

Fintan O'Toole: 'Yeats Test' criteria reveal we are doomed

Use of WB Yeats by politicians and media is an index of how bad world has become

© Sat, Jul 28, 2018, 06:00

Fintan O'Toole

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There are many ways to measure the state of the world and economists, ecologists and anthropologists labour mightily over them. Opening the Yeats International Summer School in Sligo last week, I suggested another one: the Yeats Test. The proposition is simple: the more quotable Yeats seems to commentators and politicians the worse things are. As a counter-example we might try the Heaney Test: if hope and history rhyme, let the good times roll. But these days, it is the older Irish poet who prevails in political discourse – and that is not good news.

After the election of Donald Trump, there was a massive surge in online searches for – and presumably readings of – Yeats's magnificently doom-laden *The Second Coming*. Frank McNally has reported in his *Irishman's Diary*, based on analysis from the media database Factiva, that the poem, written largely in response to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, was more quoted in newspapers the first seven months of 2016 than in any other year of the past three decades. Its popularity seems not to have abated much since: there is even an entire Twitter account called Widening Gyre that does nothing except send lines from the poem out into cyberspace without further comment.

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Yeats's brilliance lay in his ability to turn these immediate anxieties into words that seem capable of articulating every kind of epic political disturbance

“The centre cannot hold” was tweeted or retweeted 499 times on June 24th, 2016, the morning after the Brexit vote. Thereafter it continued to appear 38 times a day. It also appeared 249 times in newspapers in the first seven months of 2016. In a quick Twitter search of very recent usage, the phrase is quoted by everyone from the veteran US conservative Bill Kristol to the business editor of BBC Africa, Larry Madowo, from the poet laureate of Indiana Adrian Matejka to the comedian Avery Edison, and from an apocalyptic Zimbabwean preacher to an Indian nationalist campaign. (I am particularly glad to see that one of the many Africans who have tweeted it lately uses the Twitter handle Optimistic Guy.)

'Anarchy is loosed'

Three other phrases from *The Second Coming* – “mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”; “The ceremony of innocence is drowned”; and “The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity” – turn up all the time. And of course “Things fall apart” over and over. Other phrases from *The Second Coming*, like the “rough beast” (slouching towards the White House) have been called into service. The most frequent triggers for these quotes in 2016 were the Paris and Brussels terror attacks, the rise of Trump and the Brexit vote. But continuing global instability and the sense of foreboding it induces have made Yeats's apocalyptic vision as quotable as a chart-topping song.

William Butler
Yeats: He had a
genius for
reflecting
specific historic
events in his
own lifetime
without
allowing his
language to be
confined to or
defined by them.
Photograph:
George C

Some of this appeal is simply a tribute to the way great phrase-making acquires a timeless quality. But Yeats made lots of great non-doomy phrases too. The grim ones ring especially true right now because he lived through such turbulent times, his poetic antennae picking up the distress signals of Ireland's civil wars, the Great War, the Russian Revolution and the rise of fascism in Europe. His brilliance lay in his ability to turn these immediate anxieties into words that seem capable of articulating every kind of epic political disturbance. As Ed Ballard noted in a *Wall Street Journal* article of the resurgence of Yeats quotations, he created "a sequence of images dark enough to conjure a sense of doom and vague enough to be invoked by anybody looking for a more highbrow way of saying 'the world is going to hell in a handbasket'".

This is demonstrably true. Yeats's lines can be claimed by right, left and centre. The guru of the new right, Jordan Peterson, tweeted six lines from *The Second Coming* to his fan-base in August 2017. The post-Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek, in response to the Paris attacks, said the poem "seems perfectly to render our present predicament: 'The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity'." And here's our own Minister for Finance Paschal Donohoe in his 2016 budget speech: "I alluded to *The Second Coming* by WB Yeats when I said that it was the job of those in the middle ground of Irish politics to show that things won't just fall apart and the centre can hold – and stay firm."

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'Heart's grown brutal'

It is of course this very adaptability that makes Yeats's images so useful to those of us who are in the business of reacting to the latest atrocities of word or deed. He had a genius for reflecting specific historic events in his own lifetime without allowing his language to be confined to or defined by them. "Great hatred, little room" was hard to avoid during Northern Ireland's Troubles. (Tony Blair's key adviser, Jonathan Powell, used it for the title of his book on the peace process.) "We are closed in, and the key is turned/On our uncertainty" from *The Stare's Nest by My Window* works equally well for that conflict and for the present state of Brexit Britain. "We had fed the heart on fantasies,/The heart's grown brutal from the fare" from the same poem seems to speak to almost every historic moment when the rhetoric of zealots is in the ascendant – and to the contemporary world of "alternative facts" and ecstatic slogans.

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The problem may be that with so much bad news, the Yeats images are becoming so overused that they are sinking into the linguistic mire of cliché

In one way, the reference back to Yeats in contemporary political discourse is quite helpful. It reminds us that we've been here before, that the current sense of profound unsettlement is not unique in modern history. Perhaps especially on social media, where everything exists in a continuous, frantic present tense, the insertion of Yeats might do something to provoke a wider reflection on the big things that are happening around us and where they might lead.

The problem, though, may be that with so much bad news, the Yeats images are becoming so overused that they are in danger of sinking into the linguistic mire of cliché – a fate no great poet deserves. Given that the gloom is unlikely to lift anytime soon, will we get to the point where “Things fall apart” replaces “There are no strangers here; only friends you haven’t yet met” (which Yeats did not write but which bears his name on a million tea towels, T-shirts and pub signs) on kitschy consumer products?

We need to renew the store of Yeats images that seem to comment on our times. Here is one, from *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*, that says it all about fake news and the pre-fascist culture of hatred:

We, who seven years ago
Talked of honour and of truth,
Shriek with pleasure if we show
The weasel’s twist, the weasel’s tooth.

The sense of foreboding in *The Second Coming* is equally well-captured in *Cool Park and Ballylee*:






All is changed, that high horse riderless
Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood.

What better descriptions can there be of a Donald Trump speech than “an old bellows full of angry wind” (*A Prayer for My Daughter*) and “the barbarous clangour of a gong” (*Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*)? Yeats even anticipated the trend for stupid hair among right-wing male politicians (Trump, Boris Johnson, Geert Wilders) in *The Tower*:

There lurches past, his great eyes without thought
Under the shadow of stupid straw-pale locks
That insolent fiend . . .

We really should quote him on that.


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OLDEST NEWEST

26 COMMENTS

COMMENTING IS NOW CLOSED FOR THIS STORY.

Sex, violence and money: Game of Thrones has more of them than anything we've ever seen on TV before. So on the face of it, it may be pretty stupid to ask why it is so popular. In the age of more, more, more, the sex is more explicit and lurid; the violence is more hideously and inventively sadistic; and the money screams out at us from the screen in everything from the exquisitely detailed designs and the exotic locations to the magical conjuring of fabulous beasts and monsters.

But if this superabundance makes the series sensational, it is not what makes it good enough to hold us for so long. We may have come for the spectacle, but we have stayed because Game of Thrones is, for all its faux-medieval trappings and escapist fantasy, very much an epic for our time. It dramatises many of the great 21st-century anxieties: the breakdown of international order, climate change, globalisation, gender, the body.

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Game of Thrones savagely eliminates half its characters to show humanity stripped down to its bleakly Hobbesian basics of greed, lust and cruelty

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The world of Game of Thrones is that of Thomas Hobbes's Leviathan, written in the middle of the ultraviolent religious and political upheavals of 17th century Europe: “No arts, no letters, no society, and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Two of Hobbes's mottos hover over the entire series: “bellum omnium contra omnes”, the war of all against all; and “homo homini lupus est”, man is wolf to man (and, one might add, especially to woman).

The fear of violent death is the most rational emotion in this universe. A study published last December in the journal Injury Epidemiology showed that of the 330 named characters in the first seven seasons, 186 (56.4 per cent) died, all but two of them violently. It also found that one of the main risks of being killed was loyalty: characters who fail to switch allegiance at the right time meet brutal ends. Being good in this treacherous world is very bad for you.

GAME OF
THONES:
JON SNOW
(KIT
HARRINGTON)
IN THE
BATTLE OF
THE
BASTARDS

This is why Game of Thrones feels at once utterly stark and incredibly lavish. For the thing it is most lavish with is characters. Narratives invest in characters, building them up over time. Game of Thrones shows its wealth not just in physical objects and virtual creatures but even more in the way it dispenses with the products of its narrative investments. This is the peculiar aesthetic of the series: it flaunts its superfluity of characters by savagely eliminating half of them, but it does so in order to show humanity stripped down to its bleakly Hobbesian basics of greed, lust and cruelty.



Why does this terrible vision appeal to us? For all its elements of fantasy and wonder, it is, as John Lanchester has put it, “not a world any sane person would want to live in”. There are, of course, many insane people who would love to live in it. At the most basic level, Game of Thrones is a far-right fantasia. Its apparent worldview is the one that is taken for granted in far-right thinking: that there is no such thing as society, only a crudely

Darwinian struggle for existence and dominance in which one must kill or be killed, enslave or be enslaved. The vision would not be out of place in Mein Kampf and it informs (if that is not too flattering a word) the rantings of every white nationalist psychopath.

So does Game of Thrones capture the zeitgeist because it affirms the dark hallucinations of the rising (and returning) political force of our times? Yes and no. It enters into its fetid worldview, but it does not affirm it. In a sense, it is even bleaker than Hobbes. He had a cure for the war of all against all, and of course so has the far right: the undivided power of an absolute ruler. But the throne in Westeros for which the vicious game is being played hardly looks like a reassuring image of authority – even if you serve it, as Ned Stark discovered in the first season, it does not save you from arbitrary death.

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No one would ever mistake Game of Thrones for a treatise on carbon emissions, but we have known from the start that its end will be not so much climactic as climatic

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And this subjection to arbitrary violence speaks not to fascist fantasies of a new order emerging from the chaos but to contemporary realities. Hundreds of millions of people right now are living in failed states and narco states, where children, women and men are at the mercy of warlords and drug lords. If you want to imagine what a realistic Game of Thrones, set in our world and stripped of dragons, swords and sorcery, would look like, just watch the nightmarish Mexican series [El Chapo on Netflix](#). The hyperviolent drug cartels struggle for supremacy but the only order any of them can impose, even if they win, is universal terror.

Game of Thrones

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Unlike the usual epic narrative, Game of Thrones does not really suggest that proper order will be restored simply because the rightful monarch gains the throne. Indeed, the sheer proliferation of claimants to that status makes a mockery of all the claims to legitimacy. Authority, if it is to be re-established, will have to have a new and deeper meaning. This is so for us, too – things are falling apart, international order is threatened but we cannot simply go back to old ideas of political authority.

It is striking in this regard that, as we enter the final season, we are far less interested in the ostensible subject of the drama – who should or will occupy the Iron Throne – than we are in the general irrelevance of that question to the real existential threat: climate change. No one is ever going to mistake Game of Thrones for a treatise on carbon emissions, but we have known from the beginning that its end will be not so much climactic as climatic. The clock has been ticking from the first episode. Winter is coming. The apocalypse may be of the zombie variety, embodied in the terrifying power of the White Walkers, and it may be global cooling rather than warming that is approaching, but the connection to our own crisis is obvious. If there is to be good authority established from the political and moral chaos, it can be rooted only in the imperative to face the great menace together.

But of course therein lies the problem. Things are falling apart not just in Westeros but in our own world, and Game of Thrones mirrors the state of a contemporary culture shaped by globalisation but unable in its turn to shake off local obsessions. While the existential

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threat has been moving inexorably closer, the characters have no real sense of the historic moment they occupy. The complex dynastic genealogies that lie behind the action are a parody of real history. And Game of Thrones is itself a pastiche of historical narratives. It draws most obviously on the Wars of the Roses in the 15th century, but the wall harks back to Hadrian over a millennium before, and the Unsullied to the ancient Spartans. The Red Wedding carnage of the Starks echoes the Glencoe massacre of 1692.

We have versions of both the Viking invasions of Britain in the ninth century (the Iron-born seizure of the North) and of the Mongols (Khal Drogo, the leader of the Dothraki is an obvious avatar of Genghis Khan) 400 years later. Braavos is clearly 16th-century Venice (where the sequences set there were filmed) and one of the best plot lines, the rise and fall of the religious zealot the High Sparrow, is the story of Girolamo Savonarola in 15th-century Florence. We are in a very postmodern temporal world, where bits of history float free of chronology and context. The effect is as recognisable as it is disorienting: historic things are happening to us but we struggle to grasp them because we are not sure what narrative connects the present to the past.

GAME OF
THRONES:
THE HIGH
SPARROW
(JONATHAN
PRYCE),
LEADER OF
THE
RELIGIOUS
SECT THE
SPARROWS

The disorientation is increased by the way these games with history in the series are also games with dramatic form. The series shuffles the deck of genres. There are obvious borrowings from Shakespeare's history plays, not just in the ferocious attempts of sons, brothers and bastards to claim a hollow crown but in, for example, the way Tyrion's passage from whoring, wine-guzzling reprobate to sophisticated statesman echoes the development of Prince Hal. Or think of the way Cersei, like Macbeth, both embraces and is destroyed by the prophecies of witches. But the series also spins back to Greek tragedy – the sequence in which Stannis Baratheon sacrifices his virginal daughter Shireen is straight out of Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia and the Oresteian cycle of revenge.

(The backstory of the toppling of the Targaryen dynasty as a result of the abduction of Lyanna Stark is pure Helen of Troy, so that the Trojan Wars echo through Game of Thrones as they do through the Greek cycle.) And, equally, the dramatic form can spin forward to Samuel Beckett, as it does in the brilliant Beckett pastiche in series four in which Barry McGovern (best known as a Beckett actor) plays a philosophically moribund man encountered by Arya Stark: “Maybe nothing is worse than this.” Arya: “Nothing isn’t better or worse than anything. Nothing is just nothing.”

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The chief scriptwriters met studying Irish literature at Trinity College Dublin. David Benioff worked on Samuel Beckett while DB Weiss researched Finnegans Wake

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conventions.

We can never quite forget that, as they told Vanity Fair in 2014, the executive producers and chief scriptwriters of the show, David Benioff and DB Weiss, met as postgraduate students studying Irish literature at Trinity College Dublin. Benioff worked on Beckett while Weiss researched James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake. (“We were two American Jews in Dublin... with no Irish roots of any kind, obsessed with Irish literature, and trying to find a functional gym in Dublin in 1995.”) They understand both Joyce’s omnivorous mashing-up of different historical periods and styles and Beckett’s absurdist subversion of storytelling

The same radical uncertainty attaches to the show’s presentation of gender and sexual violence. The line between the realistic presentation of a “rape culture” on the one hand and the voyeuristic exploitation of it on the other is very fine and Game of Thrones undoubtedly crosses it far too often. The bodies of naked women are used gratuitously for spectacle and titillation – the bulk of the sex scenes have women acting as whores and we are the vicarious customers.

BARATHEON
(KERRY
INGRAM),
WHO WAS
BURNT
ALIVE AT
THE STAKE
BY HER
FATHER

But it is also true that Game of Thrones is very contemporary in its disruption of male sexual power. It has, indeed, something like an obsession with the ultimate such disruption: castration. When Tyrion threatens to emasculate Joffrey, we know it would not be a far-fetched plot twist. Conleth Hill's Varys is a eunuch – in his backstory, his genitals were sacrificed and burned by a sorcerer. The Unsullied, including Grey Worm, have all been castrated in childhood. Theon Greyjoy is sadistically tortured and castrated by Ramsay Bolton and his penis is sent in a box to his father. Has any mainstream entertainment ever had so many missing male appendages? And do they not create a world in which male sexual domination is so obviously in tension with the very real fear of being unmanned? Even more remarkably, Grey Worm, Theon and Varys are much more effective protectors of women precisely because they lack the defining physical features of masculinity.

It is obvious, of course, that Game of Thrones has powerful female characters: Daenerys, Cersei Lannister, Catelyn Stark, Sansa, Arya, Melisandre and Brienne of Tarth all have or acquire real agency and it is striking that in the cases of Daenerys, Cersei and Sansa they do so after rape. Also striking that the one figure in the whole series who could really belong in a medieval Arthurian romance is Brienne, who is the model of an honourably chivalrous questing knight who will do anything to keep the promise she has made. She and Arya are both cross-dressers, almost always seen in male attire, and both challenge the male monopoly on personal violence. They are culturally unwomaned just as so many male characters are more literally unmanned.

GAME OF
THRONES:
LORD
VARYS
(CONLETH
HILL) WITH
TYRION

What makes Game of Thrones so representative of our time in this regard is not, then, that it either reinforces or undermines patriarchal attitudes to gender. It's that it does both. It is at once luridly sexist and radically challenging in the way it presents gender. And that makes it a pretty effective trawling of our own culture, in which gender identities are in such flux. There is at once a sense of violent entrapment in gender roles (the most genuinely tender love scenes are between the gay lovers Renly Baratheon and Loras Tyrell, and they are both doomed) and of escape from them, of ideas of sexuality being simultaneously reinforced and subverted. That's pretty much the state of play in our culture.

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Game of Thrones is not exactly blind to the glamorous looks of actors, but it does have a remarkable variety of bodies that do not conform to the templates of beauty

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Game of Thrones is not exactly blind to the glamorous looks of actors, but it does have a remarkable variety of bodies that do not conform to the templates of beauty: Brienne is freakishly big, Samwell Tarly is obese, Tyrion, of course, is dwarfish.

One convention Game of Thrones does manage to shatter more unequivocally is the iron law of popular entertainment that the good characters are beautiful, the bad ugly and the truly evil deformed or disabled. (Think of Shakespeare's Richard III, or Ivar the Boneless in another long-running contemporary epic series, Vikings.) Game of Thrones doesn't turn the connection on its head. It just breaks it. Cersei and Joffrey are evil but beautiful. Jon Snow and Daenerys are good but beautiful.

And disability has never been as prominent in mainstream entertainment as it is here. As well as all the men without genitals, Jaime loses an arm, Arya is temporarily blind in Braavos, Hodor is intellectually disabled, Davos loses the fingers of his left hand, Bran has

his back broken when Jaime throws him out a window, Jorah has a disfiguring disease that threatens to rob him of his sanity, the Hound's face is violently disfigured. The body in Game of Thrones is extremely vulnerable to death but what really stands out is that the imperfect, broken, incomplete body survives and even thrives – Jon Snow even survives his own body's death.

GAME OF
THRONES:
JON SNOW
(KIT
HARRINGTON)
RETURNS
FROM THE
DEAD

As the series enters its endgame, it is hard to think of any other successful popular entertainment in which those who might bring us some conclusion that is not extinction are so profoundly wounded. The delightful Boltons have as their symbol a flayed man, but all the surviving characters in Game of Thrones have been, metaphorically at least, flayed alive. It is a commonplace of epics that the hero has had to overcome a flaw and carries a wound or vulnerability of some sort (think of Harry Potter's scar or Achilles's heel). In Carl Jung's formulation, "it is his own hurt that gives a measure of his power to heal".

This is, of course, also the basic image of Christianity: the tortured and murdered body of the Saviour. But Game of Thrones takes this to new extremes by multiplying it across such a large group of flawed and wounded heroes. Have we ever had such a coalition of the shunned, the raped, the malformed, the mutilated, the broken and even (in Jon Snow) the murdered? For an era like ours that has renamed victims as survivors, here is an epic in which the world's survival depends on them.



FINTAN O'TOOLE

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OLDEST  NEWEST

11 COMMENTS

COMMENTING IS NOW CLOSED FOR THIS STORY.

In James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Buck Mulligan has some scabrous comments on his theatregoing experiences: "We went over to their playbox, Haines and I, the plumbers' hall. Our players are creating a new art for Europe like the Greeks or M Maeterlinck. Abbey Theatre! I smell the pubic sweat of monks."

Ulysses is set on June 16th, 1904. The Abbey Theatre actually opened its doors on December 27th, 1904. Mulligan's bitching about the theatre and mockery of its ambitions to create a new European art is, shall we say, a bit previous. One of Dublin's favourite pastimes – complaining about the Abbey – is being indulged even before there is an Abbey to disparage.

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The Abbey is in the throes not just of its usual botheration but also of a profound uncertainty about what it is for

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This may be some consolation to the current codirectors of the national theatre, Graham McLaren and Neil Murray, whose stewardship is increasingly uncomfortable. The Abbey is embattled again – but when was it not? Even some of its greatest moments, such as the premieres of John Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* and Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, were greeted with howls of protest and riots in the auditorium. Arguably the most influential Irish dramatist of the 20th century, Samuel Beckett, in his first novel, *Murphy*, has a

character instruct in his will that his ashes be flushed down the lavatory at the Abbey, "if possible during the performance of a play".

It was said that my old employer the *New York Daily News*, in the days of composers, kept "Judy Garland takes overdose" in permanent type. Irish newspapers for many decades kept, metaphorically at least, "Abbey in crisis" in permanent type. I myself, in my time as a drama critic, wrote pieces under similar headlines every few years. So this is a story as old as the Abbey itself – indeed, as *Ulysses* reminds us, even older.

And yet just because an institution has always been in crisis doesn't mean it's not in crisis now. A sense of perspective is certainly required, but it does not banish the thought that the Abbey is in the throes not just of its usual botheration but also of a profound uncertainty about what it is for. The theatre is supposed to embody some kind of statement about Irish identity, but its own identity now seems deeply confused.

The first big question about the Abbey is whether it is currently a world-class theatre. That may seem an excessively high bar, but it is set by the theatre's own mission statement: "The Abbey Theatre's mission is to create a world-class theatre." Or rather, it was. Under the current regime, the Abbey has quietly dropped this ambition. Its stated mission now is "to imaginatively engage with all of Irish society through the production of ambitious, courageous and new theatre in all its forms". A certain falling-off is there.

THE
ORIGINAL
ABBEY
OPENED IN
DECEMBER
1904.
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Admittedly, the change follows from the last big Arts Council review of the Abbey, conducted in 2014 by the consultants Bonnar Keenlyside, which pointed out that "world-class" is "difficult to evidence". That seems fair enough, but it does raise the awkward question of the relationship between the Abbey's present and its past. For there have been times in which it was quite meaningful to think of the Abbey as having global importance for theatre as an art form. Its founders did think of themselves in that way and at least some of the time the world did not find their high notions risible.

And now? "World-class" may be impossible to calibrate in any objective way. But two things are plain enough. One is that the Abbey doesn't really want to be judged by world standards. And the other is that the world pretty much agrees with the Abbey on this. It produces a lot of good theatre, some of it of the highest international calibre. But it is fanciful to think that many critics would currently list it as one of the world's great theatres. It isn't.

Maybe this does not matter very much in itself. But McLaren and Murray were hired by the Abbey because of their work at the much-admired National Theatre of Scotland, where



If there is a dominant aesthetic at the Abbey now, it is adaptation: from novels and movies. Is this what 'ambitious, courageous and new' Irish theatre is meant to look like?



How does the Abbey under McLaren and Murray compare to their former home in Scotland? The National Theatre of Scotland gets £4.17 million, or about €4.7 million, annually from the Scottish government. The Abbey gets significantly more from the Irish Government: €7 million a year. In 2018, the National Theatre of Scotland staged 68 shows. The Abbey staged 26. (It has a three-year average of 49 productions in 2017-19.) The National Theatre of Scotland staged 29 world premieres in 2018. The Abbey staged 10. These numbers tell us nothing about quality, of course, and artistic judgments will always be subjective. But in terms of current reputation, few international critics would dispute that the National Theatre of Scotland's is higher than the Abbey's.

ABBEY
THEATRE:
CODIRECTORS
GRAHAM
MCLAREN AND
NEIL MURRAY.
PHOTOGRAPH:
DARA MAC
DÓNAILL

This points to another question, one that goes to the heart of the Abbey's identity. Why was the Abbey ever in any meaningful sense "world-class"? The answer is simple enough: the writers. For almost all of its existence, what people in Ireland and around the world primarily associated with the Abbey was the literary play. This is not to say that actors, directors and designers were ever incidental. But those artists and performers saw themselves as bringing to life and embodying the visions of playwrights.

McLaren was an associate director and Murray was executive producer. And what does the Glasgow-based company set as its mission? To be, over the next decade, "known as the most audacious and innovative national theatre in the world" and to "create exceptional work and showcase it all over the world". Is that a ridiculous ambition? If it is, it does not seem to weigh the Scottish company down.

There are other kinds of theatre, of course. The literary play is not everything. But it just happens to be the case that Ireland has an extraordinary history of theatre built around dramatic texts. It's a form that's been around for thousands of years, and in any global history of those millenniums Irish figures have to be given a prominent place. There is, moreover, no reason to think that this tradition is dead. Irish writers, including many very good ones (and very much including Irish women), are still grappling with it.

But here we come to the one of the most problematic sides of the current regime: McLaren and Murray are not interested in this tradition. As the leading theatre critic and historian Patrick Lonergan recently **wrote** of the Abbey in The Irish Times, “the current directors have taken an unprecedented step in programming three seasons without staging plays by Sheridan, Goldsmith, Boucicault, Wilde, Shaw, Yeats, Synge, Gregory, O’Casey, Friel, Murphy and most of the other dramatists who have made Irish theatre internationally significant.”

Nor are they apparently much interested in the international dramatic repertoire either. Indeed, if there is a dominant aesthetic at the Abbey now, it is adaptation: from novels (The Country Girls, Asking for It, Ulysses, Anna Karenina, Room, Frankenstein) and movies (Jimmy’s Hall, Let the Right One In). To get on to today’s Abbey stage, it helps a lot if the work is already familiar from print or screen. Is this what “ambitious, courageous and new” Irish theatre is meant to look like?

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It’s certainly not what the Abbey as an institution thinks it is supposed to look like. Its current mission statement still begins with the words “Inspired by the revolutionary ideals of our founders and our rich canon of Irish dramatic writing...” These words are hollow to the point of mockery. Whatever else one might say of McLaren and Murray, it is obvious that they are not inspired by Yeats, Synge and Gregory. And equally obvious that “the rich canon of Irish dramatic writing” is, to them, at best a bore. The theatre’s five-year strategy claims that “interpretations of the rich Irish theatre repertoire is a core part of our vision”, but it seems to be core only in the sense of being buried so far underground as to be invisible.

As a matter of taste, this is a perfectly legitimate position. But as a position from which to run the Abbey, it is a bit like having the National Concert Hall run by people who think classical music is a dead form or Wexford Festival Opera run by someone who can't stand all that ridiculously grandiose singing. Or, to change country, to have people at the head of the Royal Shakespeare Company who think Shakespeare is just so passe. There may be good reasons to do it, but it raises an obvious question: would the State be putting €7 million a year into a national theatre that had the honesty to say that it just doesn't care about the national tradition of dramatic writing?

If the Abbey is not about its own tradition, the very least it might be is the primary sustainer of the theatrical profession in Ireland. But of course, as open letters in **January** and **last month** from 425 leading theatre professionals have articulated, that's not happening either. The revelation that not a single Ireland-based actor appeared in an Abbey Theatre production on an Abbey stage between September 8th, 2018, and February 23rd, 2019, was mind-blowing. Not a single Abbey contract was given to an Ireland-based set designer on the main stage in 2017 or 2018. The Abbey's claim that it exists to "nurture Ireland's artists" has been increasingly divorced from reality.

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The Abbey's five-year strategy document amounts, without the window dressing, to a shockingly paltry 10 pages of corporate verbiage

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The Abbey board, in the words of its chair, Frances Ruane, appointed McLaren and Murray to “reimagine the production model of the Abbey”, and they've certainly done that by increasing the kind of coproductions that have been successful for their alma mater in Scotland. But for most of those who actually work in the Irish theatre, “collaboration” has translated into dependency and vulnerability. The Abbey's €7 million annual grant is more than three times the public funding for than the next two best-funded theatres – the Gate, in Dublin, and Druid, in Galway – put together. It shapes the entire ecosystem of Irish theatre, and that

ecosystem is one in which many life forms are struggling to survive.

If the Abbey is not a world-class theatre, is not interested in the canon of Irish drama and has been worsening the conditions for most theatre practitioners, what is it for? One searches in vain for an answer in its five-year strategy document, which amounts, without the window dressing, to a shockingly paltry 10 pages of corporate verbiage. The Abbey hails itself as “one of the world’s iconic playhouses” while saying nothing about how it might have become so once upon a time or about the relationship of its present and future to that past. It claims that “our founding principles are never more relevant than they are today” but shows no interest in telling us what that relevance might be.

If all goes to plan (which in Ireland it seldom does) the Abbey will move to a new building in 2024. If it really has no interest in its own past, this would be a good time to say so. As it prepares to move, it can also prepare to move on and ditch the history that it seems increasingly to regard as unwanted baggage. That, however, would leave the Government with two big questions: what is to be done with all that old drama that Ireland was so famous for, and who is going to do it?



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