

FINALLY AVAILABLE: MAURA LAVERTY'S DUBLIN DRAMAS

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Cathy Leeney and Deirdre McFeely, eds. *The Plays of Maura Laverty: Liffey Lane, Tolka Row, A Tree in the Crescent*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023. 274 pp. ISBN 9781802077902 (hb). ISBN 9781802077919 (pb).

To say that the publication of the plays of Maura Laverty (1907-1966), Ireland's most popular playwright of the early 1950s, has been long overdue would be an understatement. This comprehensive edition prepared from multiple typescripts by Cathy Leeney and Deirdre McFeely includes Laverty's three extant Dublin plays produced by Hilton Edwards of the Gate Theatre, Dublin. The volume is introduced by an extensive critical study contextualising Laverty's work and featuring some valuable images pertaining to the first productions.

Still known to older generations in Ireland for her cookery books and her regular food programme on the radio, Laverty was also the author of four novels, numerous short stories published in women's magazines both sides of the Atlantic as well as *The Bell* and other literary journals, a children's book and countless essays and columns that appeared in a range of periodicals. As the editors of *The Plays of Maura Laverty* argue, her immense popularity as a broadcaster and commentator really make her an "influencer before her time" (5). However, Laverty was clearly a talented journalist as well, beginning with her time in Spain when, barely aged twenty, she wrote articles for the influential Catholic daily *El Debate*. Her keen understanding of Irish society and the politics of the day is apparent across her writing for the page as well as the stage; moreover, it led to Laverty's active involvement in politics in 1947 as she became an Executive member and promoter of the newly founded Clann na Poblachta party. Commenting on her move from popular cookery programmes to campaigning, she stated incisively: "My interest in politics is a direct result of my interest in cooking. It is the result of my impatience with a Government whose cynical apathy is responsible for the fact that eighty-four per cent of the women of Ireland cannot afford the ingredients for the cooking which their families need." (qtd. 12)

Women were indeed in the centre of Laverty's interest as an activist and a writer both; as the editors point out, her plays in particular are remarkably open as regards taboo subjects discussed by women, including marital sex, unwanted pregnancies, and contraception. Laverty's dramas also amply document the effects of the discrimination of women embedded in de Valera's 1937 constitution, as well as the existence of "a stubborn class structure" unacknowledged in the same constitution (19-20). It is hardly surprising that Laverty fell foul of the vigorous

ensorship in Ireland, having two of her novels banned and multiple reviewers suggesting cuts of objectionable passages in her dramas. The contrast between Laverty's popularity with audiences and readers and the banning of her work by the state makes an interesting parallel with Frank O'Connor, also a hugely popular author and broadcaster with much work blacklisted by official guardians of morals. As for Laverty's attitude to censorship and its absurdity, it is laconically reflected in one of her characters' comment about potentially offensive scenes being removed from Hollywood movies: "What do they take us for anyway? Do they think we've no imagination?" (172)

Laverty became a playwright at the behest of Hilton Edwards who – together with his partner, Micheál mac Liammóir – read with enthusiasm her novel *Lift up Your Gates* (1946) and asked her to adapt it for the stage. As his book of essays about theatre, *The Mantle of Harlequin*, documents, Edwards was searching for a new production style at the time, one which would properly unyoke theatre from the pervasive influence of cinema, and thus gave Laverty a set of challenging instructions, asking her to create a play with minimal stage directions and no dependence on props and scenery, in which everything was to be expressed by the words spoken by the actors.¹ Laverty rose to the occasion remarkably well, creating a modern play that lent itself naturally to what Edwards referred to as "neo-Elizabethan handling"² under his direction, featuring his signature use of lighting. Produced at the large Gaiety Theatre in Dublin in March 1951, *Liffey Lane* became an instant hit, soliciting comparisons with Sean O'Casey's Dublin plays due to its setting in the Dublin slums. However, as Leeney and McFeely observe, the language of Laverty's characters avoids O'Casey's tendency towards extravagance and heightened comedy (21-22); the play also lacks the backdrop of momentous historical events which would be contrasted and interpreted against the lives of the Dublin poor. Instead, *Liffey Lane* focuses on realistically depicting the plight of working-class families who, three decades after the establishment of the Free State, still struggle with shocking housing conditions, merely "wanting to live like a human being" (*Liffey Lane* 72). Leeney and McFeely suggest, moreover, that stylistically *Liffey Lane* is in fact Brechtian *avant la lettre* as regards Irish theatre (24-25). Although their argument lacks a clear distinction between Laverty's writing and Edwards's input as a director, it certainly has some validity; it would be usefully enhanced perhaps by highlighting another plausible link pertaining to new developments in theatre on the British Isles, since *Liffey Lane* –

¹ Hilton Edwards, *The Mantle of Harlequin* (Dublin: Progress House, 1958) 37-38.

² Edwards, *The Mantle of Harlequin* 38.

as well as its immediate successor, *Tolka Row* – might be regarded as a work of kitchen-sink realism before its time.

Tolka Row was commissioned by Edwards on the very heels of Laverty's first success, and was written with astonishing speed, premiering at the Gaiety in October 1951. The play is considerably different as regards style but Edwards had high confidence in the skills of this newcomer to the stage, as testified in *The Mantle of Harlequin*: "Mrs Laverty, should she wish to use it, holds the key to more than one technique."³ Closer to conventional stage realism than *Liffey Lane*, the spatial arrangement in *Tolka Row* is somewhat indebted to the contemporaneous work of Arthur Miller with all acting areas, indoors and outdoors, simultaneously in full view of the audience for the duration of the play. Like its predecessor, it is set at the time of the Dublin slum clearance but the action is placed in a small council house on the Northside. While lauding the housing scheme provided by the state, Laverty shows that the new houses are still insufficient to accommodate a medium-sized family, which ultimately might result in tragedy.

Despite its devastating ending, *Tolka Row* became another popular favourite, triggering not only multiple revivals but also a 1957 radio adaptation⁴ and a TV version produced by the BBC in 1959 with Micheál mac Liammóir and others from the original cast. Subsequently, in the early 1960s the newly inaugurated Irish television service commissioned Laverty to develop a TV series from the play (as detailed in the Preface to *The Plays of Maura Laverty* by Christopher Fitz-Simon from his perspective of producer of the series). Laverty wrote an astonishing 100 instalments of *Tolka Row* that were broadcast between January 1964 and her untimely death in 1966; this Irish response to *Coronation Street* continued on RTÉ television until 1968 and sparked the development of legendary classics of the soap opera genre such as *The Riordans*.

Laverty's third full-length play, *A Tree in the Crescent*, was produced by Edwards at the Gaiety Theatre in October 1952. In another ambitious stylistic shift, Laverty created a modern psychological drama with symbolic elements in which she chronicles a lower middle-class marriage over the period of three decades. At the same time, Laverty maintained her focus on the modest hopes of ordinary Dubliners, documenting how these are made impossible by lack of material security. Given the social status of the protagonists, an affinity may be perceived with the frustrated social ambitions depicted in the US by Arthur Miller and Clifford Odets in the same period, as the editors suggest (39). The ending of the

³ Edwards, *The Mantle of Harlequin* 41.

⁴ Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Boys: A Biography of Micheál MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: New Island Books, 2002) 174.

play may not be happy, but considerable hope is placed in the protagonists' children who have received good education due to their parents' support and their future lives seem to be looking up.

Despite the critical response being somewhat mixed and the play undergoing a rewrite of its opening and closing parts during the first week of production, *A Tree in the Crescent* became another commercial success. The well-documented story of Hilton Edwards refusing an advance for the play as well as delaying payments to his star author – who had saved his theatre company from dissolution due to financial hardship, and by now had become a friend – remains a sad testimonial to the critical lack of funding in the arts sector in Ireland at the time, as we witness an artistic director of a first-rate theatre in global terms haggling over a moderate amount of money with a recently bereaved woman who had two daughters at college and a son at school to maintain.⁵ It was only due to the regular income from the *Tolka Row* TV soap that Laverty as a freelance writer finally achieved financial stability; its enjoyment was soon cut short by her early passing, however.

While featuring some unnecessary repetitions caused by its structure, the 45-page editorial introduction to the volume does a fine job of framing Laverty's plays in historical, political and theatrical contexts. It also implies some exciting areas for further research. For instance, we know that Laverty decided to expand her three dramas into a cycle of six plays, moving up the social ladder from the poorest to the rich; what we do not know is why, when, and indeed if she abandoned her plan. As Leeney and McFeely indicate, a part of what seems to have been the finished manuscript of the fourth play has been preserved among Laverty's papers (48) – although basic details of its plot are outlined in the Introduction, it would be fascinating to know more about the play's style, and an attempt should be made to recover the complete text. Likewise, the editors mention multiple "proposals and scripts" that Laverty sent to Edwards at the time the Gate director served as Head of Drama at Telefís Éireann, "many of which were rejected" (49) – what was their nature, and have any of them survived? Furthermore, it might be the case that the extant correspondence between Laverty and Edwards, or indeed other archival documents, hold further information about the influence of earlier productions by Edwards and mac Liammóir on *Liffey Lane*: apart from *Marrowbone Lane* by Robert Collis (1939), a play that also highlighted the shocking living conditions of the Dublin poor (and is duly referenced by the editors), an interesting parallel of a structural nature seems to offer itself, for

⁵ See Fitz-Simon, *The Boys* 173-75. Despite being an inveterate champion of Edwards and mac Liammóir, Fitz-Simon refers to the reasons given by Edwards for refusing the advance payment to Laverty as hypocritical (174).

example, with the *Insect Play* by the Brothers Čapek – produced at the Gate in 1943 – which features a central observer figure in the semi-drunken Tramp, much akin to *Liffey Lane*'s Billy Quinlan who also has “a sympathetic eye for the human comedy” (*Liffey Lane* 101).

Anyone with a serious interest in Irish theatre as well as Ireland's social history will be indebted to Cathy Leeney and Deirdre McFeely for this much needed and well-prepared edition of Laverty's lively work for the stage, beloved by audiences in its day and now calling for further examination. It is also to be hoped that Laverty's plays assume their rightful place in the syllabi of Irish theatre courses.

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