

Juno and the Paycock

THE mixture of farce and tragedy, foolishness, compassion and bitterness that is Ireland has rarely found better expression than in the plays of Sean O'Casey, and among these, most memorably in *Juno and the Paycock*. On August 18, ZB Sunday Showcase will present this play of Dublin tenement life in the time of "the troubles" of 1922. In the chaos—or *chassis* as the Paycock calls it—of the fighting between the Free-Staters and the Die-hards, the women suffer, and the Juno of the title, Mrs Boyle, is the arch-type of Irish motherhood just as Hecuba in her grief and anguish stood for the women of Troy.

She states her position simply enough: "I'd like to know how a body's not to mind these things; look at the way they're afther leavin' the people in this very house. Hasn't the whole house, nearly, been massacred? There's young Mrs Dougherty's husband with his leg off; Mrs Travers that had her son blew up be a mine in Inchegeela, in County Cork; Mrs Mannin' that lost wan of her sons in an ambush a few weeks ago, an' now, poor Mrs Tancred's only child gone west with his body made a collander of. Sure, if it's not our business I don't know whose business it is."

And this is while Juno still believes in the unexpected legacy which is to restore the family fortunes. It is before her daughter is betrayed, before her son, who has already lost an arm, is sent for and shot as a traitor to his cause. It is before her vain and braggart husband ("athruttin' about from mornin' till night like a paycock") is proved as worthless as his associates, as feckless and as time-serving as Joxer, his butt from an upstairs attic.

Then Juno, already old before her time with work and worry, rises above her accumulated woes to become an absolute and timeless character; her final conjuration, at the end of the play, reminded the critic Alan Dent of Shaw's St. Joan asking the whole world when it will be ready to receive God's Saints.

"Blessed Virgin, where were you when me darlin' son was riddled with bullets. . . . Sacred Heart o' Jesus, take away our hearts o' stone, and give us hearts o' flesh! Take away this murderin' hate, an' give us Thine own eternal love!"

This is the elemental human tragedy, and yet, against almost all of the rules, Juno and the Paycock consists largely of what James Agate called "gorgeous and incredible fooling." O'Casey dedicated one of his plays "To the Gay Laugh of my Mother at the Gate of the Grave," and this conviction that



★ SEAN O'CASEY ★

there is a great deal of light in the workaday life brings laughter into all his best work. Here, in the second act the gaiety of the party is halted by the funeral procession of Robbie Tancred, and although the light, the mockery and the happiness return, just as the party does, in a way, pick up again, that moment of tragedy has left its mark, spreading the shadow of mortality across the bright and careless lives.

The tragedy is not the less noble because it is expressed in low Dublin dialect instead of lofty poetry, and in this production the spell of an essentially poetic language is magnificently cast by the Irish voices. Cyril Cusack has assembled his actors from the Dublin theatres, mainly from the Abbey Theatre. Siobhan McKenna (pronounced Shee-vaun, and meaning "white spirit" in Gaelic), whose recent starring roles have included a sensational St Joan in London and a brilliant companion in *The Chalk Garden* on Broadway, graduated from the Abbey Theatre, as did

Seamus Kavanagh, a Programme Director of Radio Eireann, who has acted on the Irish stage and in films. Cyril Cusack himself has an international reputation as a producer and actor, from the Abbey Theatre to Hollywood. Maire Kean, Maureen Cusack, May Craig and Harry Brogan are all from the Abbey Theatre, in whose School Leo Leyden was trained, although he acts with other companies.

The Abbey Theatre has not only been the background for most of the cast, but it is in the background of the play itself, which was first performed there in 1924. By this time the Abbey Theatre had established itself as practically synonymous with Irish theatre. Before its foundation in 1904 the Irish Dramatic Movement was presenting plays by native writers with amateur actors, and it was a visit to London by these actors that moved Miss A. E. Horniman to give the actors a theatre of their own. This theatre has won and main-

★ tained a world-wide reputation for performances of a rather specialised nature —being almost exclusively national in its repertory.

The beginnings were stormy, the Irish audiences frequently rising in 'near-riots. For example, J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, the Abbey's first great success, was bitterly attacked. The idea that the western peasantry could make a murderer into a hero was taken as an attack on Irish character, and some robust passages of humour were considered as a slur on Irish chastity. But the Abbey Theatre then as always refused the censorship of the mob, being independent of the box-office and popular control.

"We went on giving the people what we thought good until it became popular," Lady Gregory has said. The other prime mover, W. B. Yeats, wanted the

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