paris, Synge's work was suddenly brought "closer to the bone." The results of his experiences on the islands were a fascinating personal ethnographic piece called The Aran Islands and six plays, the most interesting of which are his first published play, Riders to the Sea, and his greatest, The Playboy of the Western World.

Riders to the Sea is a brief, almost static, poetic masterpiece. James Joyce, never lavish with his praise of the writing of others and perhaps jealous of Yeats's praise of the play, called it "dwarf-drama" when he met Synge in Paris in 1903; yet a few years later, while living in Trieste, Joyce translated the play, and in 1918 his Zurich theatre group The English Players mounted a production, with Joyce's wife Nora herself taking the part of Cathleen. The play's grieving women, through an achieved simplicity of phrasing and understatement of emotion, achieve a dignity that struck Yeats as nearly Greek.

Working in quite a different mode from Riders to the Sea, The Playboy of the Western World takes another small episode—the story of a parricide that Synge had heard while in the Aran Islands—and makes of it something universal. While Riders is a poignant and closely observed tragedy, The Playboy borders on what Synge had originally dubbed it-farce; and though they might have been hard-pressed to put their finger on precisely what about the play offended their sensibilities, audience members were certainly right to feel challenged by it. In the Irish tradition Woman is made to stand in for all that is most Holy, and herself comprises a second holy trinity: Mother, Virgin Mother, and Motherland.

While these stereotypes obviously misrepresent the experience of any individual woman, the attempt to overthrow them is a dangerous enterprise; Yeats's The Countess Cathleen was shouted from the Abbey stage in 1899, due in part to its "unflattering" depiction of Irish womanhood, and eight years later Synge's Playboy was driven from the same stage, presumably because the play insinuates that Pegeen Mike entertains something like a healthy sexual appetite. The Dublin Freeman's Journal called Synge's play an "unmitigated, protracted libel upon Irish peasant men and, worse still, upon Irish peasant girlhood."

In spite of his early death at age 37, his influence has been formidable. The Playboy has arguably been more important to the subsequent course of Irish drama, and consequently on modern drama more generally, than any other play from the early decades of this century; it is difficult if not impossible to imagine, for instance, the drama of Sean O'Casey or Samuel Beckett, or even the marked shift in Yeats's poetry during the years 1908–10, had The Playboy never been produced. ❖

Article by Kevin J. H. Dettmar, from *The Longman* Anthology of British Literature, 4th ed.

W.B. Yeats, Molly Allgood, and The Abbey Theatre



The film *Juno and the Paycock*, starring Edward Chapman, Sara Allgood, Sidney Morgan, and Maire O'Neill. (Molly Allgood)



The Abbey Theatre, 1919.

IN 1903, J.M. Synge, William Butler Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, novelist George Moore, playwright Æ (George William Russell) and playwright Edward Martyn founded the Irish National Theatre Society (INTS). Their primary purpose was to stage performances in order to bring focus to great works of Irish dramatic literature. They initially produced plays in the Molesworth Hall, beginning with Æ's Deirdre and Yeats' Cathleen Ni Houlihan. However, when the Hibernian Theatre of Varieties on lower Abbey Street in Dublin became available, INTS patrons Annie Elizabeth Fredericka Horniman (who also served as Yeats' unpaid secretary and occasional costumer) and William Fay agreed to buy the building and refit it in order to stage performances there. Thus, the Abbey Theatre was born.

Since its inception in 1904, The Abbey Theatre has seen premieres of works by prominent Irish playwrights and authors including WB Yeats, Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn, George Moore, George Bernard Shaw, Lord Dunsany, and Thomas MacDonagh among others. Today, The Abbey is known as the National Theatre of Ireland. The first state-subsidized theatre in the English-speaking world, The Abbey has received an annual subsidy from 1925 to today. It was moved to its current location on 26 Lower Abbey Street in 1966.

It was at the Abbey that young actress Molly Allgood (aka Maire O'Neill) began her career, which was to span many decades and incorporate considerable film work as well. Molly's sister Sara Allgood was an also an actress at the time of Molly's first work at the Abbey, and she was eventually nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actress in a Supporting Role in the film How Green Was My Valley (1941).

Molly played the first Pegeen Mike in *Playboy of the Western World* in 1907 when it opened at the Abbey. She and Synge took a quick liking to each other, and by the time of J.M. Synge's death, the pair were engaged. Doubtlessly the inspiration for the role of Pegeen, Molly was also said to have inspired characters in Synge's other plays, including his last work, *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. *Deirdre of the Sorrows* was incomplete at the time of Synge's death, but was nonetheless performed with additional work provided by WB Yeats.

Molly Allgood continued her acting career after Synge's death, despite her despair over his death. She starred alongside her sister Sara in Alfred Hitchcock's 1929 film *Juno and the Paycock*, which was adapted from Irish playwright Sean O'Casey's play of the same name. Molly Allgood died after completing some 47 more films, in 1952. ❖

Glossary: Terms and Place Names

"In writing 'The Playboy of the Western World', as in my other plays, I have used one or two words only that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland, or spoken in my own nursery..."

-J.M. Synge

Achill (n.) – an island off the western coast of Ireland.

Balina (n.) – a town in County Mayo. banbhs (n.) – piglets.

bedizened (adj.) – dressed or adorned gaudily. Usually implies magnificence, fine riches.

Belmullet (n.) – a remote town in the west of Ireland.

blackthorn (n.) – a cane made from a blackthorn plum bush.

Boers (n.) – Dutch settlers suppressed by the British in the Boer War 1899-1902 bona fide – a real traveler and so permitted to purchase spirits after the closing time of a licensed pub.

carcase (n.) – carcass.

Carrowmore (n.) – a town in northern Mayo County.

Castlebar (n.) – large city in the county of Mayo on the NW side of Ireland cess (n.) – expression meaning "bad luck"– derived from the practice of assessment of the Irish for provision of British Military forces." Bad cess to ya" is a common curse meaning "may you come to a bad end".

cleeve (n.) - basket worn on the back "Cliabh"

Connaught (n.) – an area in Galway county; "blue jugs in a cabin of Connaught" in Act III refers to Danish Vikings who settled in Dublin making blue pottery. They never reached Connaught, so such a thing would be a rarity.

cnuceen (n.) – a small hill – "Cnocain".
creel cart (n.) – a wicker basket cart,
usually used for carrying fish.
Crossmolina (n.) – a town in the middle

of County Mayo.



curragh (n.) – small boat used in Ireland in ancient times, made of a frame (as of wicker) covered usually with hide or tarpaulin.

droughty (adj.) - thirsty.

Erris plain (n.) – area near Crossmolina, CountyMayo, Ireland.

felts (n.) - thrushes.

frish-frash (n.) – leavings in a cup. **furze** (n.) – a spiny, yellow-flowered shrub.

furzy ditch (n.) – ditch under the abovementioned shrub.

gob (n.) – a worthless youth with a foul mouth; "gob" literally means mouth. inveigle (v) – entice, lure.

Kilmainham (n.) – a jail in Dublin.

Kruger (n.) – Paul Kruger, president of the South African Republic established by the Boers. (See above for Boers.) Land Wars (n.) – at peak in the 1880's, to

nationalize the ownership of land and so protect tenant farmers from eviction.

lepper (n) – leaper (as in one who leaps) liefer (adv.) – willingly, gladly.

loosed kharkis (n.) – refers to former soldiers (who wore khaki uniforms) from the Land Wars, described as being belligerent and unruly.

loy (n.) – small spade with a long handle, usually used for the digging of potatoes, as in, "I just riz the loy and let fall the edge of it on the ridge of his skull..." lug (n.) – earlobe.

Michaelmas (n.) – feast of St. Michael – on September 29.

mitch off (v) – run off, disappear. mitred bishops (n.) – mitred refers to the hats that the bishops wore at the time. Neifin (n.) - The valley of Glasnevin. (Irish, Gleann Naoighean).

Owen (n.) – A glen in Galway County. "Owen" usually means a river (often in a glen)... it comes from the irish word "abhainn

parlatic (adj) - Paralytic (as in not able to stand ... usually with drink!)

paters (n.) – the Lord's Prayer. peelers (n.) – slang for police; as in, "Where now will you meet the like of Daneen Sullivan knocked the eye from a peeler".

pot-boy (n) - A young boy or man who works at a pub or tavern, serving customers and doing chores such as scrubbing pots.



poteen (n.) –an illegal homedistilled spirit.

riz (v.) – raised; as in, "I just riz the loy and let fall the edge of it on the ridge of his skull..." shebeen (n) - an unlicensed or illegally operated drinking establishment.

Sligo (n.) – harbor town in Northern Mayo County; Boats left from here to Glasgow. spavindy (adj.) – spavin is a disease of horses that causes lameness. Christy refers to a lame donkey. Spavin often refers to a kicking donkey...one that kicks out backwards...considered "cranky". The Irish word is "speachan". "Speachaire" means a cranky, irritable person. Stooks of the Dead Women (n.) –

A shoreline rock formation named for a ship disaster.

steleen (n.) – wandering. Pegeen continues with a reference to the poet Owen Roe O'Sullivan who wandered the county of Kerry and its Dingle peninsula.

St. Martin's Day – a festival day on November 11 preceding a period of penitence (St. Martin's Lent) which extends through Christmas.

supeen (n.) - a small drink.
thaneen (n.) - thread, song, scrap.
tinkers (n.) - itinerant mender
of household utensils, called
"tinkers" as they usually worked
tin.

turbary (n) – the right to cut turf (see below) on another's property. turf (n.) – rectangular pieces of dried bog, used for fireplace fuel. union (n.) – public assistance workhouse.

wake (n.) gathering of the bereaved following the death of a relative or friend, lasting all night, traditionally with lots of drinking. Started originally to ensure that the person was actually dead before the burial.

winkered (adj.) – wearing a harness with blinders.

Theatre Lore

What is a ghost light?

There is a superstition that if an emptied theater is ever left completely dark, a ghost will take up residence. In other versions of the same superstition the ghosts of past performances return to the stage to live out their glory moments. To prevent this, a single light called a ghost light is left burning at center stage after the audience and all of the actors and musicians have gone.

Now, those in the world of theatre know that a "dark" theatre is one without a play. There is nothing sadder to a dramatic artist than an empty house and a playless stage. Therefore, a light is left burning center stage so that the theatre is never "dark;" it is simply awaiting the next production.

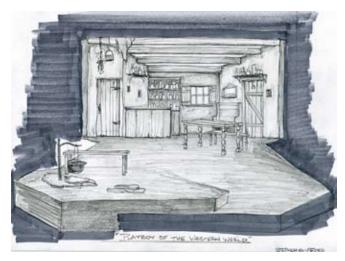
Visual Arts: Erskine Nicol and The Irish Shebeen



CLASSROOM CONNECTION

Ask students to compare the Erskine Nicol painting featured here to the actual set for The Playboy of the Western World, paying particular attention to color, texture, and predominant architectural shapes.

Erskine Nicol's "A Shebeen at Donnybrook". Oil on canvas, 1851.



Set design sketch by Stephen Gifford

Designer Stephen Gifford's concept for *The Playboy* of the Western World provides a unique and inspiring environment for the play. During the design process, Gifford was intrigued by the style of painter Erskine Nicol (1825-1904) — specifically his dark, dusty color palette, and the harmonious groupings of colorful country characters featured in his work. The set design for *The Playboy* of the Western World uses similar elements — focusing on using layered paint treatments, wood grained furniture, low ceilings, and outdoor objects such as a dirt floor, fire pit, and the ever-present piles of hay.

According to Gifford, "When the Director Geoff Elliott and I began to speak of the play, we were both thinking along the same lines of a realistic portrayal of a country public house — or shebeen. We wanted the audience to understand the dire poverty that the people in the play were living with. For example, you would have seen many people of the time without shoes walking

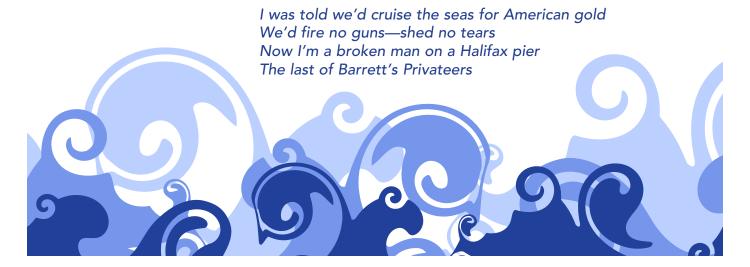


on the harsh rocky roads of Northwest Ireland. The homes were made of the rocks of the land and smeared with dirt and peat to keep out the wind. It wasn't unusual, and was often common, for the floors in homes to be just bare dirt. The interiors would have been smoky because of the continually burning peat fire in the home, along with burning oil lamps and candles. Our goal was to give the sense of claustrophobia and oppression within this public house, and show how the simple introduction of a new person into this environment made for enormous excitement."

Originally from Scotland, Erskine Nicol was known as one of the few painters during the 19th century to portray Irish country peasants, including scenes of great poverty, famine, and other social concerns. His work "A Shebeen at Donnybrook" was particularly influential, with its depiction of informal rural Irish tavern culture. *

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONSuggested Activities

- 1. The Playboy of the Western World deals with specific social issues such as murder, revenge, extended family, idolization, and love. Discuss the social themes involved in Playboy, and select a handful of central themes that the class can agree are present in the play. Have students design a shoebox diorama of a stage concept for Playboy using one of these particular social issues. Ask students to design their set with this in mind how would a set design that emphasizes revenge look? How would a set design that prominently features complicated family dynamics look? What color schemes would you use?
- 2. Ask students to use a well-known artist or architect as the inspiration for a design concept for one of the characters from *Playboy*. Using print or online materials, ask students to choose an artist and spend some time getting to know their style. One excellent Irish artist to use would be Paul Henry, whose bright, open landscapes of the Irish countryside contrast with the work of Erskine Nicol. Ask students to write a brief analysis of the artists' style and its contribution to the meaning of their work.



A SEA SHANTY is a genre of European shipboard work song, whose name is derived from the French "chanter" which means "to sing". Created and used predominantly by sailors, sea shanties are typically call-and-response songs in which a lead singer and chorus mark periods of work and rest with their rhythm. Sea shanties provide an easy way for large groups of sailors to synchronize their movements along to the music.

Some sea shanties are called "long haul" shanties, and their song structure provides a period during which sailors prepare to make a great, coordinated effort to haul up the sails of a ship, or drag extremely heavy ropes up from the sea along the hull. One famous example of a long haul shanty is *Blow the Man Down*. Other shanties feature more abbreviated musical sections wherein sailors would accomplish more short, rapid tasks such as swabbing the deck or painting strokes with a brush. Sea shanties are not typically sung onshore, although they became popular enough by the early 20th century to become the focus of some choral groups.

A Noise Within's production of *The Playboy* of the Western World features the sea shanty *Barrett's Privateers*. The piece was written by Canadian musician Stan Rogers, and centers around the year 1778, during the American Revolution. The song features the point of view of a young fisherman, onboard the doomed ship *Antelope*. Although most sea shanties typically use an unchanging, steady beat (an essential element in all work songs) *Barrett's Privateers* vacillates between 4/4 and 5/4 time.

CLASSROOM CONNECTION

- 1. Play a recording of *Blow the Man Down* for students, along with more contemporary sea shanties such as Cyril Tawney's *The Grey Funnel Line*, or *Barrett's Privateers*. Ask students to identify sections in each song where the leader would sing, and the choral response. Then, ask students to imagine what kinds of work might these songs be good for—slow, steady labor involving hauling great loads of weight? Or perhaps more fast-paced work with short movements? Ask students to describe the various musical elements they hear such as articulation, dynamics, and tension/release.
- 2. Ask students to write their own sea shanty poem. Using the example provided below from *The Grey Funnel Line*, students should create a five-line stanza, establishing a regular rhythm of 8 beats in the first and second lines, with 10 beats in third and fourth lines. (Small variations of this beat structure are typical, and acceptable on occasion.) The rhyme structure should cleave to the typical AABB or ABAB used in most sea shanties. The fifth line of the stanza should be the repeated chorus that appears at the end of each. Ask if any students might be willing to read aloud or even sing their composed sea shanty.

Don't mind the rain or rolling sea (A)
The weary night never worries me (A)
But the hardest time in a sailor's day (B)
Is to watch the sun as it dies away (B)
Here's one more day on the grey funnel line. (CHORUS)

Resource Guide

BOOKS

Boland, Eavan, Editor, Irish Writers on Writing. Trinity University Press: 2007.

County Mayo, Ireland, Genealogy & Family History, special extracts from the IGF archives. Irish Genealogical Foundation: 2001.

Greene, David H and Stephens, Edward M. JM Synge, 1871-1909. New York University Press: 1991.

Mercier, Vivian. Modern Irish Literature: Sources and Founders. Oxford: 1994

Saddlemyer, Ann, Editor. Letters to Molly: John Millington Synge to Maire O'Neill, 1906-1909. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 1984.

Saddlemyer, Ann, Editor. The Collected Letters of John Millington Synge: Volume 1: 1871-1907. Oxford University Press, 1983.

Yeats, William Butler. Synge and the Ireland of His Time. BiblioLife: 2009. (Also available on Kindle.)

WEBSITES

Mayo On the Move:

http://www.mayo-ireland.ie/MotM.htm

A brief description of some of the works of Erskine Nicol:

http://www.mafineart.com/works_for_sale/nicol_e__head_or_harp.phtml

Works of JM Synge on Project Gutenberg:

http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/authors/s#a504

VIDEO

Playboy of the Western World, directed by Brian Desmond Hurst, 1962.

Juno and the Paycock, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, 1930. Adapted by Hitchcock, after the Sean O'Casey play.

Starring Sarah Allgood and Molly Allgood (AKA Maire O'Neill).



oto by Craig Schwartz



Being an Audience Member

Today, movies and television take audiences away from what was once the number one form of entertainment: going to the theatre. But attending a live performance is still one of the most thrilling and active forms of spending time. In a theatre, observers are catapulted into the action, especially at an intimate venue like A Noise Within, whose thrust stage reaches out into the audience and whose actors can see, hear, and feel the response of the crowd. Although playhouses in the past could sometimes be rowdy, participating in the performance by giving respect and attention to the actors is the most appropriate behavior at a theatrical performance today. Shouting out (or even whispering) can be heard throughout the auditorium, as can rustling paper or ringing phones.

After A Noise Within's performance of *The Playboy of the Western World*, you will have the opportunity to discuss the play's content and style with the performing artists and directors. You may wish to remind students to observe the performance carefully or to compile questions ahead of time so they are prepared to participate in the discussion.

Theatre Vocabulary

These terms will be included in pre- and post-performance discussions at A Noise Within.

blocking: The instructions a director gives his actors that tell them how and where to move in relation to each other or to the set in a particular scene.

character: The personality or part portrayed by an actor on stage.

conflict: The opposition of people or forces which causes the play's rising action.

dramatic irony: A dramatic technique used by a writer in which a character is unaware of something the audience knows.

genre: Literally, "kind" or "type." In literary terms, genre refers to the main types of literary form, principally comedy and tragedy. It can also refer to forms that are more specific to a given historical era, such as the revenge tragedy, or to more specific sub-genres of tragedy and comedy such as the comedy of manners, farce or social drama.

motivation: The situation or mood which initiates an action. Actors often look for their "motivation" when they try to dissect how a character thinks or acts.

props: Items carried on stage by an actor to represent objects mentioned in or implied by the script. Sometimes the props are actual, sometimes they are manufactured in the theatre shop. proscenium stage: There is usually a front curtain on a proscenium stage. The audience views the play from the front through a "frame" called the proscenium arch. In this scenario, all audience members have the same view of the actors.

set: The physical world created on stage in which the action of the play takes place.

setting: The environment in which a play takes place. It may include the historical period as well as the physical space.

stage areas: The stage is divided into areas to help the director to note where action will take place.

Upstage is the area furthest from the audience. Downstage is the area closest to the audience. Center stage defines the middle of the playing space. Stage left is the actor's left as he faces the audience. Stage right is the actor's right as he faces the audience.

theme: The overarching message or main idea of a literary or dramatic work. A recurring idea in a play or story.

thrust stage: A stage that juts out into the audience seating area so that patrons are seated on three sides. In this scenario, audience members see the play from varying viewpoints. A Noise Within features a thrust stage.

produce the great works of world drama in rotating repertory,

A NOISE WITHIN'S MISSION is to

with a company of professional, classically-trained actors. A Noise Within educates the public through comprehensive outreach efforts and conservatory training programs that foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of history's greatest plays and playwrights.

As the only company in southern California working in the repertory tradition (rotating productions using a resident ensemble of professional, trained artists), A Noise Within is dedicated solely to producing classical literature from authors such as Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, Shaw, and Euripides.

The company was formed in 1992 by founders Geoff Elliott and Julia Rodriguez-Elliott, both of whom were classically trained at the acclaimed American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco. They envisioned A Noise Within after recognizing a lack of professional, classical productions and education in Southern California and sought out and assembled their own company of actors to meet the need. All of A Noise Within's resident artists have been classically trained, and many hold Master of

Fine Arts degrees from some of the nation's most respected institutions, such as Juilliard, Yale, and the American Conservatory Theatre.

In its seventeen-year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle's revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

In 2004, A Noise Within accepted an invitation to collaborate with the Los Angeles Philharmonic for a tandem performance of A Midsummer Night's Dream at the Hollywood Bowl.

More than 25,000 individuals attend productions at A Noise Within, annually, and between performances at the theatre and touring productions, the company draws over 10,000 student participants to its arts education programs every year. Students benefit from in-school workshops, conservatory training, and an internship program, as well as subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, discussions with artists, and state standardscompliant study guides.

Study Guides

A Noise Within creates California standardscompliant study guides to help educators prepare their students for their visit to our theatre. Study quides are available at no extra cost to download through our website: www. anoisewithin.org. All of the information and activities outlined in these guides are designed to work in compliance with Visual and Performing Arts, English Language, and other subject standards as set forth by the state of California.

Study guides include background information on the plays and playwrights, historical context, textual analysis, in-depth discussion of A Noise Within's artistic interpretation of the work, interviews with directors and designers, as well as discussion points and suggested classroom activities. Guides from past seasons are also available to download from the website.

Study Guide Credits

Written by Samantha Starr, Education Director Production Photography by Craig Schwartz Graphic Design by Christopher Komuro



Geoff Elliott & Julia Rodriguez-Elliott, Artistic Directors Administrative Office: 234 S. Brand Blvd., Glendale, CA 91204 Administration: Tel 818.240.0910 / FAX 818.240.0826

Website: www.anoisewithin.org Box Office: 818.240.0910 ext.1