INTRODUCTION

JOAN FITZPATRICK DEAN AND JOSÉ LANTERS

Ranging over a period of more than a century, from the beginning of the Literary Revival to the present day, the essays included in this volume focus on Irish theatre that has challenged what is perceived as the dominant but narrow confine of realist dramaturgy in Ireland.¹ In *Retreats from Realism in Recent English Drama* (1991), Ruby Cohn makes the case that realism, which she characterizes as “the mimetic representation of contemporary middle-class reality”, came to dominate English theatre from the late nineteenth century onwards.² While earlier forms of drama (notably Shakespearean and Jacobean theatre) had been inventive, even adventurous in their use of stagecraft, the consequence of realism, which inherited its main characteristics from melodrama and the well-made play, was that drama became domesticated, its climaxes muted.³ Although in later years realistic plays were no longer exclusively set in drawing-rooms, and the realism could be heightened or poetized in some way, Cohn suggests that the conventions that developed at the end of the nineteenth century prevailed: “sociological, psychological, and linguistic fidelity to the surface of contemporary middle-class reality.”⁴

In Ireland in the late nineteenth century there was, as yet, no indigenous dramatic tradition: although the Queen’s Royal Theatre in Dublin had declared itself “the home of Irish drama” in 1884, the plays performed there were predominantly sentimental and political melodramas like Dion Boucicault’s *The Colleen Bawn* or J.W.

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¹ Most of the essays included in this volume were first presented as papers at the conference of the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures (IASIL) held at the National University of Ireland-Maynooth, 26-30 July 2010.
Whitbread’s *Wolfe Tone*. Theatre was popular and English theatre companies often toured Ireland, but while Shakespeare remained a perennial favourite, realistic drawing-room plays were alien to most Irish audiences. In turn-of-the-century Ireland the middle class was still under development and largely confined to the bigger cities. If realism was to become the dominant mode there, it would at least have to be adapted to the country’s rural reality; indeed, the realistic dramas performed at the Abbey Theatre between the 1930s and the 1960s tended to be set in farmhouse kitchens rather than middle-class parlours.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Irish theatre scene became increasingly international, and Dublin and Belfast audiences were able to enjoy performances by stars like Sarah Bernhardt and touring productions of plays by Ibsen, Maeterlinck, and Sudermann. From the nationalist perspective of W.B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, the founders of the Abbey Theatre, whose intention it was to create an Irish school of dramatic literature which would counter the prevailing depiction in melodrama of Ireland as “the home of buffoonery and easy sentiment”, this cosmopolitan trend in theatre was preferable to the confines of middle-class realism. Moreover, adopting a non-English approach in creating an indigenous form of theatre would be a way of driving a cultural wedge between an Irish dramatic school and the traditions of the country’s colonial oppressor.

In the statement composed in 1897 in which they declared their intentions to create an Irish theatre, Yeats and Gregory expressed their openness to dramatic innovation and experimentation. They envisaged that blending the Continental theatre of ideas with a Gaelic poetic dramatic mode would free the Irish theatre from the restrictive conventions and venal commercial motive that dominated the London stage: “We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience …, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres in England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed.”

The play that inaugurated the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899 was

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