

Juno and the Paycock at the Irish Repertory Theatre: An interview with J. Smith-Cameron and Ciarán O'Reilly

By David Walsh
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On December 2, the WSWS posted a comment on the current production of Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, about the impoverished Boyle family in Dublin in the early 1920s, at the Irish Repertory Theatre in New York City, as well as on O'Casey's life and work. (See: Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* in New York City)

The Irish playwright's "Dublin Trilogy," consisting of *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), is a remarkably insightful and vivid representation of the national and social convulsions that shook Ireland from 1913 to 1922. They convey something essential about the life-and-death character of the turmoil of that period, part of an international revolutionary wave that included the October Revolution of 1917.

O'Casey's trilogy of plays is one of the more significant efforts to dramatize working class life, including both its everyday struggles and complex political realities. The plays' strength lies, above all, in a lacerating honesty and a deep feeling for the suffering, oppressed population. The limitations of naturalistic representation, in my view, with its inevitable contrivances and clumsiness, also make themselves felt.

The performers who play the title roles in the Irish Repertory Theatre production, J. Smith-Cameron (Juno), a prominent figure on the New York stage, and Ciarán O'Reilly ("Captain" Jack Boyle, the "Paycock"), also co-founder and producing director of the theater, were kind enough recently to discuss the play and other issues with me

David Walsh: *Juno and the Paycock* is an unusual play, written with red-hot intensity in the midst of dramatic events by someone who was a participant, or an eyewitness at least. Why do each of you think the play continues to have an enduring impact?

J. Smith-Cameron: I think, on the most basic level, it shows a family who are in very dire straits, truly poverty-stricken, and, unfortunately, that remains a condition all over the world. It concerns their desperate efforts to stay afloat. I think people relate to and are moved by that.

Also, the political climate in Ireland at that moment, a civil war situation, where two factions are fighting who used to be one, creates a sharp, particular pain for people, who identify with and feel for that.

Ciarán O'Reilly: I would just add to that, someone pointed out to me recently that the second act in particular [during which the Boyle family believe they have received an inheritance of thousands of pounds] reminds you so much of the recent "Celtic Tiger" phase in Ireland.

Suddenly, everyone was flush with money and everyone was borrowing to buy homes. Ireland became this materialistic country. And O'Casey represents that so well. Overnight everybody is out there competing with the rest of the world, and then things fall apart. All of a sudden, everybody is destitute, many of them without homes to live in and that's

the situation now.

JS-C: Yes, it's happening again.

DW: It also reminded me of the present decrepit state of the "American Dream," when things are so desperate that people see winning the lottery, or a game show, or playing in the NBA, as their only way out.

CO'R: It's their best bet! I actually think it's my best bet as well!

DW: O'Casey seems astonishingly objective in his approach. He provides everyone with a reason for his or her behavior, and he certainly sympathizes, but he criticizes everyone also. Is that a fair thing to say?

JS-C: I think he writes objectively and has empathy for all his characters, but he's also exposing each of them for their various shortcomings at the same time.

I think Juno can be shortsighted. She wants to think that what happened to Mrs. Tancred, whose son has been killed in the civil war, can't happen to her. She wants to make sure there are differences between them, so that's the important thing that happens at the end—she realizes there's no damned difference between them. She thought her son was on the "right" side, that he was protected, and she learns the painful truth.

The thought that she could leave her irresponsible husband at the end of the play is something of a modern idea. I don't think in 1922 this was a possibility open to women of her social class. It would not even cross the mind of a Catholic housewife in Dublin. The dramatic sequence at the end of the play leads up beautifully to the moment when she says to her daughter, "It's hopeless here, we have to leave. You and I will raise this baby." I think that's very prescient on O'Casey's part.

CO'R: O'Casey does distribute his criticisms, but I think he sides with the women in this play, on the whole. None of the men are particularly appealing ...

JS-C: Yet you ["Captain" Boyle] and Joxer Daly are very funny—no one can take their eyes off the two of you. The characters are certainly not classic villains to hiss at.

CO'R: We're fun, that's our only redeeming quality. We're good drinking companions, with stories to tell, but morally we haven't a leg to stand on.

DW: From an actor's point of view, what are the satisfactions, and perhaps dissatisfactions, if there are any, of performing this play? What are the biggest challenges?

JS-C: It's a very challenging play for all of us. It goes from A to Z in terms of conditions and states of mind, with every terrifying emotion included. There's dread and worry, hunger and exhaustion, and euphoria. It's a remarkable opportunity, but also a challenge for an actor.

Of course, if you think you're a serious actor, that's what you want. It's exhausting, but it's an incredibly satisfying play. I think Juno is funny and hopeful, she's not just a drudge, which she could be in the wrong hands. She has hope and persistence and empathy.

Every week that I'm performing this play, I think it's more and more of a master work, it's so well-constructed. Every week you discover new corners, new nooks and crannies. You hear things anew. When you're with such a good company, they are also finding new things. It keeps becoming fuller, richer. That can't happen unless the play is a great play.

It's exhausting, as I said, but it's satisfying. I look forward to going to work, I get a high from it.

CO'R: From my point of view, it's wonderful to play such a delusional character. What the "Captain" actually believes himself is difficult to say. "I imagine, therefore I am" ... that's the ship he's really on. He travels from Mexico to the Arctic Ocean in his mind. When you're in such a state of abject poverty, as these people are, there's very little else that you have except fantasy. What else do you have but your imagination?

It's not just that Captain Boyle's legs are bad, or he pretends them to be, he'd be too damned bored to be on a construction site, when he could go to far greater lengths by having a few jars.

Then there's the extraordinary vocabulary that he seems to have acquired, which O'Casey just threw out there. O'Casey took these characters and their language, like a sponge, from Dublin pubs and places around. I don't think he drank much, but whenever he was in the pub he heard it all, he caught it all.

When O'Casey wrote the play, he was 40 years of age or so. He worked in construction, and he had been secretary of the Irish Citizen Army, James Connolly's organization. I'll never forget the story told by Lady Gregory, who was a director of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. *Juno* opened there in 1923, and they didn't have long runs, a week or two, in those days. On the third night, the place was jammed, Lady Gregory said to O'Casey, "Why don't you come backstage, and have a cup of tea?" And he said, "Oh, no, I have to get home, I have to get to the building site in the morning."

DW: Of course, the Irish have a reputation for the gift of gab, but do you have a sense as to whether the language in the play is representative of everyday speech or is it considerably heightened?

CO'R: A few years before that, [John Millington] Synge had written *The Playboy of the Western World* [1907] and he was accused of giving "colorful speech" to a bunch of "Irish peasants." To which he replied, "I didn't put a word down that I didn't hear in a kitchen, or a house, in the Aran Islands."

The reason that *Juno* works is that you do believe it all, including the language, as is the case with Synge's play.

DW: What is the situation confronting Off-Broadway theater at the moment, artistic, financial or otherwise?

CO'R: The problems are age-old. The biggest issue is real estate in New York City. I was at an event today at which Ginny Loulouides, from A.R.T.[The Alliance of Resident Theatres]/New York, said that within the last ten years the city has lost 50 small theaters, gone for good. That was a shocking statistic.

It's very hard to get a theater. Real estate in New York has become insane, on so many levels, from store-keepers trying to stay in the city on up.

We have done well over the past few years, when we're not supposed to be doing well, when budgets are tight, and we can't get corporate money. We've gotten a lot of individual support recently. It's my naïve belief that when things get really rough, people begin to pay attention to more important values. They start to support things that are good for the soul, as opposed to when there was tons of money and people spent money on flashy cars and paid \$10.00 for a latte. When there's little money, they start to spend it another way.

JS-C: I do think that hard times make people more soulful.

DW: Speaking of hard times, is there an influence of the present moment on the production of this play?

JS-C: I think there is the ongoing struggle with poverty. There are

pieces in the newspaper right now about homeless families in New York. Terrible conditions. There's something universal about it. I think that people relate to the play very keenly. The things that are similar are terribly obvious to people. They recognize their situation, or the situation of people they know, and it draws them in. Borrowing against promised money is very current.

What makes it a classic play, unfortunately, is that that sort of hard times are with us.

Another actor in the production, James Russell, who plays Mr. Bentham, and I recently visited the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side [in Manhattan]. And one of the exhibits concerns an Irish family, very pitiful story, who lived in a tenement briefly in the 1860s. Our set looked so much like their tenement it was astonishing.

This Irish family tried to make a decent home in this inhospitable space, and this was in America, so they were considered outsiders. They were shunned and ridiculed. They had suffered some horrible things. They only stayed in the house three years; the neighborhood they were in was mostly German. James and I felt as though we had walked on our set, it was eerie.

DW: Any final comments?

JS-C: I can tell you what I tell my friends when the question comes up about as to whether theater will ever be outdated. I don't think it will because it's a humanitarian profession.

I think when people come into a space like that, a theater, and the lights go down, and they watch live human beings, by memory, tell a story and they are allowed to feel vicariously for other people, that that keeps something thawed out inside—like Juno says, "hearts of flesh," not "hearts of stone." They may forget that feeling when they walk out into the night, but somewhere inside them something is left a little less brittle. That may sound like a romantic idea, but I really believe and find it to be true.

Plays like this, where you laugh and you cry, are the most politically effective plays, even if they don't address a political agenda head-on, because you find yourself laughing at something horrible, weeping suddenly, feeling for all the people on stage, and they're not even real people. I feel very privileged to work in this business, which is not one that's going to make you rich. It is a kind of humanitarian work, at its best, in my opinion.

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