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“A Labour Leader in a Frothy Scoundrel”: Farce and Social Justice in the Popular Dramaturgy of George Shiels

In the financially precarious period which followed the partition of Ireland (1922) the Northern Irish playwright George Shiels kept The Abbey Theatre, Dublin, open for business with a series of “box-office” successes. Literary Dublin was not so appreciative of his work as the Abbey audiences dubbed his popular dramaturgy mere “kitchen comedy.” However, recent analysts of Irish theatre are beginning to recognise that Shiels used popular theatre methods to illuminate and interrogate instances of social injustice both north and south of the Irish border. In doing so, such commentators have set up a hierarchy between the playwright’s early “inferior” comedies and his later “superior” works of Irish Realism. This article rejects this binary by suggesting that in this early work Shiels’s intent is equally socially critical and that in the plays *Paul Twynning*, *Professor Tim* and *The Retrievers* he is actively engaging with the farcical tradition in order to expose the marginalisation of the landless classes in Ireland in the post-colonial jurisdictions. Brenda Winter lectures at Queen’s University and was a founder member of *Charabanc*, a Northern Irish women’s theatre company.

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A Literary Intelligentsia

George Shiels (1881-1949) was the financial saviour of the Abbey, Ireland’s national theatre. That institution originated in the ambitions of the poet William Butler Yeats, the Anglo-Irish aristocrat Lady Augusta Gregory and the writer Edward Martyn to de-anglicise the stage in late 19th and early

20th century Dublin. The trio sought to curtail a thriving tradition of popular

theatre which was associated in their minds with the decadent habits and commercial values of British colonising forces. Their project was, in Lady Gregory's words, to banish "buffoonery and easy sentiment"¹ from the Irish stage in order "to raise" the taste of Irish audiences "to an appreciation of what those who were above them in means and education judged to be finest."² Their efforts resulted in the opening of a new Irish theatre in Abbey Street, Dublin, in 1904.

In its early years the Abbey survived under the patronage of Yeats's English friend and admirer, Annie Horniman.³ When Horniman, concerned at the theatre's perceived support for the cause of Irish Nationalism, withdrew sponsorship in 1910, the theatre was forced to operate, sometimes precariously, as a wholly commercial venture.⁴ It did so against the background of a Republican revolution in 1916 and the guerrilla war with Britain which ensued. It continued to operate throughout a period of civil war which erupted when the Irish Republican Army leadership, against the wishes of some of its members, accepted the 1921 treaty which ended British rule in one part of Ireland through a partitioning of the country.⁵ The theatre's perilous financial situation was somewhat relieved in 1925 by the granting of a small annual subsidy by the new Free State government.⁶ However, it was never enough to ensure financial stability and the theatre remained heavily reliant on box-office takings for its very existence. Yeats's original intention to form a high-art, literary theatre on European models epitomised in the work of the Théâtre Libre in Paris and the Independent Theatre Society in London had long since given way to the financial necessity of catering to an audience more appreciative of realistic dramas and farcical comedy.

In 1921, with the political allegory *Bedmates*, Shiels joined a cohort of Abbey realist playwrights which included Lennox Robinson, Brinsley MacNamara, T. C. Murray and Sean O'Casey. His work rivalled O'Casey's tragicomedies in popularity.⁷ In 1926 O'Casey quit Ireland and the Abbey to pursue more expressionistic forms of theatre-making. After his departure Shiels's ability to deliver a series of popular comic "hits" made him indispensable to the Abbey during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.⁸ Shiels rarely directly confronted the "national problem" or Ireland's "troubles," engaging instead in a critique of social justice north and south of the border.⁹ His ability in his plays, comic or otherwise, to reveal the greed, hypocrisies and pieties of provincial life in post-partition Ireland has been described by the writer Frank O'Connor as "more like Swift than any other Irish writer."¹⁰ His complete *oeuvre* of some thirty-three dramas, and numerous radio-dramas, is sometimes artificially, and as will be argued in this article erroneously, divided into his earlier inferior melodramas and farcical comedies and his serious works of realism of the 1930s and 1940s.

Shiels was a working-class, poorly educated, Catholic boy from the small North Antrim town of Ballymoney. He emigrated to America at the turn of the 20th century working his way from Canada to Brazil by means of bar-tending, cow-punching and mining. Then he suffered devastating injuries in an industrial accident while working on the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway and returned to Ballymoney with only limited use of his legs. Desperate to make a

living, he acquired an education through correspondence courses. He began by writing stories based on his adventures in the “wild west” but soon moved on to try his hand at plays for the theatre. His first plays were produced in Belfast by the Ulster Theatre. However, by 1921 he had been taken up by the Abbey. This relationship would continue until 1948. In all, he wrote twenty-two plays for that theatre becoming in many ways its “representative playwright.”¹¹ Plays such as *Paul Twyning* (1922), *Professor Tim* (1925) and *The New Gossoon* (1930) delighted audiences, becoming staples of the Abbey repertoire to be produced when cash reserves were low. When it was suggested to Yeats and the Abbey management that they consider giving Shiels “a rest” from their programming, the poet is said to have replied: “it would be the same as closing the doors.”¹²

Literary Dublin was not so appreciative of Shiels’s efforts. From the outset of his career he was dismissed as a mere “purveyor of amusement”¹³ by an elite intelligentsia whose taste in theatre was fashioned by the “literary-political coalescence”¹⁴ which produced the Irish Literary Theatre (1897), the Irish National Theatre Society (1903) and, ultimately, the Abbey Theatre. An indication of the success of these initiatives in establishing the literary imperative as the pre-eminent means of judging the “worth” of theatrical endeavour in the Irish theatre tradition is well evidenced in a rejection letter received by Shiels after he submitted his first theatrical success [*Away from the Moss*] to the Talbot Press in Dublin in 1918.¹⁵

Mr Boyd has read your play *Away from the Moss* with very great interest, but he does not advise its publication by us, as it is not a purely literary play. Mr Boyd is of the opinion that it is the best Cinema Play that he has read for a very long time, and if you could get it taken up by some of the American Movie people he thinks that you would make a fortune ... He says the scenery, the dialect, and the whole atmosphere of the play is in every way excellent, but it would not be a play for the study, and, after all, it is only people with literary instinct who buy plays to read.¹⁶

This letter provides a clear indication of the attitudes of a high cultural, literary intelligentsia towards works of popular playwrights such as Shiels in the wake of the Irish Literary Revival. In re-directing the playwright towards the more commercially driven world of the cinema in which he might “make a fortune,” Boyd is distancing himself from the standards and assumptions of popular theatre which had, in his mind, driven “the poet out of the playhouse and made the writing of plays something like the supplying of scenario for modern film.”¹⁷ Shiels’s farces and works of popular realism would be dismissed in similar fashion by a succession of like-minded critics for the remainder of his lifetime. In 1942 Gabriel Fallon suggested that Shiels’s most successful play, *The Rugged Path*, was “entirely foreign to the requirements of theatre.”¹⁸ Peter Kavanagh called him “the great vulgarising influence” on the Abbey.¹⁹ Scholarship in the latter half of the 20th century (Robert Hogan, Daniel Casey) has been a little kinder to Shiels, drawing a distinction between Shiels’s earlier works of farce in which “he was still serving his time as a playwright”²⁰ and the “quiet

credibility”²¹ of his later works of Irish Realism, *The Rugged Path* (1940) and *The Summit* (1941).

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century the prevailing perception of Shiels as “a writer of Ulster kitchen comedies or as a bread-and-butter playwright who kept audiences in the Abbey stalls between geniuses”²² has been somewhat challenged. Commentators such as Christopher Murray (2008) and Paul Murphy (2008) have sought to recuperate Shiels as a playwright whose works represent a sophisticated negotiation of the social mores and class politics of De Valera’s Ireland. Murphy in particular offers a trenchant case for a re-estimation of Shiels’s canonical situation chiefly on the basis of “the sober thought-provoking tone”²³ of his later works of realism. He cannot be so wholehearted in his approval of Shiels’s earlier works where he takes issue with the “comic mediation of pain and destruction” that the playwright employs in his representations of itinerants, tramps and others down on their luck.²⁴ In setting up such a hierarchy between Shiels’s later works of realism and his earlier works of farce, Murphy seems to be aligning himself with those critics who “are suspicious of laughter in drama and treat it as a trifling or innocuous affair.”²⁵ Hence, the poetic symbolism of Yeats’s dramas has received much more critical attention than the comedies of Lady Gregory. The “literariness” and lyricism of Friel consistently trumps the comedies of Bernard Farrell or Hugh Leonard and in the north of Ireland the tragic thrillers of Gary Mitchell are treated with much more reverence than the comedies of Marie Jones or Tim Loane’s political farces. Such preferences can be linked historically to the sensitivities of an emerging nation as to how it is portrayed on stage.

Nicholas Grene attributes the continuing obsession of Irish drama with how “Irishness” is represented on stage to “the preoccupation with national identity of a colonised people.”²⁶ The sensitivities of a previously subjugated race, often stereotypically depicted on the British stage, or in print, as figures of ridicule, buffoons, blaggards or drunkards,²⁷ are easy to comprehend. Indeed they have manifested themselves in riotous form when Irish audiences have taken exception to the portrayal of the Irish peasant as “degenerate, debilitated and depraved,”²⁸ as happened with Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World* in 1907. In the process of correcting the misrepresentations of the “stage-Irishman” the literary artist in the Irish theatre tradition has been elevated to the position of representative of “the nation in the fullest possible sense, not only depicting its life-forms, but simultaneously speaking in its name and being its exemplary pre-figuration.”²⁹ By contrast, popular modes of theatre production such as farce and melodrama have not been entrusted with the same “primary productive role”³⁰ in nation-building by virtue of “their putative invitation to escapism, their repetitive and inartistic construction, and their largely emotional trajectories.”³¹ The distrust of popular forms and of the comic mode in particular as an “authentic” means of representing Irish identity on stage goes some way to explaining the perception that Shiels’s more literary works of realism are of greater value than his earlier works of farce.

O'Connor has stated that more than any other dramatist George Shiels understood "the weaknesses of Irish life and the shoddiness of its institution." He suggests that "the intense relationship which Shiels developed with his audience enabled him to say to them: "Look! This is the way you live, and it's abominable."³² O'Connor is inferring that Shiels is entering into a pact with his audiences to suspend what Erving Goffman has suggested to be "the serious or primary framework meanings of a strip of experience" in favour of "a secondary framework"³³ which treats "the world playfully."³⁴ In doing so Shiels is granted the licence to chastise them for the manner in which they have behaved towards others in matters pertaining to social justice. This tacit agreement between author and audience was forged in his most popular farces of the 1920s, *Paul Twynning* and *Professor Tim*. In these plays Shiels used the festive, but aggressive, laughter of farce as a vehicle for his social critique. The result was an unambiguous attack on the pieties and hypocrisies of Ireland's emerging bourgeoisie intent on acquiring land and position in the post-colonial jurisdiction.

Social Justice and Farce as a Political Act

In the wake of the 1916 "rising," the withdrawal of the colonial power and the subsequent civil war, the energies and resources of the island of Ireland and its people were much depleted. In the post-revolutionary phase of the Irish Free State "radical social renovation was inhibited by a culturally repressive Irish Catholic hegemony"³⁵ which regarded any form of social change as potentially damaging to the moral fibre of the nation. "Economic prudence [...] repressive sexual mores and nationalistic conservatism"³⁶ held sway in the new *Dáil Éireann*³⁷ and were reinforced in the country at large by the dominant social groupings of the strong farmer and the tradesman. In the north, social reform in public health and in the provision of housing for the labouring classes was also seriously neglected by "lethargy or even complacency especially among local authorities."³⁸ The failure of governments north and south to pay sufficient heed to the social well-being of their respective citizenry provided the back-drop against which Shiels's critiques of social justice in Ireland were played out. However, as Pilkington correctly observes, Shiels never directly questions the legitimacy of either state.³⁹ Instead, his intended targets are the forces of "the competitive market, private property in the means of production, and the monogamous family"⁴⁰ which are the state's "unofficial agents."⁴¹ It is these "unofficial agents," chiefly represented by powerful land-owners, negligent employers and cruel familial despots who are pilloried in a Shielsian farce through the potential of that form to stage "vital revolts against reason's heavily regulative hand and against other onerous requirements of civilisation."⁴²

In considering how Shiels manipulates popular farce in the socially critical idiom, it is useful to consider the dialectic on which pivots the form's structure and underlying political intent. Eric Bentley suggests that "the surface of farce is grave and gay at the same time [...] Both the gaiety and gravity are visible and part of the style."⁴³ In order to preserve the delicate balance of farce, "a dialogue has to be established between the aggression and the flippancy,

between hostility and lightness of heart.”⁴⁴ Davis endorses Bentley’s analysis of the duality of farce suggesting that there are two elements at work therein: “the impulse to pleasure and the impulse to aggression and hostility.”⁴⁵ She notes that: “the extreme hostility found in farce is balanced by a joyous festivity. The good life is represented by protagonists who are as carefully chosen as are the antagonists who forbid it.”⁴⁶ The representatives of joyousness and mischief on the one hand and hostility and aggression on the other are so constructed that “there is little doubt where the chief sympathies of an audience must lie.”⁴⁷ Sympathy always lies with the knave who, in his festive mischief-making, is the epitome of joyousness. His victim, in his utter obnoxiousness, will receive only the opprobrium of the audience. Since the victim is normally an authority figure, the farce enables “deliberate offence”⁴⁸ against the hierarchies and social norms which he or she represents. In *Paul Twyning* and *Professor Tim* Shiels pursues his social critique by engaging with the light-heartedness and aggression of farce. In the eponymous heroes of these plays he has created two classic knaves whose mischief elicits the sympathy of the audience to their cause which is to outwit those who have power over the socially defeated class which they represent. He also uses the aggressive potential of the form to create monsters of greed and acquisitiveness in his representations of the “unofficial agents” of the state: the land and property owners whose unjust treatment of the landless classes cannot fail to earn the censure of the audience.

Paul Twyning, Professor Tim and The Retrievers

The plot of *Paul Twyning* hinges on the typical comic scenario of the gulling of the master by the clever servant. The play was written and set in 1922, the year that the south of Ireland became an independent state. Paul Twyning, an itinerant plasterer, is helping to build the new house of James Deegan, magistrate, landowner and representative of an upwardly mobile Irish bourgeoisie who are seeking to fill the shoes of the departing English gentry. The allegorical potential of this scenario signals that Shiels is engaged in a portrayal of the construction of a new nation in the dawning of statehood. His representation of the national character therein is not encouraging. The older generation are greedy, domineering, corrupt landowners such as Deegan, or disenchanting, belligerent small farmers such as Denis McGothigan. The younger generation of Irish men and women portrayed are an even less encouraging picture of what Ireland may become. They are represented by Deegan’s older son, the drunken publican Patrick Deegan, and Patrick’s obsequious offspring Jim, eternally anxious about whether his grandad will leave him the farm when he dies. Deegan’s spineless younger son Dan, a “lad” of “over forty years,”⁴⁹ seems an even worse prospect. He lives in mortal terror of his father “like a young rabbit under the eye of the stoat.”⁵⁰ It is around this cast of grotesques that Shiels frames a frothy matrimonial comedy replete with the tricks, disguises, unlikely coincidences and contrived *dénouements* of the farcical tradition. However, he also skilfully infiltrates into the action a damning indictment of tyranny within the Irish family focusing upon injustices such as parental enslavement of offspring and their physical and mental abuse, forced marriage and enforced emigration. However, most significantly, it is in this play that he

begins to set up a critique of distributive justice and Irish agrarian politics which would exercise him in his next two farces, *The Retrievers* and *Professor Tim*.

In *Paul Twyning* Shiels was engaging in a representation of the Irish rural classes which was as degraded and debased as anything that Synge staged in *The Playboy of the Western World*, yet no riot ensued on the occasion of its first performance. The reviewer for the *Freeman's Journal* did note the underlying social critique of the play, recognising James Deegan as "a concentrated tyrant." However, the review mainly focused on the play's "highly coloured comedy," its "good action" and "excellent characterisation" and its surfeit of "humour."⁵¹ Such tolerance towards a less than flattering depiction of the national character is only made palatable to the sensitivities of a middle-class Abbey audience by side-stepping the politics of representation in a playful mode to engage in the dialectics of farce through the trickster figure, Paul Twyning, and his victim, James Deegan.

In the course of the action Paul outwits James Deegan by engineering and facilitating an unsuitable love match between his employer's feeble-minded son Dan, and Rose, daughter of the small-farmer McGothigan. In so doing he fulfils the function of the farcical trickster which is to thwart and expose the venality of the authoritarian figure who is his victim. Paul Twyning is the prototype of what David Krause deems Shiels's "barbarous clowns."⁵² He is "a law unto his resilient self in his daimonic struggle against repressive civilisation."⁵³ In his drinking, singing, brawling and witty repartee he invokes the joyous spirit of the carnival. From the first scenes of the play he is set up as the Lord of Misrule who turns all hierarchies topsy-turvy. His manipulation of the foolish Dan as he stirs him up to defy his father and propose to Rose is truly comic. Paul elicits "a fool's pardon" from audiences who might never emulate his behaviour in real life but tolerate his outrages on stage because his actions perform their own repressed desires in some sort of comic catharsis. In such a way is he allowed to provide the kind of offence to social taboos which Davis suggests "is both sufficiently precise to be psychologically valid and sufficiently delineated to qualify as play."⁵⁴

In contrast, farce's victim figure, Deegan, is set up as a monster of cruelty to his family. When he finds out about Dan's engagement he threatens to put him aboard an emigrant ship with the words: "try to thwart me, or disobey me, and you'll see. I've done it with your brothers and sisters when I was less independent than I am now."⁵⁵ The reference to independence here is no accident. Shiels is again operating in allegorical territory by equating Deegan's heartlessness with that of an uncaring state which has denuded Ireland of its youth by failing to stop the haemorrhage of Irish emigration in search of employment which cannot be found at home. Paul, granted the trickster's licence to flagellate verbally the iniquities of the powerful, reinforces the analogy when he upbraids Deegan with the words: "you'd drive the youth to the four winds, and then bleat and pray and send them shamrocks in exile."⁵⁶ Deegan's treatment of his family is only matched by the obnoxiousness of his dealings with those he believes to be his social inferiors. By virtue of Paul's status as a homeless person, he defines the plasterer as unmistakably inferior in values to

himself, stating that “a tramp’s opinion of respectability and mine are different.”⁵⁷ He designates the McGothigans as “much the same breed of inferiors,”⁵⁸ describing their daughter Rose, the girl Dan wishes to marry against his father’s wishes, as “a low-born trull.”⁵⁹ However, it is in parodying Deegan’s acquisitiveness of money and property that Shiels enters into the arena of agrarian politics to launch his critique of Ireland’s *nouveaux riches* and their ruthless treatment of the landless and dispossessed which will become a recurring feature of his work in his next two farces, *The Retrievers* and *Professor Tim*, and in his works of realism of the 1930s.

Diarmaid Ferriter has observed that “the early twentieth century [...] was to herald the end of landlordism in Ireland” and that “by 1914, seventy-five per cent of occupiers were buying out their British landlords, mostly under the Land Acts of 1903 and 1909.”⁶⁰ This resulted in “a massive social transformation characterised by larger holdings increasingly organised in response to market demands.”⁶¹ This transformation inevitably resulted in winners and losers, leading to increased tension between those who had a surfeit of land to till and those who had little or none. In *Paul Twyning* Shiels reflects this situation in the troubled relationship between the powerful landowner, Deegan, and the envious, disenchanted small farmer, McGothigan. Although McGothigan is unattractive in his belligerence, Shiels is more sharply critical of Deegan’s position. Again it is farce’s trickster Paul who observes how greed for land has debased the high ideals and democratic values of this former democrat who had taken part in the Land League’s struggle for “fair rent, fixity of tenure and freedom of sale”⁶² for the Irish tenant farmer in the 1880s. Paul mockingly denounces Deegan and the class which he represents:

Paul: Well begorry, I’ve tramped England, Ireland, and parts of Scotland, but there is the worst specimen of the landed aristocracy I’ve met. That’s the sort of democrats the Land League left behind it. (*Shouts*) Hi, Dan! You may emerge from your rat-hole. Ould Clanricarde⁶³ has gone out.⁶⁴

The political potency of the play *Paul Twyning* is enabled by the indigent condition of its central character. Farce, like melodrama in favouring the powerless as “its protagonist of choice,”⁶⁵ allows the socially defeated to articulate their oppression. Paul, the representative of the landless and dispossessed in the play, launches an invective against the newly enriched propertied class who have benefited in the struggle for land-ownership in post-colonial Ireland:

Paul: And the vagrant will have his say. Ireland north, south, east and west is lousy with your kind. There was more happiness on the Irish homestead when you were paying the rack-rent and eating the lumpers.⁶⁶

Murphy has suggested that while *Paul Twyning* “offers a withering critique ... of the *nouveaux riches* in both states, it is ultimately neutralised”⁶⁷ by a

matrimonial reconciliation at the end of the play. However, as Weitz has observed, such “happy” endings cannot be taken at face value but are rather to be considered as “an insistent remnant” of comedy’s origins in “folk culture’s rite of fertility.”⁶⁸ These farcical comedies would rather suggest that George Shiels instinctively understood Stuart Hall’s definition of popular culture as:

one of the sites where the struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged [...] It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises and where it is secured.⁶⁹

In *Paul Twynning* Shiels was clearly manipulating the popular forms of farce in a socially critical idiom to enable the landless classes to have their say about those who have power over them.

Shiels adopts the same formula of knave, victim and prank in his 1925 farce *Professor Tim* and this time his critique of the strong farmer class is even more astringent. The play is concerned with a plot between two bourgeois families to buy at auction the estate belonging to the bankrupt aristocrat Hugh O’Cahan. The Scallys have just purchased their second farm and consider their daughter Peggy to be a match for Joseph Kilroy, son of the biggest landowner in the district. The two families plan a match which will increase their power and prestige in the area. Peggy is in fact in love with O’Cahan but she refuses to marry him because he has lost his fortune and accepts instead a proposal from the loathsome Joseph. Murray suggests that *Professor Tim* is “clearly a sentimental comedy.”⁷⁰ However, amidst the comedy and romance, Shiels is again engaging with the aggression of farce in a critique of social justice. This time he illuminates a middle-class mentality which regards contact with destitution as a kind of contamination. Shiels accomplishes this by intruding the tramp-like figure of Mrs Scally’s long lost brother, Professor Tim, into her home to disturb the comfortable milieu of her *nouveau riche* pretensions. When Kilroy senior observes the supposedly drunken old tramp in Mrs Scally’s kitchen, the following exchange takes place:

Kilroy: Who’s that ould viper? I seem to know his face. (*Sniffing*)
The smell of whiskey and snuff and rotten fish would poison you!
Mrs Scally: It’s not drink, James. He’s a poor man with the palsy or something, and Peggy always feeds him in the old kitchen.
Kilroy: The Lord knows how she does it! She’ll surely get a powerful reward in heaven. For I couldn’t go near him.⁷¹

Mrs. Scally then threatens to turn her brother, who has become a threat to her dynastic machinations, out of her house. Her ineffectual husband remonstrates with her, pointing out that the old man may “die on the road.” She callously replies: “If he dies we can bury him. Step on.”⁷² Tim is in reality a man of means posing as a tramp. He masterminds a plot to buy O’Cahan’s estate from under the land “grabber”⁷³ Kilroy’s nose and give it to Peggy the only member of his family to treat him with humanity. In carrying out his plot Tim, another of Shiels’s anarchic clowns, creates havoc as he turns the tables on the grasping landowners

who are the butt of his joking. *Professor Tim* enjoyed huge success with audiences at the Abbey and on the amateur drama circuit. It toured to London and America and was made into a film. It was so popular that in the early 1930s the British Medical Association bought out the Abbey Theatre for an evening and requested a special performance of *Professor Tim* to entertain their members who were attending its annual conference in Dublin.⁷⁴ Murray suggests, a little condescendingly: "Of its kind, which is light comedy, it [*Professor Tim*] is lastingly entertaining."⁷⁵ This article would suggest that in this play and its companion piece *Paul Twynning* the social critique is equally obvious and just as enduring.

However, it is in his 1924 comedy, *The Retrievers*, that Shiels articulates his concern for distributive justice for Ireland's small-holder and landless classes most fully. His technique in this play differs somewhat from the earlier *Paul Twynning*, and the play which follows it, *Professor Tim*. Whilst Shiels retains the ludicrous scenarios, concealments and disguises of the farcical tradition, he abandons the knave and victim formula for a more thematic approach. His material is current to the time in which it was performed and potentially divisive. *The Retrievers* is set during Ireland's Civil War whose legacy of acrimony was to last for successive generations. The play is set on a homestead devastated by the lawlessness which has been the product of guerrilla warfare. A traumatised house-keeper is defending the property against the depredations of "a robbing neighbour,"⁷⁶ John Dollas, whilst its rightful owner, Steve Maguire, is interned for belonging to the IRA. In a feat of comic mediation Shiels manages to create a farcical situation out of these tragic circumstances. He weaves a sub-plot in which Steve's right to the farm is challenged by an emigrant aunt returning from America, Mrs Snider, and her husband Reub. In the labyrinthine course of events the Sniders are captured and held hostage by Steve's supporter Peter Duat, described as a "walking doctor."⁷⁷ Duat and his wife disguise themselves as their American captives in order to secure the farm for Steve. Amidst the broad comedy which ensues Shiels embarks upon a theme which he would develop over the rest of his writing career: that social inequity, determined by the position in life into which the subject is born, is the midwife of disaffection, unrest and, ultimately, lawless behaviour.

This theme is expanded in the play through the character of John Dollas. Dollas has formerly been a good neighbour and a law-abiding person but economic disadvantage has turned him to crime and, in the chaotic aftermath of Irish revolution and civil war in the border areas between north and south, he has taken to intimidation, robbing mail-bags and looting the farms of his neighbours. Dollas, enriched by £18 from intercepted mail, defends his actions thus: "How long would I have worked to the farmers for eighteen pounds? Is there a labouring man in all Ireland has eighteen pence at the end of his days? If there is, he's not honest."⁷⁸ He extols the benefits of his life of crime, stating: "I'm getting used to good clothes on my back and money in my pocket, and ham and eggs to my breakfast and a bit of mate [*meat*] to my dinner – all for the first time in my life."⁷⁹ When he is eventually called to account for his misdemeanours, Dollas gives as reasons his disappointment at the outcome of revolution and his

disillusion with the unfulfilled promises of Land League politicians who have taken his “thruppence” in contributions and his votes and given back nothing:

Dollas: The labouring man was to've fine wages and short hours and a canary singing in the front window. Like a fool I believed it all. 'Twas a fine dream and I was a fine dreamer. On hungry days I'd think of Home Rule with full and plenty, and that made me happy. I didn't know then what I know now – that Home Rule or foreign rule is all the same to the labouring man.⁸⁰

It is at this point that Dollas issues a threat towards the stability of the state from a disaffected underclass enraged at the infringements of social justice which curtail their life-chances:

Dollas: But there is a day coming when it won't be safe to gull men like me ... D'ye hear me? And every broken promise brings that day nearer. From this day forth I'm blood brother to every man in the world – English, Scotch, Protestant, Jew, and Atheist, that has to live in a hovel on praties and salt.⁸¹

The idea that want inevitably breeds disaffection reverberates through Shiels's later works of realism. It is allegorised in *The New Gossoon* in the poacher Rabbit Hamill's assertion that he will “raise hell's delight”⁸² on the homestead of the Cary family who have taken away his rights to poach on their land. It is, however, most explicitly expressed in *The Rugged Path* and *The Summit* when the robbing neighbour Dollas is transmogrified into the disillusioned, murdering Dolis family. Mark Phelan has commented :

As historians of Irish theatre have long known, there is no better way to investigate modern Ireland's political history than to study its popular theatre ... To understand why the realities of post-independence life disillusioned a generation read Brendan Behan and George Shiels.⁸³

It is in the farces *Paul Twynning*, *Professor Tim* and *The Retrievers* that that disillusion is unequivocally stated for the first time.

Conclusion

George Shiels continued his engagement with the farcical tradition until 1930 after which he turned his attention to Irish realism. However, his “sure-fire comedies” were so central to the financial stability of the Abbey that when he submitted more serious material he “could not get a stage.”⁸⁴ In the 1930s, in order to satisfy play selection committees, Shiels was obliged to camouflage an increasingly dark vision of the rancid realities of Irish rural life with what his friend David Kennedy called “the muffling laughter of comedy.”⁸⁵ There may well be a delicious irony in the fact that the Abbey, originally founded to banish

“buffoonery and easy sentiment” from the Irish stage, had to place reliance on such popular comic forms for its continued existence.

However, in 1940 and 1941 Shiels was allowed to eschew comedy altogether in *The Rugged Path* and its sequel *The Summit*. In these, his most critically acclaimed plays, he undertook a serious treatment of how good citizenship in Ireland was under threat from a lawless underclass. It is in these plays that John Dollas gets a new lease of life as Hugh Dolis, paterfamilias of a socially deviant mountain clan. In the realist tradition these are problem-plays which treat in a literary manner with the legacy of post-colonialism. It is not surprising given that the literary is privileged over the popular in the Irish theatre tradition that scholarship has singled these plays out for the most sustained praise. Analysts such as Casey, Hogan, Murray and Murphy have been correct in identifying them as “serious, challenging and historical.”⁸⁶ However, in setting up a hierarchy between Shiels’s serious works of realism and his works of farcical comedy of the 1920s, these critics have not sufficiently acknowledged the potential of Shiels’s early works to function equally well both as critiques of social justice *and* as “a good night out”⁸⁷ in the theatre. In the midst of the festive but aggressive laughter of farce, Shiels’s clear intent in these plays is to identify the oppression of the weak by the powerful. Deegan’s comments on Paul Twynning, that “there’s a labour leader lost in that frothy scoundrel,”⁸⁸ could equally be applied to Shiels himself.

Shiels’s plays have fallen from the repertoire. He last received professional productions on the anniversary of his birth in 1981 at Belfast’s Lyric Theatre and at the Abbey. If he is remembered at all thirty years later, it is as an old-fashioned playwright whose work is of interest only as a “cultural document.”⁸⁹ However, in a post-Celtic Tiger Ireland which is grappling once more with poverty and enforced emigration, Shiels has still much to say to an audience on matters of social justice. Revivals of his work are long overdue.

¹ Augusta Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography* (New York and London: The Knickerbocker Press, 1913), 9.

² Adrian Frazier, “The Ideology of the Abbey Theatre,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* ed. Shaun Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 43.

³ See Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre, 1601-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 125.

⁴ Irish Nationalists sought freedom through political or military means from the British colonial power which had ruled in Ireland since the 12th century.

⁵ The signatories to the 1921 Treaty with Britain accepted the partitioning of Ireland into a twenty-six county Free State and a six-county, unionist-dominated northern entity ruled by Britain. A civil war ensued. The new Irish government *Cumann na Gaedheal* swiftly put an end to the conflict by interning and executing some of their former comrades-in-arms.

⁶ See Lionel Pilkington, *Theatre and the State in Twentieth-Century Ireland: Cultivating the People* (London: Routledge, 2001), 89.

⁷ Sean O’Casey was the author of *Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926).

⁸ O’Casey left Dublin in 1926.

- ⁹ Notable exceptions to this generalisation are *Bedmates* (1921), *The Retrievers* (1922) and *First Aid* (1923).
- ¹⁰ Frank O'Connor, Programme note: *Macook's Corner* by George Shiels, directed by Tyrone Guthrie, Grove Theatre, Belfast, 1969. Copy courtesy of Mr Alex Blair.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 1.
- ¹³ Andrew E. Malone, *The Irish Drama: The Early History of the Abbey Theatre* (London: Constable, 1929), 237.
- ¹⁴ Ben Levitas, *The Theatre of Nation: Irish Drama and Cultural Nationalism 1890-1916* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 30.
- ¹⁵ *Away from the Moss* was first performed by the Ulster Literary Theatre on 25 November 1918 at the Grand Opera House, Belfast.
- ¹⁶ Letter to George Shiels from the Managing Director, Talbot Press Limited, Dublin, 10 May 1918. Box 3, Folder 1916-18, Shiels Collection, University of Ulster at Coleraine.
- ¹⁷ Una Ellis-Fermor, *The Irish Dramatic Movement* (London: Methuen, 1939), 3.
- ¹⁸ Gabriel Fallon, [Untitled] in *The Irish Monthly*, 70, No. 831 (Sep 1942): 394.
- ¹⁹ Peter Kavanagh, *The Story of the Abbey Theatre* (Orona, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1976), 147.
- ²⁰ Daniel J. Casey, *George Shiels: The Enigmatic Playwright* (Ballymoney: Ballymoney Drama Festival Publication, 1981), 1.
- ²¹ Robert Hogan, *After the Irish Renaissance: A Critical History of the Irish Drama since "The Plough and the Stars"* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 37.
- ²² Casey, *George Shiels*, *ibid.*
- ²³ Paul Murphy, *Hegemony and Fantasy in Irish Drama, 1899-1949* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 91.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.
- ²⁵ David Krause, *The Profane Book of Irish Comedy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 48.
- ²⁶ Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 48.
- ²⁷ For a full discussion see Joep Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, its development and literary expression prior to the Nineteenth-Century* (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 1996), 77-150.
- ²⁸ In 1907 Synge provoked a riot in the Abbey Theatre by his portrayal of the Irish peasantry in *The Playboy of the Western World*. See Susan Cannon Harris, *Gender and Modern Irish Drama* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2002), 90.
- ²⁹ David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993), 69.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.
- ³¹ Stephen Watt, *Joyce, O'Casey and the Irish Popular Theatre* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 5.
- ³² Frank O'Connor, Programme note: *Macook's Corner*.
- ³³ Eric Weitz, *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ³⁵ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: the Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996), 5.
- ³⁶ Terence Brown, *Ireland a Social and Cultural History: 1922-2002* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), 16.
- ³⁷ The parliament of the Irish Free State after Partition.
- ³⁸ F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine* (London: Fontana Press, 1985), 711.
- ³⁹ See Pilkington, *Theatre and the State*, 102.
- ⁴⁰ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 7.
- ⁴¹ David Fitzpatrick, *The Two Irelands: 1922-39* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 206.
- ⁴² Jessica Milner Davis, *Farce* (London: Methuen, 1978), 23.
- ⁴³ Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (New York: Athenaeum, 1975), 242.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 244.
- ⁴⁵ Milner Davis, *Farce*, 26.

- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 27.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 27.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 26.
- ⁴⁹ George Shiels, "Paul Twynning" in *Three Plays* (London: Macmillan, 1947), 100.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 153.
- ⁵¹ *The Freeman's Journal*, 4 October 1922: 4.
- ⁵² Krause, *The Profane Book of Irish Comedy*, 135.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 25.
- ⁵⁴ Milner Davis, *Farce*, 85.
- ⁵⁵ Shiels, *Three Plays*, 112.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., 144.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 100.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 110.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland: 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2005), 62.
- ⁶¹ Martin Waters, cited in Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland*, 63.
- ⁶² David Dwan, *The Great Community: Culture and Nationalism in Ireland* (Dublin: Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies, University of Notre Dame/Field Day, 2008), 114.
- ⁶³ Marquess of Clanricarde was a notorious British landlord in Ireland during the Land Wars of the 1880s.
- ⁶⁴ Shiels, *Three Plays*, 101.
- ⁶⁵ Daniel Gerould, "Melodrama and Revolution," in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen* eds. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook and Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 185.
- ⁶⁶ Shiels, *Three Plays*, 144.
- ⁶⁷ Murphy, *Hegemony and Fantasy*, 82.
- ⁶⁸ Weitz, *Introduction to Comedy*, 10.
- ⁶⁹ Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular," in *People's History and Socialist Theory* ed. Samuel Raphael (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 231.
- ⁷⁰ Christopher Murray, Introduction to *Selected Plays: George Shiels* (Gerrard's Cross: Colin Smythe, 2008), xv.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., 88.
- ⁷² Ibid.
- ⁷³ Ibid., 104.
- ⁷⁴ Letter from George Shiels to his nurse Nelly Hunter. The letter is undated but probably written around 1930. Shiels's correspondence with Hunter is not as yet in the public domain. They are held in the private collection of her daughter, Professor Maire Liberace, Rockland College, SUNY, New York State.
- ⁷⁵ Murray, Introduction to *Selected Plays: George Shiels*, xvii.
- ⁷⁶ George Shiels, "The Retrievers" in Christopher Murray, *Selected Plays: George Shiels*, 4.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid., 4.
- ⁷⁸ George Shiels, "The Retrievers" in Christopher Murray, *Selected Plays: George Shiels*, 32.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid., 27.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid., 56.
- ⁸¹ Ibid., 56.
- ⁸² George Shiels, "The New Gossoon" in Christopher Murray, *Selected Plays: George Shiels*, 134.
- ⁸³ Mark Phelan, "(Un)Settlement: Political Parody and the Northern Irish Peace Process," *Ilha Do Desterro* 58 (2010): 206.
- ⁸⁴ David Kennedy, "The Drama in Ulster," in *The Arts in Ulster: A Symposium* eds. Sam Hanna Bell, Nesca A. Robb and John Hewitt (London: George G. Harrap, 1951), 60.
- ⁸⁵ David Kennedy, "George Shiels: A Playwright at Work," in *Threshold* 25 (1974): 52.
- ⁸⁶ Murray, Introduction to *Selected Plays: George Shiels*, xxviii.
- ⁸⁷ John McGrath, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form* (London: Methuen, 1981).
- ⁸⁸ George Shiels, *Three Plays*, 144.
- ⁸⁹ Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up To Nation* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 138.