

A HISTORY OF  
IRISH THEATRE  
1601–2000

CHRISTOPHER MORASH



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## CHAPTER I

### *Playing court, 1601–1692*

7 September 1601. The Great Hall of Dublin Castle is alight with dozens of wax candles, mounted in candelabra around the room. Baron Mountjoy, the Lord Deputy of Ireland, is seated at one end of the chamber, surrounded by his court; from the other end, a group of wild men appear, dressed only in clusters of leaves. The wild men produce a thick bundle of sticks. They pull, twist and hit the bundle, trying to break it, but with no success. Then one of the wild men draws out a single twig and snaps it. Within minutes, the entire bundle is torn apart and every stick broken, thus presenting in dumbshow the argument of the play which is to follow: Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton's *Gorboduc*, a verse tragedy in which a divided kingdom descends into fratricide, rebellion, and civil war, leaving 'the land for a long time almost desolate and miserably wasted'.

This production of *Gorboduc* is as good a place as any to start a history of the theatre in Ireland, even though *Gorboduc* is not an Irish play. Written for the 1561/2 Christmas festivities at London's Inner Temple, *Gorboduc* was already archaic when Mountjoy revived it in 1601; but this does not mean that he was ineptly aping London fashion. In 1601, Dublin Castle was supposed to be the administrative centre around which Ireland revolved; however, with Hugh O'Neill, the Earl of Tyrone, in open rebellion in Ulster, and Spanish forces only a fortnight away from landing in Kinsale, it might be more accurate to say that Dublin Castle provided a common arena of intrigue for a number of competing groups: the Gaelic aristocracy, the Old English whose ancestors had come to Ireland during the Norman invasions of the twelfth century, the New English of the Elizabethan plantations, and a constantly shifting cadre of English administrators and soldiers. These factions were capable of a variety of strategic and usually unstable alliances; and many of them would have been represented in Dublin Castle on that September evening. And so, when a character in *Gorboduc* warns that 'with fire and sword thy native

folk shall perish . . . when noble men do fail in loyal troth, and subjects will be kings',<sup>1</sup> Mountjoy was doing more than entertaining his guests; he was using the theatre to define the terms of war.

Hovering somewhere near Mountjoy as he watched *Gorboduc* may well have been his 'Irish fool', Neale Moore, a traditional Gaelic clown, or *druth*, who had been in the service of the English nobleman since at least 1600. Moore's presence should remind us that while Ireland did not have any theatres in 1601, it had a long history of performance, extending back at least to the seventh century. Outside the Pale, it had long been common practice for Gaelic noblemen to retain the services of artists ranging from *flid*, who could compose verse in complex metres, to the *braigetóirí*, who amused their audiences by farting. In Dublin and Kilkenny, there was liturgical drama as early as the fourteenth century, and the script of one such play still exists: the *Visitatio Sepulcri* performed in the Church of St John the Evangelist, within a few paces of Dublin Castle. Equally, civic processions with theatrical elements passed the gates of the castle on feasts such as Corpus Christi. Meanwhile, throughout the period there are tantalising hints of strolling players, entertaining audiences with lost forms of performance.<sup>2</sup>

The Irish *druth* Neale Moore watching the English tragedy *Gorboduc* can stand as an emblem of the unexpected ways in which the competing cultures of early seventeenth-century Ireland were thrown together. Indeed, when the wild men first began to creep into the Great Hall at the beginning of *Gorboduc*, we can imagine a moment of *frisson*, as if Neale Moore's world from outside the Pale – at least as it was fantasised from inside the Pale – was invading the inner sanctum of the castle. Of course, this could not have lasted for more than a moment, for Mountjoy's audience would have recognised the wild men as conventional masque figures whose task was to present an allegorical tale. In this case, however, transferring the parable of the bundle of sticks from an English to an Irish context transformed its meaning: when first staged in London in 1561, the moral that a divided land was easily conquered would have been understood as an admonishment; in Dublin in 1601, it was a threat. Indeed, two days after he watched *Gorboduc*, Mountjoy set off once again to pursue a war in which, as his secretary, Fynes Moryson, observed, 'the common sort of the rebels were driven to extremities beyond the record of most histories I ever did read'. By the time the Battle of Kinsale had been fought on Christmas Eve, Gaelic Ireland – Neale Moore's Ireland – was in defeat, and 'the whole Countrie' was 'harried and wasted'.<sup>3</sup>

In the years that followed, plays continued to be produced privately in great houses around the island, but it was not until Thomas Wentworth, the Earl of Strafford, arrived as Lord Lieutenant in July of 1633 that the first attempt was made to build a theatre. From the beginning of his administration, Wentworth set about transforming Dublin into an image of royal power, rebuilding part of Dublin Castle, laying down strict codes of court etiquette, and planning a mint. The theatre was a major part of life at the court of Charles I in London; consequently, Wentworth set about building a theatre for his court in Dublin. By late 1635 (and possibly earlier) he had a ‘gentleman of the household’, John Ogilby, making, ‘great preparations and disbursements in building a new theatre, stocking and bringing over a Company of Actors and Musicians, and settling them in Dublin’.<sup>4</sup> A few years later, Ogilby was made the first Master of the Revels in Ireland.

Ogilby’s timing was propitious. The London theatres had been closed because of plague since 12 May 1636, and this enabled him to recruit a strong company of English actors: Edward Armiger and William Perry, who had connections with London’s Red Bull theatre; William Cooke, who had been under the patronage of the young Prince Charles (later Charles II); almost certainly Thomas Jordan from Salisbury Court; and possibly members of Queen Henrietta’s Men from the Cockpit, who had disbanded in 1636. Then, on 23 November 1636, he pulled off an even greater *coup* when he brought to Dublin a prestigious resident playwright, James Shirley. This core company are referred to on the title page of one play performed in Dublin as ‘His Majesty’s Company of Comedians’, and while they probably arrived in small groups, by the late autumn of 1637 they were able to première Shirley’s *The Royal Master* in the new theatre.<sup>5</sup>

There is still much that is not known about this first Irish theatre, including the exact date of its opening and its precise location. In 1749, the earliest historian of the Irish stage, W. R. Chetwood, claimed that the Werburgh Street Theatre opened in 1635, and this opinion was echoed by most historians up to the middle of the twentieth century, until W. S. Clark pushed the date ahead to 1637. However, a letter recently uncovered by Alan Fletcher in which Wentworth refers to ‘a Playhouse lately sett up and allowed by me’ clearly indicates that the theatre had been at least ‘sett up’ before June 1636 – although how long before is still a matter for speculation.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, no one is quite sure of its location, although we do know that it was located on or near Werburgh Street, only a few hundred metres from the castle precincts, and within the city walls.

Early seventeenth-century maps of Dublin show Werburgh Street (or ‘St Warbers Stret’, as John Speed’s 1610 map calls it) closely lined with buildings, including the church that gives the street its name. Sir Adam Loftus, Lord Chancellor until 1638, lived there, and a company of sadlers, a surgeon and a letter-writer all had business premises on the street. This means that Ogilby’s theatre was an indoor theatre squeezed into an already built-up streetscape, like the Blackfriars or Salisbury Court in London. The few existing written descriptions from the eighteenth century indicate that it was opposite Hoey’s Court, and there was a nineteenth-century tradition that it was located in what later became Derby Square, on the west side of Werburgh Street. This latter view has been given added credence by recent archaeological work in the area, which has unearthed some unusual curved walls in early seventeenth-century buildings on the south side of the Square, across from Hoey’s Court, and within the old city walls near what had been Pole Gate.<sup>7</sup>

While there are no eyewitness descriptions of the theatre, it is still possible to assemble a reasonably accurate picture of the building’s interior. The eighteenth-century theatre historian Thomas Wilkes claims to have been told that Werburgh Street ‘had a gallery and pit, but no boxes, except one on the Stage for the then Lord Deputy, the Earl of Strafford’,<sup>8</sup> and this would accord with what is known of private indoor London theatres of the time. In terms of size, a good point of comparison here is probably the Blackfriars, where the pit was 30 feet (9 metres) deep, and 23 feet (6.9 metres) wide, according to one recent estimate, seating an audience of about three hundred, to which could be added another hundred in a balcony running around the three walls of the auditorium.<sup>9</sup> The stage was certainly smaller than that of the large outdoor London theatres, for when one of Shirley’s Dublin plays, *The Doubtful Heir*, made its London debut at the Globe in 1640, a new prologue asked the audience to ‘pardon our vast stage’.<sup>10</sup> Again, we might draw a comparison with Blackfriars stage, which was about the same size as its pit, while there is some evidence to suggest that Salisbury Court (with which Shirley was connected from 1629 to 1633, and in which several of his Dublin plays were staged after he returned to London) may have had a rounded forestage, shaped like half a hexagon.<sup>11</sup>

Whatever its shape, the Dublin stage, like its London counterparts, certainly had an upper acting area, for the opening scene of *The Politician* (written by Shirley for the theatre in 1639) begins with one character warning another to ‘avoid the gallery’, which we are told is lined with paintings; a later scene takes place on the city walls above the gates. Other

plays written for the theatre require a small discovery space, probably behind a set of double doors, in the upstage wall, and stage directions for Henry Burnell's *Landgartha* (1640) – 'Enter Reyner musing at one doore, and Hubba to him at the other' – specify two further entrances, with doors, on either side of the stage. Finally, a scene in Shirley's *St Patrick for Ireland* (1639), in which a character is swallowed up by the ground, indicates at least one trap in the main stage.

This first Dublin theatre, then, was a versatile, intimate performing space, and in some respects it was a typical court theatre. One prologue written for the theatre addresses what was probably the largest group in the audience – courtiers and castle functionaries – when the poet observes that he 'did expect a session, and a train / So large, to make the benches crack again', just as the epilogue to *Landgartha* tells us that the play was commanded to appear 'fore the Court Break up'. At the same time, the Werburgh Street audience were not exclusively members of the court. A prologue to a lost play, *The Generall*, curses the 'dreadful word *vacation*', and pines for 'the term' to come, 'though law came with it', indicating that the theatre had patrons from the law courts, and possibly from Trinity College, founded in 1592. This same prologue goes on to note the presence in the audience of 'some soldiers' while in *Landgartha* there are a pair of clownish farmers who tell the audience that 'when in Towne, we doe / Nothing but runne from Taverne, to Taverne; . . . Now and then to see a Play'.<sup>12</sup> In short, while the audience of the Werburgh Street theatre was by no means a representative sample of the predominantly Irish-speaking population of the island as a whole, it did bring together the tight circle of courts, castle and college that would form the foundation of Irish theatre audiences for almost two centuries.

When this audience gathered by candlelight to watch Shirley's *The Royal Master*, probably in the late autumn of 1637, the little auditorium must have crackled with tension. Everyone in that room would have been aware that when Shirley had lived in London, he had been part of the group of courtiers who congregated around the Catholic wife of Charles I, Henrietta Maria. Rumours would have circulated that Shirley himself had converted to Catholicism, probably in 1624. Thomas Wentworth had almost certainly heard those same rumours, for he was a consummate court insider, and his letters show that while in Ireland he kept up with London's theatre gossip. Shirley did nothing to dispel these stories after he arrived in Dublin, for the 1638 Dublin edition of *The Royal Master* contains a commendatory verse by Richard Bellings,

a prominent Catholic, later Secretary to the Supreme Council of the Catholic Confederation in the 1640s, and its envoy to Pope Innocent X.

Seated in his viceregal box on the side of the stage, Wentworth must have noted with some satisfaction the anxious swell of conversation, and the suspicious, sidelong glances. Sponsorship of an Irish theatre with a Catholic resident playwright in 1637 was precisely the sort of audacious move we might expect from a man who once told a correspondent: 'I am not afraid of any Man's complaint, being well assured in myself that whoever questions me shall work towards my greater Justification.' During the period in which the Werburgh Street theatre operated, Wentworth's strategy was, as he admitted to a friend, 'to bow and govern the native by the planter, and the planter by the native'.<sup>13</sup> Playing one faction against another, Wentworth embarked on a series of labyrinthine and increasingly perilous manoeuvres to raise money in Ireland for Charles I, dispossessing Catholic landowners while at the same time absolving Catholics from the need to take a special oath of loyalty forced upon Ulster Presbyterians.

Although Shirley was no wide-eyed innocent when it came to court intrigue, he would not have been in Dublin for long before he realised that he had become a player in a dangerous game. Back in London, he had gained admittance to Charles' court in 1634 after writing an admired masque, *The Triumph of Peace*, which uses theatrical spectacle to create a flattering image of harmony emanating from the monarch. In Dublin, he found himself writing for a court in which the cultivation of suspicion and discord – not harmony – was a basic strategy of survival, and he soon recognised that a few allegorical cherubs were not going to change the situation. As early as his first Dublin play, *The Royal Master*, a character dismisses a masque as a collection of 'pretty impossibilities . . . Some of the gods, that are good fellows, dancing, / Or goddesses; and now and then a song, / To fill a gap.'<sup>14</sup> From that point on, Shirley's plays for the Dublin theatre register an anxious awareness that he was not going to find an image of reconciliation for his divided audience, and this anxiety would eventually dominate his last Irish play, *St Patrick for Ireland*, staged in the autumn of 1639.

It may well have been Shirley himself who spoke the prologue with which the play begins, in which he claims to 'have no despair, that all here may, / Be friends, and come with candour to the play'. By the closing months of 1639, this was a slim hope. A few months earlier, in June, the position of Charles I had been weakened further by the Treaty of Berwick, in which he was forced to admit temporary defeat in his

campaign to impose Anglican worship on the Scots (who, of course, were linked to their co-religionists in Ulster). For the soldiers, courtiers and lawyers sitting on the benches in Werburgh Street, this stalemated religious war would have been uppermost in their minds as they watched Patrick's crusade to evangelise the Irish. 'We are of Britain, Sir', the saint tells the Irish king, Leogarius, in act 1, making Patrick initially appear to be a type of evangelising English colonist.<sup>15</sup> However, from that point on, any simple allegorical reading of the play becomes increasingly complicated.

Part of the problem is the figure of St Patrick, who was closely associated with Irish Catholicism. Indeed, *St Patrick for Ireland* may well have been a piece of special pleading on behalf of Shirley's former patron, Queen Henrietta Maria, who had requested Wentworth to reopen St Patrick's Purgatory, an Irish site of Catholic pilgrimage demolished in 1632 by zealous reformers. The audience of court insiders would, of course, have known this, and there must have been more than a few whispered comments when Shirley's Patrick makes his first entrance, trailing a procession of choristers who sing a sonorous, liturgical-sounding ode in bad (but suggestively Catholic) Latin. And yet, a few scenes later in Shirley's play, two native Irish noblemen attempt to hide by disguising themselves as Roman 'idols', standing on an altar bedecked with candles and incense, and uttering duplicitous prophecies. This must have looked like precisely the sort of exposure of superstition and religious imposture that would warm the heart of any Protestant missionary. 'We are but half-gods, demi-gods', they tell the audience, 'there's nothing beneath the navel.' In the end, *St Patrick for Ireland* is torn between the desire to create miraculous stage spectacles, and the conflicting urge to expose them, so that when an Irish magician, Archimagus, is swallowed up by the earth in the play's final moments, Patrick remains sceptical. 'I suspect him still', he tells the audience.

'Howe'er the dice run, gentlemen', Shirley boasted in the epilogue to *St Patrick for Ireland*, 'I am / The last man borne still at the Irish game.'<sup>16</sup> At that point, the game was nearly over. By the beginning of 1640, members of the Werburgh Street company were already beginning to slip away, and on 16 April Shirley would sail home to London. Before he left, however, he would have been able to watch the depleted company play Henry Burnell's *Landgartha*, the first Irish play by an Irish writer, staged on St Patrick's Day, 1640. 'A semi-maske . . . now't can be no more', Burnell apologises in his prologue, 'For want of fitting Actors here at Court. The Warre and want of Money, is the cause on't.' Indeed,

‘the Warre’ dominates Burnell’s play, in which a female warrior, the Norwegian Landgartha helps the Danish king, Reyner, to defeat both the Swedish and German kings, even though Reyner has betrayed her. The play ends with Landgartha agreeing to live as Reyner’s wife, and he in turn pledges his faithfulness; yet, she tells him ‘my heart shall still receive you; But on my word, / Th’ rest of my body you shall not enjoy, sir.’ In terms of sexual allegory, this failed consummation is a tragic end, which Burnell tells us offended some (‘but not of best judgements’) who expected Landgartha to accept ‘the Kings Kind night-embraces’. This could not be, Burnell insists, in a ‘Tragie-Comedy’, which ‘sho’d neither end Comically or Tragically, but betwixt both’.<sup>17</sup>

*Landgartha*’s place in the Irish cultural wars of the 1640s comes into focus with the character of Marfisa, who first appears ‘in an Irish Gowne tuck’d up to mid-legge, with a broad basket-hilt Sword on, hanging in a great Belt, Broags on her feet, her hayre dishevell’d, and a payre of long neck’d big-rowll’d Spurs on her heels’. In performance, Marfisa’s costume and speech mark her out either as Gaelic, or, more probably, as one of the Old English, who in many cases had adopted the speech and dress of the indigenous population. In case the audience miss the point, shortly after her entrance a character comments: ‘The fashion / Of this Gowne, likes me well, too; I thinke you had / The patterne on’t from . . . Ireland.’<sup>18</sup> Throughout the play, Marfisa and her foil Hubba (a conventional plainspoken English soldier, who enters praising Marfisa’s ‘gigglers’) are the low comic counterparts to the main protagonists, Landgartha and Reyner. If Marfisa (and thus Landgartha) is Old English and Hubba (and therefore Reyner) is New English, the play begins to take an allegorical shape. Landgartha’s betrayal by Reyner corresponds to the Old English sense of betrayal by the New English, after which cohabitation might be possible, but full consummation was out of the question.<sup>19</sup> For Burnell, a prominent Catholic royalist, *Landgartha* was a last-ditch attempt to define a possible relationship between two cultures that were spiralling towards war.

In the months after *Landgartha* was staged, the situation in Ireland deteriorated rapidly. A little over a year later, on 12 May 1641, Wentworth was beheaded for a list of treasonous crimes, among which was the attitude to Catholicism that led him to open a theatre with a resident Catholic playwright. Typical of the pamphlets published in the months before his execution is one claiming that his secretary, George Radcliffe, stopped the Warden of St Werburgh’s parish from pulling down ‘a Masse-house that was newly erected within foure or five houses

of the Castle gate'. 'All men that knew him', writes the pamphleteer, 'might quickly discerne his inclination to that Idoltarous, Babilonian whore'.<sup>20</sup> With Wentworth gone, the theatre in Werburgh Street was closed by the Lords Justice, Sir William Parsons and Sir John Borlase, becoming first a military stable and then 'spolyed and a cow house made of the stage', before falling 'into utter rueine by the Calamities of those times'.<sup>21</sup> On 17 November Ogilby narrowly escaped being blown up along with the rest of Rathfarnham Castle (where he had taken refuge with his Werburgh Street neighbour, Sir Adam Loftus), later was shipwrecked on the voyage home, and arrived in London more dead than alive. At around the same time, the Old English were joining the Irish who had taken over Ulster.

In the exodus from Dublin, Burnell headed south to Kilkenny, where in October 1642 a Confederate Assembly of Old English and Irish formed a government in internal exile, which lasted until 1649. Burnell became an Assembly member, and he was joined by many of the Catholic Old English merchants and noblemen who had been in the audience in Werburgh Street. The city in which they found themselves had a theatrical tradition extending back to at least 1366, when Archbishop Thomas Minot forbade 'theatrical games and spectacles' on church property. On 20 August 1553, two plays were staged at the Market Cross in Kilkenny: *Gods Promises, a Tragedy or Enterlude*, and *A brefe Comedy or Enterlude of Johan the Baptydes preachynge in the Wyldernesse*, by John Bale, Bishop of Ossory. Bale presented his plays in a zealous, but short-lived attempt to counter the city's vigorous Catholic mystery cycle tradition, which continued until at least 1639, when a Mathew Hickey was paid 13*s.4d.* by Kilkenny Corporation 'for acting a Conqueror's parte at Corpus Christi and at Midsomer time last'. In 1642, a Jesuit college was established in Kilkenny, and in 1644 the 'Schollars of the Society of Jesus, at Kilkenny' performed an original Latin play, *Titus: or the Palme of Christian Courage*, for which a detailed playbill still exists.<sup>22</sup>

Although much attenuated, Irish theatre culture thus shifted its centre to Kilkenny in the 1640s, where at least one new play was published: *A Tragedy of Cola's Furie, OR, Lirenda's Miserie*, by Henry Burkhead (1646). With the battle lines now more or less clearly drawn, *Cola's Furie* is able to dispense with the ambiguous identifications and torturous parallels of its predecessors, *St Patrick for Ireland* and *Landgartha*. Indeed, in his dedication, Burkhead states bluntly that although 'drawn from the historicall records of Forren countryes', 'this small worke' is nonetheless 'fitly applyable to the distempers of this Kingdom'.<sup>23</sup> Should the point be missed,

the play refers directly to ‘puritans’, ‘Papists’, ‘Roundheads’ and other contemporary matters. Hence, it would have taken little guessing for the audience to figure out that ‘Lirenda’ is an anagram for ‘Ireland’, and the invading ‘Angoleans’ are the New English of Cromwell’s army.

Once this basic framework is in place, it becomes apparent that each of the major male characters represents a real individual: the villainous ‘Angolean Governors of Lirenda’ Pitho and Berosus are, appropriately enough, Sir William Parsons and Sir John Borlase, the men who ordered the closing of the Werburgh Street Theatre; the furious Cola is Sir Charles Coote (the elder), a New English colonist who had come to Ireland with Mountjoy, and the heroic Osirus is the Earl of Ormond, who also happened to be the great-nephew of Lord Mountgarrett, President of the Confederate Council.<sup>24</sup> Working with these characters based on real (and in most cases living) individuals, the play follows a loose, five-act structure in which events on the stage follow those of the Irish rebellion from 1641 up to the truce of September 1643.

Although there is no record of *Cola’s Furie* having been performed, it is entirely possible that it was staged, at least privately. Kilkenny in 1646 had the necessary theatre personnel, and some of the play’s most powerfully theatrical moments suggest that it was at least intended for the stage. These include two disturbing torture scenes, strategically placed at the ends of acts II and III (in the first, a sixty-year-old man is racked, in the second a woman is ‘drawne aloft, with burning matches between each finger’); there is also a masque, a ghost scene, an antimasque performed by drunken soldiers. Most tellingly, there is a speech indicating that the whole production was at least intended for performance on New Year’s Day. The main character, Cola, is a ‘mounster tyrant’, a type which can be traced to Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* and ultimately to Seneca. ‘A Turke could not [be] more brutish villaine than he’, says one character. Cola indulges his motiveless lust ‘to hang, to racke, to kill, to burne, to spoile’<sup>25</sup> until his death at the end of act IV, whereupon a lesser tyrant, Tygranes (Lord Moore of Mellifont), takes up his cause, before being blown to bits by a cannonball (offstage, it should be noted).

As well as the glimpse it affords of the frightening, haunted world of Ireland during the early 1640s, *Cola’s Furie* shows an emerging politicisation of theatrical spectacle. Shirley’s awareness of New English Protestants in his audience in 1639 may well have led him to write those scenes in *St Patrick for Ireland* in which theatrical illusion and idolatry merge and are exposed. Writing for an almost exclusively Catholic, royalist audience in Kilkenny, Burkhead has no such concerns. Just before

his death, Cola is confronted by ‘Revenge with a sword in one hand, and a flaming torch in the other followed by three spirits in sheets’, including the spectres of two Irish-speaking farmers he had hung earlier in the play. Cola refuses to credit these supernatural visitations, dismissing them as ‘a plot of some conjuring Papist / to vex me with these filthy strange affrightments’, and he is subsequently shot dead by a half-seen, possibly supernatural, figure. In pointed contrast to this, Abner (an Irish general who has been identified as Sir Thomas Preston, the Confederate commander-in-chief) sees a masque-vision in which Mars and Mercury tell him that the gods ‘are now resolv’d’ to let the ‘sorrows’ of the ‘discontent *Lirendeans* . . . be dissolved’.<sup>26</sup> Unlike Cola, he accepts the vision, and is able to force a ceasefire. Accepting visions, Burnell tells his audience, is part of their Catholic, royalist identity, not shared by their iconoclastic, Protestant counterparts.

‘We hope in time’, wrote one of the Catholic Confederation’s leaders, Lord Castlehaven, ‘the storm being passed, to return to our old Government under the King’.<sup>27</sup> While this was to happen in Castlehaven’s case, in the years of Cromwellian rule between 1650 and 1660 most of the land that had been in the hands of Gaelic and Old English landlords was confiscated, and promised to supporters of the Puritan cause, some already established in Ireland, others recent arrivals from England and Scotland. Of those who did manage to keep their land, some (including Castlehaven) had spent time with the future king in France, where they had enjoyed the vibrant theatre culture of the French court. Hence, when Charles was restored to the throne in 1660, there was no mistaking the link between the theatre and sound monarchist views, and the stage beckoned as an avenue of political rehabilitation. As a prologue directed towards an Irish viceroy a few decades later put it: ‘Players, tho’ not in favour with the Law, / Have ever suffered with the Royal Cause.’<sup>28</sup>

Among those who were ready to reap the rewards of loyalty was John Ogilby. When Charles made his ceremonial progress through London on 23 April 1661, it was Ogilby who was commissioned to design the triumphal arches and write the masques staged on the streets through which the king passed. In these performances, allegorical figures such as Rebellion are banished by Loyalty and Monarchy, to the accompaniment of songs, such as one sung by an allegorical figure representing Concord promising: ‘No Discord in th’ Hibernian Harp! / Nought but our Duty, flat, or sharp.’<sup>29</sup> Realising that his star was once more in the ascendant, Ogilby petitioned the king for a renewal of his title as Master of the Revels in Ireland, which Charles had granted to Sir William Davenant in 1660. The king rescinded Davenant’s claim, and, on 8 May 1661,

issued a patent stating that the monarch ‘thought fitt that our subjects of our said Kingdome of Ireland should enjoy the like priviledges in that kind as our subjects here in our Kingdome of England’, and granting Ogilby, ‘his heires, and assigns’ the exclusive right to build theatres and stage ‘all Comedies tragedies Operas and other enterludes of what kind soever decent and becoming and not prophane and obnoxious’.<sup>30</sup>

Patent in hand, Ogilby began work on a new Dublin theatre in Smock Alley, a few hundred yards to the north of Werburgh Street, near the rapidly developing quays along the River Liffey. While Davenant and Thomas Killigrew were making the first London theatres out of converted tennis courts, when Ogilby’s new theatre opened in October 1662 it was the first Restoration theatre to have been built and designed as a performance space from the ground up, starting with an empty cobbled yard. Measuring 39 feet wide and 66 feet long internally (12 metres by 20 metres), the Smock Alley theatre had a proscenium arch that more or less equally divided a stage reputedly just under 30 feet (9 metres) deep into an apron acting area and a rear stage, which could accommodate pictorial flats and side-wings for scenic illusions. Building a proscenium arch was, in its own right, a statement of political allegiance, for up until this point, its use had been confined to exclusively royalist theatres, such as Davenant’s home, Rutland House, and the Cockpit, to which an arch was added in 1658; it was also a feature of Richelieu’s Palais-Royal in Paris, where Charles and followers such as the Earl of Ormond had been in exile.

Although the proscenium arch opened up new scenic possibilities, the Smock Alley theatre was very much an actor’s theatre. Most of the acting would have taken place on the square forestage, putting the actors in closer contact with the audience than with the painted castles and forests behind the proscenium. Surviving prompt books make it clear that there were two doors on either side of the apron (uniquely referred to as the ‘East’ and ‘West’ sides of the stage) over which were rooms with casement windows, known as ‘lattices’. These were used as performance areas or let out to members of the audience, as the play demanded. Finally, above the proscenium, there was a ‘music loft’ for the musicians<sup>31</sup> at a time when music formed an important component of the pleasure of theatre-going.

In the early months of its operation, few of these features would have been used, for when the theatre opened in October of 1662 Ogilby was offering plays that had been performed in Werburgh Street (such as Fletcher’s *Wit Without Money*, staged on 18 October 1662) on a bare stage. ‘We have a new Play-house here’, one observer wrote to a friend in London, ‘which in my Opinion is much finer than D’Avenant’s; but

the Scenes are not yet made.’<sup>32</sup> And yet, even before the stage was fully operational, the ‘fineness’ of the original Smock Alley theatre was evident in the decoration of the auditorium. The pit contained rows of cloth-covered benches, where the ‘lords and ladies’ sat. Above them were ‘three stories of galleries’, in which ‘those of the greatest quality sat lowest. Those next in quality sat the next above; and the common people in the upmost gallery.’<sup>33</sup> Where the Werburgh Street theatre had a single box for the Lord Deputy, Smock Alley had an entire gallery of boxes adjacent to the viceregal box, suggesting that as Dublin’s population grew, the audience became more socially diverse, and hence felt greater need for sequestration in the auditorium. Indeed, the increased number of galleries, and the passing of handbills announcing plays at coffee houses, taverns and shops, indicates a desire (or more to the point, a financial need) to reach out beyond the environs of Dublin Castle to the wider population of Dublin – or at least to those portions of the population with the disposable income and leisure to attend a performance which customarily began at three-thirty in the afternoon.

Although it was a public theatre, Smock Alley would rely doubly on the support of the court growing up around the new Lord Lieutenant, the Earl (now Duke) of Ormond: both directly for patronage, and for the social cachet to attract audiences who were not part of the inner circles at Dublin Castle. Initially, however, the theatre operated almost as a private court theatre. The first original play Ogilby staged was *Pompey*, a translation of Corneille’s *Le Mort de Pompée* by Katherine Philips, one of the rising stars of the Dublin viceregal court. *Pompey*’s première on 10 February 1663, was followed two weeks later by *The Generall*, written by one of the most powerful men in Ireland, Roger Boyle, first Earl of Orrery. For the many in the Smock Alley audience who turned out to watch these plays, the act of attending the theatre – particularly to watch sumptuously staged neo-classical tragedy on a proscenium stage – was an act of fealty to the king. Indeed, as Ormond said to his son, ‘it is of importance to keep up the splendour of the government’.<sup>34</sup> Much of that ‘splendour’ was to be found on the stage of the new theatre, particularly in the exotic Egyptian setting of *Pompey*, or the Sicilian setting of *The Generall*. At the same time, there was more to the politics of the theatre in Restoration Dublin than simple spectacle.

‘When I had the honour and happiness the last time to kiss his majesty’s hand’, wrote Orrery to Ormond in January of 1661, ‘he commanded me to write a play for him . . . Some months after, I presumed to lay at his majesty’s feet a tragi-comedy, all in ten feet verse and rhyme . . . because I found his majesty relished the French fashion of plays, than English.’

Orrery (when he had been plain Lord Broghill) had been closely associated with Charles I in the 1640s; then, in October of 1649 – the same month in which Cromwell massacred more than two thousand inhabitants of Wexford – he joined the Parliamentary forces, and by 1657 was one of Cromwell’s closest advisors. Three years later, he had switched sides again, and was a confidant of Charles II, writing that he loved the king ‘a thousand times more than myself’.<sup>35</sup> So, when Charles hinted at a taste for French neo-classical drama, with its conflicts of loyalty and honour, Orrery recognised that here was a forum in which he could make a case for the tragic nobility of regicide. Taking advantage of a fit of gout in 1660, he wrote *The Generall*.

*The Generall* is a piece of court theatre of a very specialised kind, a piece of public negotiation directed as much at Ormond, the Lord Lieutenant, as at a general audience. Set during a rebellion in which a legitimate king and a usurper struggle for power, the play is clearly about Ireland in the 1640s and 1650s, just as the general who sides with the usurper is clearly Orrery himself. ‘Disgrace I feare lesse than to be unjust’, he says at one point. ‘Tis such to take and then betray a trust.’ Elsewhere, another character observes:

Sometimes hee [the King] thinkes, the Rebells being nigh,  
That wee and they are in Confederacy,  
Then straight hee thinkes, from honour or from spight,  
Wee scorne our selves, butt by our selves to right.<sup>36</sup>

Torn between ‘disgrace’ and injustice, ‘honour’ and ‘spight’, ‘scorne’ and ‘right’ (the rhyming couplets here working to point up the parallelism), Orrery’s play puts on public display the irreconcilable tensions that had placed him (like so many others) in impossible positions during the middle decades of the seventeenth century. What is more, his vocabulary here – words like ‘Confederacy’ and ‘Rebells’ – leave little doubt as to what is being discussed. Eight months before *The Generall* was staged, Orrery had given Ormond the pragmatic reasons why those who had fought against the king must be rehabilitated. ‘The act of oblivion, free pardon, and indemnity’, he told Ormond, ‘if it is not very cautiously drawn and worded, may destroy the great bill of settlement.’<sup>37</sup> *The Generall* continued this argument in the public arena of the theatre by outlining the conditions in which pardon, rather than punishment, is both just and prudent.

Meanwhile, another Dublin was taking shape at the margins of the world of high politics. The city’s population would double in the decade

between 1660 and 1670, and many of the city's new inhabitants were living in expectation of land either promised or confiscated during the 1640s and 1650s. 'There must bee new discoveryes made of a new Ireland', commented an exasperated Duke of Ormond, surveying a country in which 'gentleman's seats were built, or building everywhere'. For others, however, who 'Nature thought it fit / To give some nought but . . . Wit', as the writer Richard Head was to put it, Dublin in the 1660s was a place in which the most extravagant fantasies of social mobility were worth dreaming. 'Swimming for their Lives, these misrules think, / 'Tis better catch at any thing, then sink.'<sup>38</sup> Head himself was one such self-confessed 'rogue', and in his play *Hic et Ubique: or, the Humors of Dublin*, published in 1663 (and possibly staged in Dublin privately sometime over the previous three years) we see the first traces of a radically fluid Irish stage character who, unlike the protagonist of heroic tragedy, lives only in the present moment. Over the next three centuries, in wildly varying social contexts and theatrical forms, such characters would establish themselves as one of the points of continuity on the Irish stage.

Head's Dublin in *Hic et Ubique* is a place where anything is possible, populated by characters whose success depends on their ability to abandon the entanglements and loyalties of the past. The play opens with Hope-well, Bankrupt, Contriver and Trust-all arriving in Dublin from England with Phantastic, the eponymous Hic, and Peregrine, congregating at the London Tavern (a real Dublin hostelry just across from the old Werburgh Street theatre site). Some, like Bankrupt, are content simply to be in a city where English debts do not need paying; others, like Contriver, have elaborate plans for using the Irish mountains to dam up the Irish bogs, for which 'the King will confer on me little lesse than the Title of Duke of *Mountain*, Earl of *Monah*, or Lord *Drein-bog*'. Among the Dubliners encountered by the English is Colonel Kil-tory, a Cromwellian ex-soldier awkwardly in quest of a wife, who confesses that 'whilst I was scouring the Mountains and skipping the Bogs, I had none of these qualms. I cu'd have then driven a score or two of these white cloven Devils without pity or regard.' While he is capable of raping Irish peasants – as his Irish servant Patrick tells it, of 'putting the great fuck upon my weef' – Kil-tory is at a loss when it comes to courtship 'since Mrs *Peace* came acquainted with us', and he is eventually cheated out of his land by Hope-well's wife.<sup>39</sup> The present, in *Hic et Ubique*, clearly belongs not to the military conquerors, no matter how ruthless, but to schemers with the wit and commercial sense to read a rapidly changing situation.

The scars of the past were not so easily healed, however, and by 1669 the decade which had opened as a new era in the theatre in Dublin was to close on a note that would presage the difficulties that lay ahead. Ogilby, who had kept up his map-making and publishing interests, returned to England early that year, just before John, Baron Roberts, took over the post of Lord Lieutenant from Ormond. Roberts was a Presbyterian, and, as one of his co-religionists, Patrick Adair, put it: ‘The public players he stopped . . . as well as other vicious persons.’ They remained ‘stopped’ until Roberts was replaced the following year.

Smock Alley had barely re-opened, when, in December 1670, it came to an even more spectacular halt during a production of Ben Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair*. Near the end of act IV, a character named Zeal-of-the-Land Busy is placed in the stocks on stage. In Jonson’s script, Busy is a Puritan; however, in the 1670 Smock Alley production, he would seem to have been dressed as a Presbyterian clergyman – ‘to teach great persons to deal with like severity toward them’, Adair believed. ‘I am one’, Busy declaims, ‘that rejoiceth in his affliction, and sitteth here to prophesy the destruction of fairs and May-games, wakes and Whitsun-ales, and doth sigh and groan for the reformation of these abuses.’<sup>40</sup> As Busy groaned and sighed, so too did the upper gallery, before splintering and falling ‘on the middle one, where gentlemen and others sat, and that gallery broke too, and much of it fell down on the lords and ladies’, killing ‘a poor girlie’. ‘Such providences’, noted Adair, ‘have a language if men would hear.’<sup>41</sup>

There were structural flaws in more than the galleries of Smock Alley. In the early 1660s, the Dublin theatre had been often in advance of its London counterpart: Smock Alley was the first purpose-built Restoration theatre; both *Pompey* and *The Generall* have claims as the second English neo-classical tragedy; and Philips was the first woman to have a play publicly staged. A decade later, however, the Dublin theatre was still locked into a dependence on the court at Dublin Castle, which meant that its fortunes were tied to the vagaries of political appointments in a way that was becoming less and less true on the other side of the Irish Sea. Hence, during the early 1670s – the years in which Aphra Behn began writing for the stage and the second Drury Lane theatre was built in London – Smock Alley, under the management of William Morgan, was closed almost as often as it was open.

Under a sympathetic administration, the theatre was to all appearances healthy. In 1676, Joseph Ashbury took over the management from Morgan, just as the Duke of Ormond was preparing to return for a third

term as Lord Lieutenant. In 1677, the company used Ormond's position as Lord Chancellor of Oxford to perform in the university, becoming the first Irish actors to tour outside the island. Four years later, in 1681, the Smock Alley players (by then about thirty in number) went to Edinburgh, where they staged Nathaniel Lee's *Mithridates* for the royal family at Holyrood House. They were also building up their stock of scenery. Surviving Smock Alley prompt books show that by the mid-1670s, the theatre had standard sets for 'Court', 'Towne', 'Grove' and 'Castle', to which could be added a rear shutter of 'ye shipp's'. These basic scenic properties, along with others for interior scenes, allowed the company to stage *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Henry VIII*, *Henry IV: Parts 1 and 2*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Tempest*, and possibly *The Comedy of Errors* – more or less the staples of the Irish stage for the next century or more.

However, the taste for pre-Restoration works exposed a deeper malaise. 'You are of late such Antiquaries grown', chastised one prologue of the period, 'that no regard's to modern writers shown.'<sup>42</sup> The problem was not simply audience taste. Already, one of the economic facts of the Irish theatre world was beginning to make itself felt; a playwright could make more money in London than in Dublin, simply because there were more theatres and a larger population. Consequently, in the decade after 1669, only three original plays were premièred in Smock Alley: *Agrippa*, *King of Alba* (1669) and a translation of Corneille's *Nicomede* (1670), both by John Dancer, and *Belphegor* (1677) by John Wilson. Dancer was an officer in the Horseguards with 'a great esteem of French Playes', while Wilson was Recorder of Londonderry. Writing in the neo-classical style that had already become *passé* in London, there was a sense in which Smock Alley had become locked into a dependence on court approval (with its corresponding theatrical style) that cut it off from the reinvention of the theatre world taking place in London, to which Irish writers and actors of real ability were increasingly drawn.

A case in point is the Irish-born Thomas Southerne. His play *The Disappointment* first opened in London, before being picked up by Smock Alley in late January 1685. *The Disappointment* has an intricate double plot, in which a character named Aphonso tests his wife's constancy while a rake, Alberto, is tricked into marrying the mistress he has jilted. Like many plays of the period, it makes sex into a metaphor for just about everything, at one point comparing old prostitutes who become bawds

to ‘lawyers past the exercise of the Bar’ who are ‘consider’d for their Experience [in] Civil government’.<sup>43</sup> In short, Southerne was capable of writing precisely the sort of play that could have helped Smock Alley consolidate the educated, prosperous audience who patronised the pit and boxes; but, as would so often be the case, he did not live in Dublin.

In the same week that Smock Alley first staged *The Disappointment*, the theatre found itself facing far more pressing problems than the lack of a resident playwright. Charles II died on 6 February 1685, and was succeeded by his Catholic brother, James. When James appointed the Catholic Earl of Tyrconnell as Lord Lieutenant in 1687, the largely Protestant court dispersed, taking with it Smock Alley’s *raison d’être*. ‘When Doubts & Fears distract the Troubled Age’, lamented a prologue read in the theatre on 14 October 1687, ‘What suffers most is the forsaken stage / . . . Our poor Broken Troop neglected Lye, Heartless, benumm’d & cold as Winter Flyes.’ Ashbury struggled on with a shrinking company until 1689, finally closing the theatre around the time of the Siege of Derry. It remained closed over the next two troubled years, and it was not until after the Treaty of Limerick was signed in October 1691, that he decided it was time to resume business.

Just before Christmas 1691, Ashbury offered a free performance of *Othello*, in which he played Iago and Robert Wilks played the title role. Most of the other male roles were taken up by officers of Ashbury’s old regiment, the King’s Guard, who had been closely associated with the theatre since the Restoration, and are addressed in one prologue as ‘Defenders of the Pit’.<sup>44</sup> The performance was repeated when the theatre re-opened to the public on 31 March 1692 as part of the official celebrations to mark William of Orange’s victory, and it looked as if the old ties with the castle had survived yet again. However, things were not to be so simple.

The theatre in Ireland had made the transition from private entertainments – such as Mountjoy’s 1601 production of *Gorboduc* – to the public performances in Werburgh Street theatre under the patronage of the court at Dublin Castle. The transition had taken place at a time when court life had been governed by a set of tastes that valued spectacle and illusion, so it is no coincidence that the first three major writers for the Irish stage – Shirley, Burnell and Burkhead – all had Catholic ties. This ethos continued to develop when the centre of theatrical activity shifted to Kilkenny, and was formalised after the restoration of Charles II, when the theatre was defined as a right granted by the monarch. The

explicit links to Catholicism may have been broken in the decades after 1662, but the ties to Dublin Castle – where many Irish actors held army commissions – were so strong that Smock Alley became a sort of court theatre attended by the public. When William of Orange became king, the ethos of the court at Dublin Castle would undergo a radical change, as would the understanding of the king's power to grant rights, including the right to stage plays. Consequently, the entire meaning of theatrical performance would change in Ireland after 1692.

*A night at the theatre 1*

*Pompey* by Katherine Philips

Smock Alley

Tuesday, 10 February 1663

There might never be a king in Dublin Castle, but when the carriage and retinue of the Duke of Ormond, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, swept out of the castle gates shortly after three o'clock on the afternoon of Tuesday, 10 February 1663, he was, as usual, greeted by a fanfare and salute suitable for royalty. And, as usual, making his progress the short distance to Smock Alley Theatre, he found the streets half-blocked by horses, carts and country people selling rabbits, cheese, tallow or ducks. Meanwhile, from the opposite direction an equally imposing procession was bringing Roger Boyle, Earl of Orrery, from his Dublin residence of Thomas Court past Christchurch and down Fishamble Street. Around the same time, a group of students were making their way up Dame Street from Trinity College, while from the tavern on Cork Hill, in a slightly more dishevelled procession, lawyers, booksellers and demobbed soldiers were walking the few hundred yards to the theatre, some getting no further than the prostitutes who worked the area.

The occasion on that February afternoon was the first production of a verse tragedy, *Pompey*, translated from the French of Pierre Corneille by Katherine Philips. The air of anticipation in the city's streets was due in part to the novelty of theatre-going, for the first performance at Smock Alley had taken place only four months earlier, and it would be some time before a regular repertoire would be established. It was also the case, however, that Dublin in 1663 had the frenzied uncertainty of a gold rush town, a place where there were fortunes to be made and lost in a game for which rules were still being written. Many of these hopes were pinned on Ormond, who had arrived in Dublin only eight months earlier as the first Lord Lieutenant appointed by Charles II, bringing with him the expectation that he would settle the almost six thousand land claims that were the legacy of two decades of warfare and dispossession.

So, as the candles were being lit inside Smock Alley, the streets around Dublin Castle swarmed with courtiers attached to the new viceregal