

*National Theatre and the 20th Century Irish
Dream Play*

Gunnar Fridén

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Abstract:

Author: Gunnar Fridén, Department of Languages and Literatures, University of Gothenburg.

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This study examines the delay of modernism as the central idiom of the Irish theatre and drama, primarily by looking at how aesthetics, ideology and politics interact to advance the arts in a state. Irish theatre in the 20th century was dominated by the legendary Abbey Theatre, the first modern institution of its kind in that country. It is argued that the kind of folk play that dominated the artistic output of that theatre was congruent with the educational policies of national theatres across Europe in the early 20th century. It is also shown that while most European national drama took a decisively modernist turn in the 20s, Irish theatre remained largely traditional for another forty years, delaying the impact of popular modernist drama and theatre in that country.

It is argued that popular modernism did make temporary inroads into the Irish theatrical world in the late 20s and 30s, as seen in the rise of the Dublin Gate Theatre and the modernist works of playwrights like Sean O'Casey and Denis Johnston. Nevertheless, these efforts remained largely a fringe phenomenon owing to the fact that the Abbey, as the leading institution of its kind in Ireland, had to lead the way before any substantial change in the national dramatic output could take place.

Finally, this study presents a series of in-depth analyses of Irish dream plays with discussions of how that modernist mode has been used by some of the most prominent contemporary Irish playwrights to respond to the folk drama that dominated the Irish theatre during the earlier part of the 20th century. For these playwrights, a central concern has been to critique the monolithic view of nation and the uniform mode of representation connected with much of the Irish drama that preceded them. In the process, the dream play has become one of the most recognisable features of modern Irish drama.

Key Words: Ireland, national theatre, nationalism, drama, performance, modernism, dream plays, expressionism, The Abbey Theatre, The Dublin Gate Theatre, W.B. Yeats, Hilton Edwards, Micheál Mac Liammóir, Sean O'Casey, Denis Johnston, Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Frank McGuinness.