CHAPTER VIII.

CONCLUSION

The over-riding impulse of Yeats's theatre is to affirm the spirit at the expense of the body, rejecting the visible world for the invisible, while John Millington Synge effected a creative fusion of both with the art of theatre in his mind. Yeats tried for scenery and costumes which would draw little attention to themselves and cost little money in a theatre where preference is given to the spoken word rather than to visual effects. Yeats also argued for speech at the expense of gesture and movement in "a school of imaginative acting."¹ It is against this background that Synge's dramatic works gain remarkable attention and considerable significance in modern theatre practice. Yeats wanted everything to sprout from the artist's contact with the soil but before long, he deserted the soil for the drawing-room and character and incidents were less important than mood and symbol. Synge, on the contrary, grounds his drama firmly on character and incident related to a definite place and time. Hence his plays have the essential quality of stage-worthiness in terms of acting, gesture, movement, posture, setting, stage-business, lighting,

¹ Yeats, Explorations, p. 96.
sound effects, characterization, music and meaning suggestive of different levels of life on the stage, communicating to the audience an intimate experience of "reality" and "joy.

The plays, when considered in comparison with another, reveal Synge's conscious effort to blend the visual and the auditory. The setting and stage directions of his plays are organically related to the total meaning of the play. In *Riders to the Sea*, for instance, the cottage kitchen is central to the inexplicable calamity of the riders to the sea. It can stand for the poor, helpless Maurya witnessing the loss of all her menfolk. Its outward simplicity is deceptive because of the complex experiences of its inhabitants. Like Maurya it is deserted by its menfolk. The lonely cottage kitchen pitted against the vast sea, still hungry for its (Maurya's) young boys, is a contrasting picture suggestive of the total meaning of the play. Similarly, the cottage kitchen of *The Shadow of the Glen*, placed against a long and lonely glen in County Wicklow, reflects the loneliness of the characters, their suppression and an earnest quest for the world outside. The domineering forces of the sea and Nature can form parts of the set, making their presence felt through the waves or the chilly, cold gust of wind or rain.

The scene or the set of *The Well of the Saints* is equally symbolic of the dream world of Martin and Mary Doul who are left on the roads uncared for. It indicates the eternal pilgrimage of the beggars in search of kindness. Here the "lonely mountainous district" (*Plays*, I, p. 69) does not
specify a particular place and time, which is in tune with the
wandering habit of the leading characters including the saint.
For the production of the play in Abbey theatre, decorative
scenery was painted, as Yeats says, with "mountains in one or
two flat colours and without detail, ash-trees and red salleys
with something of recurring pattern in their woven boughs. . . .
We know that we are seeking to express what no eye has ever
seen." ² This "recurring pattern" is the in-and-out experience
of both the characters and the spectators. In The Tinker's
Wedding the scene is "A road-side near a village" (Plays, II, p. 5)
and The Playboy of the Western World also is set near a "village,
on a wild coast of Mayo." All these scenes suggest, at bottom,
the thoughts, emotions and the behavioural patterns of the
central characters in their inevitable moments of anguish and
isolation. A scenic (set) designer will also find these poetic
suggestions highly exciting as good source materials.

The properties also have an organic linking with the
emotional and spiritual conflict of the characters. The wheel,
white boards, rope, bread, holy water, shirts, bundle, stick etc.
in Riders to the Sea are really epigrammatic and poetic expressions
in material shapes. In The Shadow of the Glen the black stick
and money are more eloquent than the words. The bell, holy
water and the cloak (The Well of the Saints), tin can, ring
and porter (The Tinker's Wedding), knife, horn of wine, twigs,

² W. B. Yeats, "Preface to The Well of the Saints," Plays,
Book I, p. 68.
sword, gold, jewels, flowers (Deirdre of the Sorrows), chicken, bottle, shawl and fire (The Playboy of the Western World) have both emotive and evocative meanings in their respective contexts. Some of them have a metaphoric linking with the central idea and the visual beauty of the play. In the modern development of non-verbal theatre these scenic devices will have greater significance.

The visual quality of Synge's plays is enhanced by the suggestions of lighting made directly and indirectly. Lighting is not employed merely to evoke a mood but to suggest an inner state of mind as well as a relationship between man and his material surroundings. Candle (Shadow of the Glen), turf fire (Riders to the Sea), sun light and moon light (The Tinker's Wedding) and the red flames (Deirdre of the Sorrows) make the actors and the set visible, highlight their three-dimensional and sculptural form and lend an atmosphere of fluidity bringing out their agony and the pathetic fallacy. Light seems to have been associated with life in Synge's plays, especially in Deirdre of the Sorrows. When "the red glow fades leaving the stage very dark" (Plays, II, p. 269), with the dead bodies of Deirdre, her lover Naisi and those of his two brothers in the grave, Fergus says: "Four white bodies are laid down together, four clear lights are quenched in Ireland" (Plays, II, p. 269). The last sentence uttered by a character in Synge's dramatic works is replete with death and darkness encircling the whole universe, including the stars and the sky. It is given by
Lavarcham who leads the old and "blind" Conchubor into her little hut.

Deirdre is dead, and Naisi is dead, and if the oaks and stars could die for sorrow it's a dark sky and a hard and naked earth we'd have this night in Emain. (Plays, II, p. 269)

This last sentence appears to project the dramatic intensity, the inescapable catastrophe, anticipating intuitively even the death of Synge himself. The play of light and darkness is thus taken to its logical conclusion. A curious investigator may be prompted to link this "death of light" in the last sentence in Synge's plays with the coming in of light in the opening unit of the first of Synge's plays produced. In The Shadow of the Glen: "Nora Burke is moving about the room, settling a few things and lighting candles on the table" (Plays, I, p. 33). Darkness and death are linked up with this lighting also but it is only a death feigned by the peevish and old Dan Burke. Thus the suggestions of stage lighting given in the plays are potentially strong enough to point out multiple levels of images connecting life and art, youth and old age, death and destruction, and eventually Darkness setting in for the time being. The pivotal characters all get out into light, after a long struggle in the dimly lit interiors and Synge finally closes the curtain himself to embark on a long journey into immortality.

Sound and silence have also been one of the main scenic elements explored by Synge for the auditory and visual impact
of his plays. Similarly O'Neill, one among the modern playwrights influenced by Synge, "wrote primarily by ear for the ear, that most of my plays, even down to the rhythm of the dialogue, had the definite structural quality of a musical composition." Synge's plays are also dramatically orchestrated for the theatre. His diction, syntax, tempo, pitch and tone are well synchronized with a "lilt," the essential quality of the peasant speech transcending the limitations of naturalistic style. He has been able to get rid of the intellectual and prosaic practice of Ibsenian or Shavian language. He preferred the richly flavoured speech of the Aran islanders. His characters—visionaries, tramps, beggars, tragic heroines, innocent rustics, selfish and blunt men and women—demand an idiom of primitive harmony of folk culture. Synge has really exhausted the possibilities of Irish language in touch with the soil for creating a "barbarous idiom" in theatre.

The stagecraft is displayed in envisaging an audio track in agreement with the visual track of the plays. Synge has effected a harmonious blend of these two tracks thereby supplying the spectator with sufficient sources of creative enjoyment. Thus the spectator listens to a sound pattern controlled by the right tempo, pitch, volume, intonation and declamation of Synge's language properly studied by a trained actor. Apart from the outward auditory appeal of the patterned language, Synge has linked it with the total personality of the character, his

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dilemma and a search for a way out of it. Silence is a different aspect of language for communication in the theatre. Thus dialogue, sound and silence together constitute the audio structure of Synge's plays. Sound can be vocal, mechanical, and that of the whole nature around. For instance, The Shadow of the Glen opens in silence, in an atmosphere of wake. Then a knock is heard followed by the voice of the tramp. There is a whistling also made by Nora with two fingers in her mouth, which is a unique shrill in the whole of Synge's works. It indicates the complex character of Nora who, as she herself says, can never be pleased by any man. The play ends with a reference to a wonderful symphony of sounds produced by different kinds of birds, waters, breeze and wind. Riders to the Sea is also a manifestation of a sound pattern suggested by the waves of the sea, the gust of wind opening the door, the keening and lamentations of the neighbouring women--all broken by moments of silence and sublimity of a primordial ritual. Singing, laughter and choric utterances form meaningful notes of Synge's sound pattern in theatre. Old Mary's song in her drunken mood (The Tinker's Wedding), the voice of the crowd, the village sports and the girls' giggling (The Playboy of the Western World), the resonance of the bell-ringing, the sound of the can falling and rolling down the road (The Well of the Saints), the jingling sound of gold thrown away by the mad Owen (Deirdre of the Sorrows)--all point to a practical sense of stagecraft enlivened by the nature, mood and quality of the
characters and their dramatic role in driving the action forward.

What has been summed up above in terms of setting, properties, lighting, language, sound, silence, and characterization clearly points out an artistic unity of purpose and design. All the plays except Deirdre of the Sorrows possess unity of time, place and action and their structure is naturally compact.

The human setting, its lighting, the properties, colour and sound are all indicative of the characters; and they finally, besides the aesthetic reason, give a sense of harmony and totality closely related to Synge's themes, which are, of course, limited in range but universal in appeal. The conflict between reason and emotion (The Well of the Saints and The Playboy of the Western World), the tragic inevitability and the ecstatic immortality (Riders to the Sea and Deirdre of the Sorrows), the inescapable "life force" and passage of time (The Shadow of the Glen), the uprooted and the "unaccommodated" crying for acceptance (The Tinker's Wedding) are properly embodied in characters of flesh and blood with driving motives of dramatic excitement.

All this was possible because, besides his own constant practice, as a man of the theatre, Synge watched the practical experiments in the laboratory of the renowned Irish actors, Willie and Frank Fay. But the idea of space and time and other elements of stagecraft revealed in his plays could not be very well followed by most of the members of the company. Yeats was doing serious experiments with the spatial relationship of the three-dimensional actor with his two-dimensional background.
More than any of his counterparts in the Irish dramatic movement, he knew this aspect of theatre and consequently he brought Edward Gordon Craig and other innovators into Irish theatre to create spatial significance. The oriental theatre worked as a source of strength and inspiration for this type of innovation. Gestic language found expression in their hands, strengthened by the Japanese and other eastern theatre concepts of space and time.

Gordon Craig's collaboration with the Irish theatre gave it a fillip and the artists of the company became gradually aware of the different uses of space and time, the actor's position and movement in relation to a creative design of stage setting and mood lighting. This exposure into the visual aspects must have influenced the approach of the Abbey Theatre in its later productions. Robert Edmund Jones, a disciple of Craig, recollects the impressions left on him by the scenery and lighting in Synge's Riders to the Sea on the Abbey Theatre's first American tour:

The setting was very very simple . . . Neutral-tinted walls, a fire place, a door, a window, a table, a few chairs. The red home-spun skirts and bare feet of the peasant girls. A fisher's net perhaps, nothing more. But through the window at the back, one saw a sky of enchantment. All the poetry of Ireland shone in that little square of light, moody, haunting, full of dreams, calling us to follow on . . . By this one gesture of excelling simplicity, the setting was enlarged into the region of great theatre art. 

This concept of lighting is in the line of Craig's designs which brought in a new life in European theatre. He began dreaming of a new theatre art like Isadora Duncan's dance which must express ideas in time and space. No longer would scenery be a background to the stage action by becoming three dimensional, as flexible, and as interesting in itself as the body of a trained dancer and by changing shape before the eyes of the audience it would provide a new kind of theatrical experience. It shows that most of Synge's plays can be presented using this type of flexible design indicating timelessness or the flow of time as is found in The Well of the Saints, The Shadow of the Glen and Deirdre of the Sorrows.

Craig's On the Art of Theatre was published in 1905 but Synge does not seem to have obviously taken note of it. Nevertheless, for the Abbey tours of 1913-14 The Well of the Saints was designed by Yeats following the principles of Craig. The flexible scenic arrangement created by Yeats enabled them to have a multi-purpose setting:

when a big cross was placed in the middle of the stage, for instance, the setting was complete for the first act of The Well of the Saints, with the door on stage left leading to the church. When the cross was replaced by a well, a small piece of hill side scenery at the back and red lights within the stage door left, the scene was transformed to Timmy's forge, the setting of the second act.5

The same scenery with slight shift of place and with the use of different back drops and simple stage properties was

appropriate for other plays also including Lady Gregory's *The Canavans* and *The Rising of the Moon* and Yeats's *The King's Threshold*. All the time, round the stage, was hung a grey-blue cyclorama cloth flooded with light.

All this leads to the conclusion that as new theatre concepts or ideas developed, even though they were very realistically presented during his time, the elements of stagecraft in Synge's plays could be better explored. If he had been able to collaborate with Craig, the Abbey Theatre would have benefited much from that union. If the actor was given all the means of free expression, which a Christy Mahon or Sara Casey would have liked, they could have moved into new spaces on the stage lit by black and shade lighting. The stage space, then, could afford the actor wonderful possibilities for movement and creative expression. But the Abbey company was not properly tuned for the daring visual concept of stagecraft dreamt of in Synge's plays. If Craig's idea of lighting were used in the night scene of *The Tinker's Wedding* and for *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, the plays would have risen in production to a level so far unimagined by anybody in the Abbey Theatre. As Yeats himself commented, with the use of Craig's lighting design,"it is now possible to substitute in the shading of one scene real light and shadow for painted light and shadow . . . One enters into a world of decorative effect which gives the actor a renewed importance."

6 W. B. Yeats, in a "Letter" to the *Evening Telegraph* on 9 January 1911.
Synge's sorrow knew no bounds when he learned that the Abbey company or his contemporary Irish theatre itself was not imaginative enough to grasp the whole implication of the content, elements of stagecraft and the concept of theatre presented in his plays which were given to the company after meticulous rewriting, "polishing the phrasing, balancing the dialogue, clarifying the action until he achieved the strong stage play he required." The construction of his plays was done so artistically and consciously that even the slightest alteration of a single line or poetic expression would have upset the delicate balance of the whole. But the Dublin audience and theatre artists who were trained on traditional melodrama at the old Queen's Theatre were puzzled and genuinely shocked at the very simplicity and sincerity of a new form and language which later led to the well known controversy over The Shadow of the Glen and violent riots over The Playboy of the Western World and scandalous and hostile criticism of most of his plays. Eventually this conservative taste of Dublin audience hampered Synge very much. By the time he came to produce The Playboy of the Western World, his own theories in turn had become more sophisticated, and neither the company nor the audience were trained to follow him. But Yeats understood the greatness of Synge and his pioneering concepts of modern theatre revealed through his plays and he expressed his ideas

very frankly. "The rest of us have had to make our experiments before the world. He alone, if he escape the commercial hand, will leave behind him work as perfect as a beautiful statue."8

Whatever be the literary greatness of Synge as a playwright, his serious approach to the medium created an indelible impression on many theatre artists. His convictions and concepts and his creative role in building up the Abbey theatre as an unalloyed centre for indigenous acting and play productions exerted a great influence on W. B. Yeats, Sean O'Casey, Padraic Colum, John B. Keane and others who followed the folk and Gaelic story-telling tradition in Irish theatre. Colum's Broken Soil (1903) and The Land (1905) are plays out of the mid-current of Irish life. Similarly the plays of George Fitzmaurice are "folk" in form and content. His The Pie-dish (1908) and The Magic Glasses (1913) concern the lives of curious rustic people who subsist upon their own fantastic imaginings. These plays are regional in spirit with a rhythm of the local idiom. "It is, therefore, 'regional' drama of a special sort, and difficult of access to outsiders—just as Synge's language makes his plays difficult of access to New Yorkers or Londoners."9 Sean O'Casey is one of the major playwrights influenced by Synge. The influence manifests

8 W. B. Yeats in a letter to Joseph Hone, 6 October 1910 quoted in Plays, Book I, p. xvi.

9 Christopher Fitz-Simon, The Irish Theatre, p. 159.
itself mainly in his use of a mixture of dialect, spoken in
the Dublin slums and English. Synge has virtually bequeathed
to his followers a colourful dramatic language which O'Casey
exploited to the maximum in *Juno and the Paycock*, *The Silver
Tassie*, *The Plough and the Stars*, *Cock-a-doodle-Dandy* and
others. Mrs. Boyle in *Juno and the Paycock* is usually compared
with Maurya in *Riders to the Sea*. Even though, the intensity of the
mother's sorrow is the same, O'Casey cannot claim Synge's
sustained poignancy. *Cock-a-doodle-Dandy* is also said to be
modelled on Synge's *The Well of the Saints* because there Julie
renounces her faith in the miracle cure as Martin Doul turns
against the saint. But Sean O'Casey, being ideologically
committed to the cause of Socialism, cannot maintain Synge's
balance of tone, gentleness, and unreserved sympathy and
humanity. The influence may be very indirect and O'Casey
himself said once, "I am sorry, but I'm not Synge, and not
even, I'm afraid, a reincarnation." 10

Synge's influence on W. B. Yeats also merits mention.
Both of them have helped each other for a fuller understanding
of the national drama and Irish tradition to be recreated in the
modern theatre. Both the realistic drama of Ibsen and the
symbolic drama of Maeterlinck, features of the early period
of the Abbey Theatre, have been kept at a distance, in favour of
Irish drama inspired by an ancient idealism. Consequently,

10 Sean O'Casey, in a letter to Robinson, *Sean O'Casey
p. 245.
On Bailes Strand, The Hour Glass, Cathleen ni Houlihan, The Pot of Broth, Purgatory and a large number of "folk" plays were written by Yeats. But he lacked the true dramatist's curiosity for character. Even though Yeats left his 'roots' for the drawing room, in the early years of the Abbey theatre, "Yeats' skill in drama increased on account of Synge's influence on him."11

Synge is considered to be a pioneer in expressing the modern sensibility in theatre at the dawn of the century. Thus the complex issues entangling man's existence leading to his isolation, confinement, a feeling of meaninglessness, undue significance attributed to material progress, a sense of loss that has come over him as he is removed from nature, an eternal question of freedom, his anxiety over the dark forces attacking the individual's right to choose his own way of life, art, and approach to nature dominated Synge's mind. The ever-advancing fear of age, growing grey and confronting Death, the untimely and unwelcome guest, was also his major preoccupation. His own personal experiences of love and its disappointment, affinity for nature, fear of diseases and death were expressed in an impersonal and universal language of the theatre. What he received from the French, German, Norwegian, English and Greek traditions also underwent a radical and dramatic transformation in the spiritual and artistic tradition of Ireland. Of all these, Moliere, Ben Jonson, Rabelais,

Shakespeare and the Irish poetic contemporaries remained a strong influence.

But the art of drama that Synge shaped is fresh and original because the spirit is latent in the remote and distant glory of the "ancient idealism" of Ireland itself which is now recreated for a contemporary society with a view of the future man. As Jameson puts it in Synge's debate on "National Drama: A Farce," "the essentials of all art are the eternal human elements (coat sleeve) of humanity which are the same everywhere and it is only in the attributes that make an art more or less charged with beauty, more or less daring and exquisite in form, more or (less) dull or shiny on its surface, that the influence of place is to be found."12 The realism Synge received from Ibsen and others of the preceding decade has been handed over to the following playwrights of European tradition like Pirandello, Lorca, Brecht, Beckett and others in an entirely different idea of the theatre which could accommodate the complex and dubious vision of existence that the twentieth century man is destined to confront.

Here life cannot be expressed in pure tragedy or comedy, because there is no unifying force of religion, politics and other patronizing authorities. The modern man has all his unifying visions scattered. Life appears to be obsessed with no satisfying idea of progress, nationalism or totalitarianism.

No single explanation is adequate to point out the meaning or fallacy of life. No reasoning is substantial especially after the Second World War and the unfathomable depth of men's destructive capacities accumulated in atomic explosives. Man has dwindled, and his own dignity called in question. He feels terribly cut off from his background, the people around him and the social institutions which fostered him. This human condition is always disturbing and distracting the modern writer and philosopher. And there is a feeling of the absurd and the ridiculous cut deep in the emotional life of man who struggles hard to place himself in a congenial background, which he fails to do. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity. This incongruous feeling of the absurd and the meaningless forms the theme of the plays of Samuel Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, Genet, Albee, Harold Pinter and a few others of world theatre of our time.

The idea of the absurd theatre has been emphasized not to mean that Synge is the immediate precursor of the trend. The purpose of the reference to the Theatre of the Absurd and its adherents is very much limited even though it is highly significant and inescapable. Synge presents some very strong and powerful realistic characters who are rootless and who have no society to cling on to. They are Nora (The Shadow of the Glen), Maurya (Riders to the Sea), Sara Casey (The Tinker's Wedding), Martin Doul and Mary Doul (The Well of the
Saints), Christopher Mahon (The Playboy of the Western World), Deirdre (Deirdre of the Sorrows)--six characters in search of an author, or somebody who can accommodate them, satisfying their physical, spiritual, aesthetic and philosophical quest. It is not too much to say that Pirandello himself must have spiritually come across this theatre vision of Synge in some creative moments of his. Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky, Hamm and Clov, Peter and Jerry and a host of others in European and American theatres must have definitely their creative prototypes in Synge's Martin Doul and Mary Doul, Mary Byrne, the tramp, Pegeen Mike and Christy and Deirdre and Naisi. Synge with a romantic vision still lingering tries to assert life and its dignity in an alternative way, while his followers grope completely in the dark.

We have seen that Synge explored in the Irish theatre a new vision and form which is explainable in terms of the theatre language now being developed in serious theatre laboratories the world over. It is ritualistic and myth making, poetic and indigenous, and expresses the existential anguish of man. These ideas are expressed through communicative stage devices or elements of stagecraft fully exploring the story-telling techniques of the nomadic races living in rural and primitive communities. They are linked with the primordial and the future through the contemporary reality of the Irish life. And one can with an air of confidence affirm the original contribution of Synge to the Irish theatre in terms of literature and stagecraft and
place. This unique genius between the dramatic energy released by Ibsen and the visual phenomenon of life suggested by Samuel Beckett.

It seems that Synge dramatized the modern conflicts generated by the antagonism between matter and spirit, idea and the form, concrete and abstract. In dramatizing this psychic state, Synge has also made his original contribution to the tradition of dramatic visuals released by Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* or Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* in Europe. Pirandello takes up this tradition in his own way in *Henry IV*. It is a game of "True or false?" with every agonizing piece of evidence revealed within our own soul. *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* continue this game in a changed environment with an ecstatic and existential anguish. Thus the Irish tradition running from Synge through Yeats and O'Casey to Beckett can be considered the main line of modern drama.

Maeterlinck with his gruesome solitariness (*The Intruder* and *The Sightless*), Pirandello with his masked and uprooted characters (*Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Henry IV*) and Lorca with his "violent" rituals (*Yerma* and *Blood Wedding*) can be joined with them.

In conclusion, Synge has proved himself to be special and unique in his plays which combine the comical and the sombre. His comedy or farce has a grim edge, violent laughter and tragic gaiety. He has seen life as a stage dream like Martin Doul in *The Well of the Saints*, a theatrical process of self-creation and self-production. He prefers comedy and farce as the vehicle
of his lonely, ironic, iconoclastic and often nihilistic view of the universe. His leading characters are strong and passionate with an invincible will power but they do not "belong." They suffer in this hostile universe and are undeservedly victimized. Nora, Maurya, Martin, Christy and Deirdre are thus deprived and afflicted. Synge has also displayed his original theatrical intuitiveness in drawing his subjects with unprecedented anti-romanticism from the most unexpected places and in selecting unprepossessing nomads, tramps, beggars and old people and tapping in them springs of humour, imagination, passion for life and quest for freedom. He has succeeded in visualizing their drama in a theatre of bareness and austerity suggesting poetic images of great visual and auditory dimensions.