Perhaps the most glaring example of how Irish theatre’s stylistic innovation has been obscured in the general run of popular knowledge is the misleading critical reception afforded to one of its most successful practitioners. While Sean O’Casey’s three most famous Dublin plays remain staples in the repertoire of Irish theatrical production to this day, his many later, stylistically more experimental works have faded from the Irish stage and attracted relatively scant academic commentary. The customary assumptions that O’Casey’s talent simply atrophied after 1926 – assumptions that obscure the enormity of his complex theatrical career – remain an impediment to the appreciation of later plays, such as *Within the Gates* (1933), *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* (1949) and *The Drums of Father Ned* (1958). In this regard, in the centenary year of 1980, Abbey director Tomás Mac Anna stressed the importance of a broader, more considered perspective regarding O’Casey’s oeuvre and in particular regarding the playwright’s later “Total Theatre fare”.¹ Bernice Schrank takes up this point:

A popular and pernicious perception of O’Casey’s work is that the realistic “Dublin Trilogy” represents the high point of his achievement, and everything after *Plough* is one long, embarrassingly bloated falling away from his initial greatness. Despite its popularity, this view is gradually yielding to a more accurate assessment of O’Casey’s achievement as a premature practitioner of the art of “total theatre”.”²

In this essay, I will explore one of the most outstanding examples of

¹ Tomás Mac Anna and Christopher Murray, “In Interview about the Later O’Casey Plays at the Abbey Theatre”, *Irish University Review*, X/1 (Spring 1980), 136.
this aspect of O’Casey’s work, and one for which the playwright himself had, at any rate, great respect. *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* was in fact his favourite play, written at a time when Dublin’s “slum playwright” had long progressed beyond his common acclamation as a stage realist, towards a new, nonetheless equally politicized, but vibrantly expressionistic aesthetic.\(^3\) O’Casey’s later dramaturgy, of which *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* is the most accomplished example, engages a bewildering array of diverse techniques. In doing so, it also questions standard and staid notions of the relationship between Irish theatre and some of the twentieth century’s most vital and daring theatrical developments.

Abruptly, but with technical aplomb, this new phase in O’Casey’s writing exploded onto the stage with his depiction of the Great War in a stylized, expressive, dream-like form, during the experimental second Act of *The Silver Tassie* (1928). Here was an emphatic rejection of conventional realism, and more broadly, of humanity’s rationalization of a barbaric conflict and its underlying ideologies, which had resulted in the loss of tens of millions of lives. Theatrical convention, which had often indeed facilitated the propaganda of war, was an inadequate tool with which to engage humanity’s recent, apocalyptic failures, O’Casey seemed to suggest. Only radically defamiliarizing forms could produce fresh perspectives on what human “civilization” ought to mean.

By the 1930s, O’Casey was arguing that theatre needed to transcend its standard, realist obsessions of subjectivity and “well-rounded” characterization: in the previous decade, Lady Gregory had encouraged and applauded his abilities in this more conventional mould, but now O’Casey declared that if drama must be “gay, farcical, comic or tragic”, above all “it must be, not the commonplace portrayal of the trivial events in the life of this man or that woman, but a commentary on life itself”.\(^4\) O’Casey thus invoked the politicized

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