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“Reflections on Classic Gate Plays by Mary Manning, Christine Longford, and Maura Laverty”

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Last June, the Waking the Feminists organisation published *Gender Counts* (its eagerly-anticipated report on gender representation in Irish theatre), and the report confirmed what many Irish theatre fans suspected: during the period under scrutiny (2006-2015), Dublin’s Gate Theatre put on fewer plays by women than any other Arts Council-funded theatre organisation in the country.¹ While it is wonderful that light has been shone on this egregious manifestation of conscious and unconscious gender bias, it is also important to note that the Gate was not always resistant to staging the work of female playwrights. Indeed, during the theatre’s early decades, many of its most important and successful new plays were written by women, and the outstanding work by these playwrights has been underappreciated for far too long.

In suggesting that “outstanding” plays have premiered at the Gate, I recognise that I am flying in the face of the conventional assertion that the Gate Theatre – unlike the Abbey – never produced a great house playwright. A number of recent commentators have rightly disputed this notion; but, when they do, they usually namecheck *male* playwrights who got their start at the Gate, including – among others – Denis Johnston (author of the 1929 expressionist classic *The Old Lady Says No!*), Brian Friel (whose successes at the Gate include his breakthrough works *Philadelphia*, *Here I Come!* and *Lovers*, as well as important, late-career scripts such as *Molly Sweeney* and *The Home Place*), and one of the theatre’s co-founders, Micháel macLíammóir (author of excellent plays in English and Irish). However, I

¹ Only six percent of the Gate’s plays were written by women, compared to the nationwide average of 28%. See Brenda Donohue, Ciara O’Dowd, Tanya Dean, Ciara Murphy, Kathleen Cawley, and Kate Harris, *Gender Counts: An Analysis of Gender in Irish Theatre 2006-2015* (Dublin, Waking the Feminists/The Arts Council, 2017), p. 35.

would contend that there are three other names that could easily sit alongside those of Johnston, Friel, and macLíammóir, and they are Mary Manning, Christine Longford, and Maura Laverty.

Some might balk at my confidence in including these women in such exalted company. However, the inclination among commentators to disrespect these playwrights is not based upon the quality of their scripts (most of which were never published and almost all of which have gone unproduced for decades). Their condescension is based simply on the treatment meted out to these women by (mostly) male commentators since their heyday as playwrights. Today, Mary Manning is almost exclusively discussed in relation to her role in the life of childhood friend (and one-time lover) Samuel Beckett. Likewise, Christine Longford is usually depicted (when remembered at all) as the small, quiet wife of Lord Longford, who faithfully served her husband as he struggled for decades to keep the Gate Theatre afloat financially. And Maura Laverty is remembered today primarily as a writer of classic cookbooks and as the first ‘agony aunt’ on RTÉ radio.

Obviously, Manning’s relationship with Beckett was extremely important to both of them – personally and artistically. Likewise, Christine Longford was certainly a tremendous help to her colourful husband, as he struggled to preserve the Gate. And Maura Laverty is central to any understanding of the history of Irish cookery and Irish media. However, these three women were also important and successful dramatists, and, in this essay, I want to focus on one unjustly neglected play by each of them. By doing so, I hope to encourage publishers and theatre producers to rescue the excellent scripts by these women from various archives and repositories of rare books, placing them once more before the public eye.

Mary Manning’s *Youth’s the Season...*?

Mary Manning was born in Dublin in 1906, the descendant of a Co. Kerry ‘Big House’ family. Like the female cousins of her family friend Beckett, Manning attended the Morehampton House School on Dublin’s southside, known locally as ‘Miss Wade’s’ – the name that Beckett used for it in his play *Come and Go* (1966).² Manning later attended Dublin’s Alexandra College, and upon graduation, she went on to study at the Abbey Theatre Acting School, managing to land bit parts in Abbey plays. However, Manning soon realised that she had more interest in writing. Her knowledge of drama came in handy when, in her

² Samuel Beckett, *Come and Go*, in *Collected Shorter Plays* (London, Faber and Faber, 1984), pp. 191-195 (194).

early twenties, she began writing perceptive (and outspoken) theatre and film reviews for the *Irish Independent*. It was a series of harsh reviews of Gate productions that first brought her to the attention of the theatre's founders: Hilton Edwards and his professional and romantic partner, macLíammóir. Edwards, upon running into Manning in Dublin one day, invited her to the theatre, explaining to her (hopefully in a playful way) that 'I would like to take a whip and lash you across the shoulders!'³ Playful or not, Manning was (in her own words) 'terrified' as she went along to the meeting at the Gate.⁴ As it turned out, she and Edwards got along famously, and he recognised immediately that this was a young woman of remarkable depth and intelligence. Unexpectedly, he asked her if she had written any plays that the Gate might consider producing. As it happened, she was working on a play entitled *Youth's the Season...?*. Upon reading it, Hilton and Micheál were greatly impressed by its quality, and they produced it in late 1931. It was a big success and was revived at the Gate in 1932 and 1937.

Youth's the Season...? is a remarkable play for several reasons. First, it is a fascinating portrait of the Dublin Protestant bourgeoisie in the wake of Irish independence – a group torn between loyalty to the new national project (which some of them embraced with zeal) and old British loyalties (which led some others to consider taking jobs in London or 'the colonies'). As the play demonstrates, a further sign of that lingering Britishness is the degree to which the well-to-do Protestant young people of the time were remarkably similar in manner and psychology to their English contemporaries, the Bright Young Things. Indeed, the play can be most easily compared to works about the Bright Young Things such as Evelyn Waugh's second novel, *Vile Bodies* (1930). But, as Manning suggests, there is something false in the louche behaviour and light wit of the era's Irish Protestant young people: she has a character called Terence Killigrew – based on a young Beckett – deliver many powerful jeremiads about these defiantly shallow and self-destructive twenty-somethings, and one of the main male characters, Desmond Millington, laments the faux-Englishness of his Dublin Protestant set:

³ As quoted in Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Boys: A Biography of Micháel Mac Liammóir and Hilton Edwards* (London, Nick Hern Books, 1994), p. 63.

⁴ Fitz-Simon, *The Boys*, p. 63.

Oh God, the self-consciousness, the gossiping, the bigotry, the Imitation Chelsea, the Imitation Mayfair, the Imitation Bright Young People! And such *unoriginal sin!*⁵

Desmond and his friend Willie Sullivan are another remarkable feature of the play (considering the time in which it was written and staged), in that they are both openly gay. Desmond makes no apologies for this, as we see in his exchange with a young doctor called Gerald Parr:

DESMOND. My dear!

GERALD [*irritably*]. Can't you drop that effeminate cliché!

DESMOND [*unperturbed*]. My deah fellow! After all I am effeminate. It's my temperament. I was born that way.⁶

An American of Boston Brahmin stock named Priscilla Converse hits on Willie repeatedly during a party in Act II. When other characters try to explain (euphemistically) why she is wasting her time, she is unperturbed, explaining: 'I'm crazy about pansies'.⁷

While this was certainly radical subject matter to tackle in the repressive context of the Irish Free State of the 1930s, there were two additional radical aspects of Manning's play. The first relates to dramaturgy. She includes a character called Egosmith in the play who listens attentively to everyone's problems and who sinisterly follows Terence Killigrew around but who *never* speaks. It is perhaps not surprising to learn that the inclusion of this character was – like the question mark at the end of the play's title – suggested to Manning by Beckett. But Manning, off her own bat, makes extremely effective use of Egosmith, turning him into a 'Gothic double' of Killigrew.⁸

The final radical aspect of the play is the degree to which Manning consistently disrespects the male literary canon throughout the script. The characters deliberately misquote, flippantly quote out of context, or mockingly allude to (in order) Eugene O'Neill, Robert Herrick, Charles Dickens, John Gay, Rudyard Kipling, W.B. Yeats, Anton Chekhov,

⁵ Mary Manning, *Youth's the Season...?*, in *Plays of Changing Ireland*, ed. Curtis Canfield (New York, Macmillan, 1936), pp. 321-404 (398).

⁶ Manning, *Youth's the Season...?*, p. 347.

⁷ Manning, *Youth's the Season...?*, p. 365. For more on queer sexuality in *Youth's the Season...?*, see Cathy Leeney, *Irish Women Playwrights 1900-1939: Gender & Violence on Stage* (New York, Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 138-158.

⁸ Willie Sullivan can also be seen as a double (or, at the very least, an 'echo' or 'pale imitation') of Desmond Millington, as Desmond and the stage directions suggest. (Manning, *Youth's the Season...?*, pp. 348, 353.)

J.M. Synge, James Joyce, P.G. Wodehouse, Sapper (H.C. McNeile), Edgar Wallace, D.H. Lawrence, Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, Percy Shelley, William Shakespeare, Arthur Conan Doyle, Lord Byron, Richard Corbet, Horace, Algernon Swinburne, Edmund Spenser, Ben Jonson, Liam O’Flaherty, Marcel Proust, Miguel de Cervantes, and Michael Drayton. And it is surely no accident that the play’s two main families – the Millingtons and the Middletons – share a surname with important branches of the families of Synge and Yeats, respectively. In contrast to all of this disrespect shown to male writers, the only female writer quoted – Katherine Mansfield – is cited seriously and sincerely by Killigrew in one of the play’s most important scenes.⁹

Youth’s the Season...? was published in 1936 in an out-of-print American anthology entitled *Plays of Changing Ireland*. Copies of this rare book are held at the National Library of Ireland, the James Hardiman Library at the National University of Ireland, Galway, and the James Joyce Library at University College Dublin. There is also a typescript of the play among the holdings in the Dublin Gate Theatre Archive at Northwestern University, outside Chicago. It is wonderful that scholars and theatre fans with access to these repositories can read *Youth’s the Season...?*, but, arguably, a play as brilliant as this also deserves to be made readily available to the general public. (The same can be said of the eight other plays by Manning produced during her lifetime – three of which had high-profile productions at the Gate and only two of which were ever published).¹⁰ *Youth’s the Season...?* should also be produced in Ireland once again – especially since the play’s feminist messages, modernist techniques, and engagement with queer sexuality would be even more appreciated by audiences today.

Christine Longford’s *Tankardstown, or A Lot to be Thankful For*

Christine Longford was born Christine Trew in Somerset in 1900. Her father, Richard, was raised in a single-parent household in England by his mother, an Irishwoman from Youghal,

⁹ This is the scene in which Killigrew finally recognises that he will not be a great writer. The Mansfield quote is Killigrew’s reference to a ‘warm, eager living life’, which is a direct quote from Katherine Mansfield, *The Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. J. Middleton Murry (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), p. 255.

¹⁰ Manning’s other produced plays include *Storm Over Wicklow* (1933); *Happy Family* (1934); her stage adaptation of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, entitled *The Voice of Shem* (1955); her stage adaptation of Joyce’s ‘Ivy Day in the Committee Room’, entitled *Ivy Day* (1966); her stage adaptation of Frank O’Connor’s novel, *The Saint and Mary Kate* (1968); *Ah Well, It Won’t Be Long Now!* (1972); *Outlook Unsettled: A Trilogy* (1976); and *Go, Lovely Rose* (1997). The script of *Storm over Wicklow* appears to be lost, but could possibly be recreated, since a film based on the play was made by the BBC in 1938. *Happy Family*, *Storm over Wicklow*, and *The Voice of Shem* were produced at the Gate, and the only plays of hers to get published (besides *Youth’s the Season...?*) were the adaptations *The Voice of Shem* and *The Saint and Mary Kate*.

Co. Cork.¹¹ Christine's middle-class mother, Amy, claimed to have ties to the English gentry, but – as Christine freely admitted – this was pure fantasy.¹² Given her mother's fixation on aristocracy and her father's ties to Ireland, it is fitting that Christine ended up marrying an Irish earl whom she met when they were both studying at Oxford University. That Irish aristocrat was the English-born but proudly Irish Edward Pakenham, the sixth Earl of Longford – or, as the Irish-speaking earl liked to call himself, Eamon de Longphort. After the couple married in 1925, they moved to Ireland, where they split their time between Dublin and the Longford family Big House, Tullynally Castle (also known as Pakenham Hall) in Castlepollard, Co. Westmeath.

The young Gate Theatre was in danger of closing down in 1930 due to debt, but Edward and Christine came to the rescue by buying numerous shares in it, and they soon began contributing to the theatre in more practical ways, doing important backstage work and even writing plays. While Edward wrote interesting plays such as *Yahoo* (1933) and *Ascendancy* (1935), it was Christine who soon emerged as the more prolific and gifted playwright of the two. Her first big success came with *Mr Jiggins of Jigginstown* in 1933. In 1936, there was a famous split between the Longfords and the Gate's original founders, with Longford Productions (headed by Lord and Lady Longford) agreeing to occupy the Gate for six months of each year and Edwards-Mac Liammóir Dublin Gate Theatre Productions (headed by Hilton and Micheál) occupying it for the other six. Each Gate-affiliated company would tour when not based in the theatre. This arrangement persisted until Edward Longford's death in 1961.

With the creation of Longford Productions came intense pressure on Christine to produce scripts for the company to stage. She often had to rush scripts into production when they were not quite ready, but she also managed to produce enduring works that stand as some of the best Irish plays of the mid-twentieth century. One of those is the classic comedy *Tankardstown, or A Lot to Be Thankful For* (1948), which did very well in Dublin as well as on tour in Ireland and England.

The play takes place near the Northern Irish border in a former Big House, which is now taking in paying guests. The visitors during the weekend on which the play is set include two English people writing a book on the 'real' Ireland, a faded Anglo-Irish couple who are

¹¹ When Richard was a small boy, his English father abandoned the family.

¹² See John Cowell, *No Profit But the Name: The Longfords and the Gate Theatre* (Dublin, O'Brien Press, 1988), p. 12.

looking to buy a house in the area but whose snobbery prevents them from committing to anything that is on offer, and a ‘new money’ Catholic family from Dublin who now actually own this Big House (and its hotelier business).¹³ Thanks to Christine Longford’s English upbringing, she is able to expertly mock English prejudices about Ireland through her depictions of the two English characters, while her exposure to Irish Big House-society through her marriage enables her to draw a fascinating and precise picture of the culturally-hybrid Anglo-Irish couple. But Longford generates the play’s sharpest satire and richest comedy through her incisive portrait of the nouveau-riche Dublin family. The family patriarch’s financial shadiness (which includes cross-border smuggling) and his plans to evade prosecution by the state anticipate similar figures from Charles Haughey to those responsible for the 2008 banking crisis. As such, the play is still highly relevant today; and with its curious mix of Wildean wit and proto-Beckettian absurdity, it is also highly entertaining.

Despite the play’s topical relevance and timeless comedy, it has remained out of print and unproduced for decades. Indeed, the only edition ever published was a quarto, softcover, pamphlet version from 1948, which was sold at performances of the play. The person who oversaw publication of this edition was Séamus De Búrca, who ran a small publishing house out of his costume and dress hire shop in 64 Dame Street, Dublin. (The Dame Street shop bore the name of Séamus’s father, the theatre impresario P.J. Bourke, who started the costumier business in 1920.) P.J. Bourke’s published a number of Longford Productions scripts in this way and had them printed at the *Midland Tribune* Printing Works in Emmet Street, Birr, Co. Offaly. Relatively few copies of this *Tankardstown* pamphlet are in existence, but thankfully, there are copies held at the National Library of Ireland, NUI Galway, UCD, and the Cregan Library at Dublin City University. However, like Manning’s *Youth’s the Season...?*, this play deserves to be more readily accessible to the general reader. What’s more, the Dublin theatregoers who flocked to recent Gate productions of ‘society plays’ by Oscar Wilde, Noël Coward, W. Somerset Maugham, and Terence Rattigan would undoubtedly enjoy this sparkling, ‘upper-crust’ comedy by Christine Longford. This is especially true, since the play condemns the robber barons/‘cute hoors’ who still (sadly) plague Irish public life.

¹³ Other excellent character portraits in the play include a ‘diabolically clever’ waiter and a cynical Dublin journalist. See Christine Longford, *Tankardstown, or A Lot to be Thankful For* (Dublin, P.J. Bourke, 1948), p. 5.

Maura Laverty's *Tolka Row*

As previously mentioned, the Rathangan, Co. Kildare-born Maura Laverty is best remembered today as the author of cookbooks such as *Feasting Galore* (1952) and *Full and Plenty* (1960), as well as for being RTÉ radio's first 'agony aunt'. However, she was also an internationally-successful short story writer and novelist (not that Irish literature fans would necessarily know this, since most of her novels were banned by the Irish censors). Many might be surprised to learn that she was also one of Ireland's most successful playwrights of the 1950s.

Laverty's trilogy of plays for the Gate – *Liffey Lane* (1951), *Tolka Row* (1951), and *A Tree in the Crescent* (1952) – were inspired by her observations of the Irish class system. *Liffey Lane* deals with the abject poor living in Dublin's slums; *Tolka Row* tells the story of a working-class family living in the newly-built estates on the outskirts of Dublin; and *A Tree in the Crescent* deals with a couple struggling to become more solidly middle-class. It is said that Laverty planned to write three more plays, continuing up the social scale; and it is a pity that her early death at the age of 59 prevented her from completing those three additional plays.¹⁴

The reincarnation of *Tolka Row* as Irish television's first soap opera is just one of many indicators of its capturing of the Irish public imagination. Another sign was, of course, the fact that it was revived no less than six times by Edwards and Mac Liammóir after its initial run in October 1951 – three times in Dublin and three times on tour.

Tolka Row's popularity was well-deserved. It is a remarkable play, in which the matriarch from a Dublin working-class family takes her widowed father into an already crowded family home. Tensions between the generations ensue, and Laverty's characterisations of the various family members – as well as a colourful neighbour, a Dublin 'rag and bone' man, and her youngest daughter's 'fella' – are vivid and well-observed. As in her novels, Laverty is also unafraid to include controversial subject matter. In this play, for example, she tackles Irish gender politics in a very direct manner. She demonstrates that the permanently-exhausted matriarch, Mrs Nolan, is the person holding the household together against great odds, whilst having to show deference to the men in her life, even if they do not

¹⁴ See the RTÉ Radio 1 documentary 'Never No More: Maura Laverty Remembered', which was produced by Sarah Binchy and Sarah Blake and first broadcast on Saturday 18 June 2011 at 2pm. This documentary can be accessed as a podcast at <<http://www.rte.ie/radio1/doconone/2011/0617/646727-radio-documentary-mauar-laverty-agony-aunt-cook/>> (accessed 10 February 2018).

deserve it. The same forced deference to males is also a feature of the life of the neighbour, Mrs Feeney. At one point, Mrs Nolan and Mrs Feeney have a conversation in which they discuss these gender dynamics and lament the lack of access to contraception – a supremely risky scene to include in a play in 1950s Dublin (the same decade in which the important Pike Theatre would be destroyed because it produced a Tennessee Williams play in which an actor dropped an invisible condom onto the stage).¹⁵ Here is the edgy scene from Laverty’s play:

MRS. NOLAN: ...Mrs. Feeney, you were saying about the Guard’s wife?
Before me Daddy came in...

MRS. FEENEY: Oh yes... Mrs. Farrell. She’s terrible well up.

MRS. NOLAN: She was going on for a nurse, wasn’t she? Before she got married?

MRS. FEENEY: So I believe. Well, she gave me a lend of a book all about this rhythm business. Oh, there’s nothing agen religion in it – nothing at all. Only it tells you when.

MRS. NOLAN: I heard about that, and I was often wondering about it. Is it any use?

MRS. FEENEY: It’s a cod. In my house, anyway. As I was saying to Mrs. Farrell when I was giving the book back to her, “Maybe it works for you, Mrs. Farrell,” says I, “Your husband being in the Guards’ Band and all. But my Oliver would never get the hang of rhythm. He has no ear at all for music”.

MRS. NOLAN: (*Laughing*) You’re a caution!

MRS. FEENEY: Rhythm? Stop.

MRS. NOLAN: Well, this is the way I look at it. Whether we like it or not we have our duty. It’s for all the world like cooking. There’s days you wouldn’t care if you never seen the sight of food. Just the same, you can’t consider your own feelings – the dinner has to go on the table. And even if your stomach

¹⁵ The Williams play was *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), and the legal costs associated with defending the theatre against a charge of indecency ruined the Pike financially. For more on this, see Gerard Whelan with Carolyn Swift, *Spiked: Church–State Intrigue and The Rose Tattoo* (Dublin, New Island Books, 2002).

was turning, wouldn't you let on to be eating a bit and enjoying it so as not to spoil it on another. Marriage is the identical same.

MRS. FEENEY: That's all very well. But there's always the risk – and with eight already. And Oliver Feeney is easy hurt in his feelings.

MRS. NOLAN: They all are.

MRS. FEENEY: “You're cold”, he does tell me if I keep to my own side of the bed. “You don't love me any more”. (*With indulgent amusement*) Ould eejit.

MRS. NOLAN: God help him. Don't be hard on him.

MRS. FEENEY: Isn't it a pity about him?...¹⁶

Although Laverty's plays were box office successes, they were never published. Even more distressingly, the scripts for *Tolka Row* and *Liffey Lane* were presumed lost for decades. (The script for *A Tree in the Crescent* has been residing safely among the papers at Northwestern since the university first began purchasing materials from Edwards and macLíammóir in 1971.) Thankfully, within the past year, Dr Deirdre McFeely of Trinity College Dublin and archivists at NUI Galway (who are currently digitising the Gate Theatre's own archive) independently tracked down or unexpectedly discovered scripts of both 'lost' Laverty plays. It goes without saying that Laverty's seminal scripts should be published as soon as possible. As regards production, *Tolka Row* would be an outstanding programming choice for Irish theatres today – a time when the country is once again debating women's reproductive choices.

Conclusion

The fact that so many of the plays by these gifted women playwrights were never published is undoubtedly a sign of gender bias. It is sobering to consider that, in recent decades, important publishing houses have found it necessary to recover and print collections of plays by Paul Vincent Carroll, Austin Clarke, St John Ervine, Padraic Fallon, George Fitzmaurice, Rutherford Mayne, M.J. Molloy, T.C. Murray, Lennox Robinson, George Shiels, and Jack B.

¹⁶ From Act I, pp.12-13 of an original *Tolka Row* typescript, which was provided to the author by Dr Deirdre McFeely of Trinity College Dublin. I have copied the unusual spelling and punctuation found in that original manuscript, but for clarity's sake have added italics to the stage directions. Special thanks to Dr McFeely for showing me this script.

Yeats, while simultaneously ignoring the scripts of their female contemporaries Manning, Longford, and Lavery (to say nothing of other women). Without casting aspersions on the male playwrights listed above or on the excellent scholarly editions of their collected plays, one cannot avoid the conclusion that there is a general willingness to ‘make the case’ for the work of ‘unsung’ male playwrights while ignoring (and failing to publish or produce) even highly-successful plays by women. Clearly, in an era in which Irish theatre is seeking to bring about greater gender equality, the best work of Manning, Longford, and Lavery – including the three plays examined in this essay – cannot continue to languish in archives and repositories of rare books any longer. They must be properly published and produced, so that theatre fans and scholars can once again enjoy these unjustly (indeed, criminally) neglected works.