The Plough and the Stars
by Sean O’Casey

Background Pack
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The National’s Production</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehearsal Diary</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with the Cast</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Welcome to the National Theatre’s background pack for *The Plough and the Stars***

This background pack introduces the process of bringing the National Theatre production to life, from auditions through to press night.

Through imaginative and innovative in-school, on-site and online activities, NT Learning opens up the National’s repertoire, artistry, skills, and the building itself, enabling participants of all ages to discover new skills and experience the excitement of theatre-making. If you’ve enjoyed this background pack or would like to talk to us about getting involved in NT Learning activities, please contact us on learning@nationaltheatre.org.uk or 020 7452 3388.

**Jane Ball**  
Programme Manager, NT Learning  
September 2016
The National Theatre production of
The Plough and the Stars
by Sean O'Casey

Characters, in order of speaking
Mrs Gogan (a charwoman) ................................................................. Josie Walker
Fluther Good (a carpenter) ............................................................... Stephen Kennedy
Peter Flynn (a labourer), Nora's uncle ........................................... Lloyd Hutchinson
The Young Covey (a fitter), Clitheroe's cousin ............................... Tom Vaughan-Lawlor
Nora Clitheroe .................................................................................. Judith Roddy
Bessie Burgess (a street fruit-vendor) .............................................. Justine Mitchell
Jack Clitheroe (a bricklayer), Commandant in the Irish Citizen Army Fionn Walton
Captain Brennan (a chicken butcher), of the Irish Citizen Army .... Adam Best
Mollser, Mrs Gogan's consumptive child ........................................ Róisín O'Neill
A Bartender ........................................................................................ Eoin Slattery
Rosie Redmond, a daughter of 'The Digs' ........................................ Gráinne Keenan
The Figure in the Window ............................................................... Christopher Patrick Nolan
Lieutenant Langon (a civil servant), of the Irish Volunteers ........ Kieran Gough
A Woman ......................................................................................... Lucia McAnespie
Corporal Stoddart, of the Wiltshires .............................................. Richard Pryal
Sergeant Tinley, of the Wiltshires ................................................... Eoin Slattery
Ensemble .......................................................................................... Siobhán Cullen
..................................................... Pádraig Lynch
.................................................. Caolan McCarthy
............................................................... Niamh McGowan

Other parts played by members of the Company

Understudies
Cavan Clarke (Jack Clitheroe/Lieutenant Langon), Siobhán Cullen (Nora Clitheroe),
Kieran Gough (Corporal Stoddart), Lucia McAnespie (Bessie Burgess/Mrs Gogan),
Pádraig Lynch (Peter Flynn/The Figure in the Window), Caolan McCarthy
(Captain Brennan/Sergeant Tinley/The Young Covey), Niamh McGowan (Mollser/
Rosie Redmond/A Woman), Christopher Patrick Nolan (Fluther Good),
Richard Pryal (A Bartender)

Co-directors ...................................................................................... Jeremy Herrin
Howard Davies
Designer ........................................................................................... Vicki Mortimer
Lighting Designer ........................................................................... James Farncombe
Music ............................................................................................... Stephen Warbeck
Sound Designer ............................................................................... Paul Groothuis
Fight Director .................................................................................. Kate Waters
Company Voice Work .................................................................... Charmian Hoare
Staff Director .................................................................................... John Haidar

Opening
Lyttelton Theatre, 27 July 2016
Week one: ‘Vivid Faces’

Rehearsals for the production began on Tuesday 31 May, 2016. Staff Director John Haidar’s rehearsal diary reveals how the process unfolded.

On the first day of rehearsals for The Plough and the Stars, the company gathers for the ‘Meet and Greet’ in the rehearsal room. Rufus Norris is away opening his production of wonder.land at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, so there is a second get-together scheduled later this week with members of the various departments working at the National Theatre, whose task it will be to bring this production to life. Both occasions allow those involved a chance to forge the collaborations that they will continue to develop over the coming weeks and months.

After an introductory talk from Co-director Jeremy Herrin, we read the play. It’s a revelation to hear it lift off the page for the first time after several months of pre-production work. Designer Vicki Mortimer then guides us through the intricacies of the model box for her set design. The play is full of striking images and we’ll spend as much time discussing these as we will anatomising the truths (and falsehoods) we discover about the characters themselves. In addition, we have adorned one of the rehearsal room walls with a photographic tapestry, encompassing a vast spectrum of references to help us navigate through Dublin in Easter Week of 1916.

Midway through this first week of rehearsals, we are joined by Shivaun O’Casey, who describes her father’s experience writing the play in 1926 (a decade after the Rising), the riots in response to its name – had been desecrated by the likes of Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, Tom Clarke, Seán MacDermott, Joseph Plunkett, Eamonn Ceannt, and Thomas McDonagh, signatories to the Proclamation of the Irish Republic in 1916 [see glossary] and self-declared members of the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic.

We begin to excavate the text of the play itself, reading through and meticulously questioning anything that’s not immediately obvious to a 21st century ear in an attempt to bring clarity and precision to the storytelling. As part of this process, Jeremy divides the cast up into pairs and allocates research topics for us to examine the social fabric of the time in even greater detail: everything from religious divides to the geography of Dublin, its flags and symbols, paramilitary groups, the role of women, O’Casey’s politics, the relationship to the First World War, and modern-day parallels of violent insurrection in the Middle East and elsewhere. Our task is to locate ourselves emotionally and politically in the world O’Casey has brought into being and this proves to be an invaluable learning curve, augmented by a visit from Dr Ben Levitas towards the end of the week. Dr Levitas starts his session by playing the trailer for John Ford’s 1965 film, Young Cassidy, a swashbuckling drama based on O’Casey’s life starring Rod Taylor, Julie Christie, and Maggie Smith: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjNUV0Y6Dxg.

Finally, we have a read-through with our understudies, who are covering several roles within the company and will be creating ensemble characters to populate O’Casey’s Dublin – some of the ‘vivid faces’ Yeats describes in his unforgettable poem, ‘Easter, 1916’. It’s a question of honouring the social realism of the tenement life that permeates The Plough and the Stars, existing as it did at the epicentre of the incendiary politics in which modern Ireland was made.
Having recently worked on new plays with only a few scenic changes and stage directions, the blueprints O’Casey drafts for staging each act of *The Plough and the Stars* pose a new challenge for me and several of the other members of the company. They compel the creative team to conjure a visual and sonic world that’s just as rich as the purely linguistic one. The invention of a theatrical ‘language’ incorporating these elements is at the front of our minds this week as we continue to dig down into the play. We are digging down to get to what’s subversive beneath the surface of the play and put the lives of its characters and their often fractious relationships under the microscope. The more we examine them, the more they reveal about themselves.

As we sketch the characters’ journeys through the text, the actors start to inhabit the lyricism of O’Casey’s play. As part of this process, voice work with Charmian Hoare starts with a session on stage in the Lyttelton Theatre where the 20-strong cast get to grips with a range of vocal techniques to ensure that they are able to reach every person within the 890-capacity audience. Charmian takes us through Yeats’ ‘Easter, 1916’, which we’re becoming increasingly familiar with as a lens through which to view the events of that fateful week. Three words strike me as particularly significant this week: ‘polite meaningless words’, which Yeats laments as a weak way of interacting with others.

‘Polite meaningless words’ are something that this play can never be accused of, which is perhaps why Yeats was such an admirer of it as a second ‘arrival of Irish genius’ after Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* (which also provoked riots when first produced in 1907). Indeed, as the Director of the Abbey Theatre, Yeats walked out onto the stage at the fourth performance of *The Plough and the Stars* to chastise the rioting audience on 11 February 1926: ‘You have disgraced yourselves [...] Dublin has once more rocked the cradle of a reputation [...] the fame of O’Casey is born here tonight. This is his apotheosis.’ Few could even hear or understand Yeats – one especially disgruntled audience member hurled a shoe at his head in an attempt to silence the poetic tirade – and, according to O’Casey, he himself had to find a dictionary to look up what the word ‘apotheosis’ meant. Nevertheless, the play proved to be an undeniable statement, one that propelled the Abbey to new heights, artistically and financially: it sold out a week in advance; people queued round the block; prior to its first performance, weekly takings averaged £180 and, as soon as it opened, that average rose to £434.

Week two: ‘Polite, meaningless words?’

Professor Roy Foster, Carroll Professor of Irish History at Oxford University, visits us in rehearsals this week. His books – *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* and *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland 1890-1923*, in particular – have been a constant source of inspiration throughout my research into this chapter of Irish history, so it’s a huge pleasure to hear him discuss O’Casey’s contribution to the theatrical landscape of the time. Professor Foster pointed out that the revolution that doesn’t happen in the play is a class revolution, that O’Casey portrayed life as the counterweight to heroics, and that his women represent reality, whilst his men represent various forms of delusion. And, again, Yeats casts a long shadow over proceedings, in particular his belief that Ireland, at the time of the play’s opening in 1926, should have been a nation ready for self-criticism. Yeats’ war on censorship was predicated on the idea that a vain country could not face up to its history, whilst a proud one could.

We begin our staging of the first act. In the rehearsal room, there is no such thing as a pointless question. Everyone in the company is a ‘yes’ person: ‘Yes, let’s see if that works... yes, let’s try that... yes, that’s the clearest storytelling.’ This breeds an infectious positivity as well as a willingness to fail, and then fail better, as Beckett would have it. With set-building underway elsewhere, our stage management team creates a ‘mark-up’ with electrical tape and strategically placed walls, scaffolding, and furniture to simulate Vicki’s set design, allowing us to choreograph the scenes precisely in advance of technical rehearsals in the Lyttelton in several weeks’ time. There are also a few props and bits of costume now being filtered in: a carpenter’s toolkit, a cavalry sword, and an eclectic mix of hats.
The pace has stepped up this week. As the actors grow in confidence with their lines and the journeys of their characters, we begin to explore Acts Two and Three in detail, tracing the narrative arc. As such, the textual choices we are making are becoming increasingly clear. O’Casey’s writing has a very precise rhythm and, as we grow familiar with it, the sound of the play has started to take on a new, almost musical, quality. In terms of the blocking, it’s significant that the actors’ natural movements have informed so many of the staging choices we are now settling on. This was a bit of a revelation to us all: that the collective instinct can show us so much about the story we’re trying to tell.

We’re becoming increasingly aware of a phrase Dr Ben Levitas shared when he visited us in week one: the ‘theatricality of the self’, whereby characters present a certain version of themselves depending on what they want from others within their immediate environment. This lends the play its heightened, carnivalesque energy and means it’s able to shift from the intimate to the epic and back again in quick succession. Indeed, the Rising itself was conceived of by a band of poets and playwrights and could be interpreted as an inherently theatrical event. Some of the rebels wore costumes, or ‘motley’, and carried sabres. It was a rebellion choreographed to take place at centre-stage within the city of Dublin. The rebel headquarters were located inside the General Post Office, a crucible of communications in the British Empire’s so-called ‘second city’, its neo-classical façade a poignant backdrop to the final, tragic act of – in Professor Declan Kiberd’s words – ‘a kind of street drama’. Michael Collins warned the rebels that taking over the GPO would be a disastrous mistake militarily, since it could be surrounded by the British on all four sides, but ultimately it was a purposeful strategy to cut across all life in the capital, compelling everyone to pay attention. At the end of the week, Patrick Pearse handed over his sword in a gesture reminiscent of what the composer Richard Wagner, in an 1849 essay, termed the gesamtkunstwerk, or ‘complete artwork’. Following the Rising, General Maxwell, commander of the British forces in Dublin, believed he had finally succeeded in bringing down the curtain on Irish insurrection and that there would be no repeat performance. His belief was to be short-lived. Maxwell and the firing squads of Kilmainham Gaol transformed the ‘villains’ of Easter Monday into a pantheon of national heroes, galvanising the rallying call for an Irish republic.

In spite of the weight of this history, O’Casey’s characters in The Plough and the Stars are shown to be largely peripheral to history itself: most are non-combatant civilians of a city under occupation. As such, we need to be aware of the larger social, historical, and political context, while also focusing on the specific scenes O’Casey has written. What is challenging is to balance psychological truth with a heightened, poetic language, which is unique to this play. It’s why it was key to excavate the text in previous weeks, to analyse and understand it before attempting to physicalise it – instead of trying to run before we can walk. As we move through the piece, we are constantly referring back to the model box, which sits between myself and Jeremy in the rehearsal room, and which will revolve between the four acts to show the various imagined worlds O’Casey meticulously describes in his stage directions. In parallel, the actors have been visiting Cosprop costumiers to try their characters’ clothes for the first time in consultation with our designer, Vicki Mortimer, and Costume Supervisor, Lynette Mauro.

Putting on a play involves much more than simply rehearsing it. As I mentioned previously, there is a vast array of people associated with this production, all of whom have been working tirelessly behind the scenes over the past few weeks, whether it be in pursuit of construction, sound, lighting, music, fights, educational outreach, or press and marketing. These elements will fashion the show just as much as the ‘motley’ fashions its cast.
We complete our first ‘draft’ of staging early this week and return to the start of the play to scrutinise each act in more detail. In parallel, understudy rehearsals are now in full swing. We have a good session with fight director, Kate Waters, who is briefed to stage several moments, including an argument between Peter Flynn and The Young Covey involving a cavalry sword, a brawl in a pub between Bessie Burgess and Mrs Gogan, and a struggle between Jack and Nora Clitheroe taking place in the street outside the tenement. Kate is shown the action leading up to and beyond each moment of hostility and given some context for the scene. She then collaborates with the actors, drawing on their natural instincts and honing the ideas presented into something safer and more effective, in accordance with the tone we’re looking to achieve.

This week, the company have started to become ‘off-book’, meaning that they’re able to put the scripts down and inhabit their characters. Paradoxically perhaps, this has a helpful destabilising effect. When freed from the constraint of holding a script, the cast are able to make much bolder choices, but occasionally they come unstuck when a line doesn’t immediately come to them. Often, this is because the connection between thoughts is not yet completely clear and so our job, at this stage of proceedings, is to decipher the emotional logic that runs through a scene. There will be a noticeable change in momentum by the end of the week. We also begin to realise, especially in Act One, that we will need to populate the ‘world’ of the tenement house with characters that O’Casey only references in passing in the script. For instance, Mrs Sullivan, who (by the time we get to Act Three) has left ‘to spend Easter with her people in Dunboyne’, will make a brief appearance, as will the delivery boy sent from Arnott’s whom Mrs Gogan accosts in the first few lines of the play. This should mean that there’s not only an active foreground, in which the vast majority of the dialogue takes place, but also an active background. In Act One, this is the hallway of the tenement and the back room with its window to the street; in Act Two, a platform from which one of the leaders of the 1916 Rising, Patrick Pearse (whom O’Casey terms ‘The Figure in the Window’ or ‘The Voice of the Man’) delivers a speech inciting the crowd to fight for Ireland’s independence; in Act Three, the interior of the tenement or the end of the street; in Act Four, the staircase leading up to Bessie’s attic room, and the bedroom in which Nora is sleeping.

Jeremy Herrin likes to begin with a ‘sketch’ of each of the acts before then focusing on what it is that the audience should be watching at every point. For instance, we join Mrs Gogan and Fluther at the start of the play giving us various insights into the state of the relationship between Jack and Nora. O’Casey gives us so much exquisite detail here, and yet its interrupted at certain points by Peter Flynn and some intricate business with a shirt, so we run and run this opening, placing the exchange under the microscope until we are satisfied that the psychological insights are clear.

The final couple of fittings have taken place and we have seen photos of the vast array of clothes the characters will wear. It’s great to be able to piece together an entire community of Dubliners – particularly in such detailed period costume. Outside the rehearsal room, Vicki Mortimer and Renata Hill (Wigs, Hair & Make-up Supervisor) have been working on blood application with both Justine Mitchell and Kieran Gough to capture the best possible effect for the manifestations of horrific violence. In fact, it strikes us that the process of making a piece of theatre is often a kind of ‘elegant chaos’, in effect a series of carefully choreographed events which nevertheless have the appearance of spontaneity, chance, and (above all) truth. In this sense, it’s about composing what Yeats referred to as the ‘terrible beauty’ of the Rising, which is still being debated – in a week where Sinn Féin is holding a public rally at Liberty Hall (the very place where a public rally is held in our play.)
It is a week of changes. Primarily, there is a notable shift in pace and momentum. Now that the actors have lived with the characters and the script for a significant amount of time, each of the four acts starts to contract: where before there was a bit of excess ‘air’ in between the lines, or even between thoughts within lines, the language becomes fluent and fluid. The effect of this is that the play takes on a greater psychological truth. Like Shakespeare, if there are too many breaks in the line, or unnecessary emphases, some narrative clarity is lost and the dialogue can sound expositional or overly poetic.

This is our penultimate week in the slightly cavernous Paccar Rehearsal Room – complete with its own in-built revolving set – before we move into the Lyttelton at the end of next week to begin technical and dress rehearsals. At this stage, we are keeping an eye on the impending technical challenges we will face but fine-tuning the storytelling is still key. Between Act Two and Act Three, there is a time lapse of several months that takes us from November 1915, looking forward to the liberation of Ireland, to April 1916, during the week of the Easter Rising itself. O’Casey does not give the audience any information relating to the intervening months, so one of our tasks is to ensure that we convey the sense of the world turned upside down. By the time that the audience return from the interval, they should be able to see that everyday life for the people of Dublin has changed to an almost unbearable extent. Although Act Three begins with a fairly tranquil scene between Mollser and Mrs Gogan, lulling us into a false sense of security, O’Casey then directs us down a different path, into a darker, more frightening place, with the first mention of the ‘shooting’ that has kept Mrs Gogan awake the night before. In the words of Yeats, the status quo has ‘changed, changed utterly’. As we move through Acts Three and Four, Jeremy quotes David Mamet when he talks about the way certain characters are forced to face up to a ‘surprising inevitability’ in the later moments of the play, referring to experiences they had feared but somehow knew were unstoppable. This is a notion we will continue to investigate.

Midway through the week, the core production team meet to discuss the transitions between each act. Vicki’s epic set design includes four separate ‘worlds’, which will be presented to the audience on a revolving stage. Between Act One and Act Two, we have the idea of staging the arrival of Patrick Pearse to a meeting taking place outside the ‘commodious public-house’. Between Acts Three and Four, our objective is to immerse the audience in the hostile reality of the Rising itself with a clash between the Irish rebel forces and British soldiers through the crumbling passageways of the set. This is where we rely on our ensemble cast – who have also been engaged in their understudy rehearsals in parallel – to richly populate the play with an even greater variety of personalities and to convey some of the incendiary politics at work at that time.

James Farncombe (Lighting Designer) and Paul Groothuis (Sound Designer) visit us in rehearsals. James immediately tries to get a sense of what the lighting needs to do to best facilitate design and direction. Jeremy suggests that, ‘perhaps the lighting for each act should begin with something confident, bold, and imagistic, and then move into a kind of realism, so it can go on a journey’. As well as this, Paul and our composer, Stephen Warbeck, who is creating original music for this production, contribute thoughts regarding the way the music, which is to be recorded rather than being played live, and sound effects might be able to complete the complex jigsaw of technical elements we are planning to assemble.
Week six: ‘Close of Day’

Our collective focus this week is geared towards the start of technical rehearsals on Saturday morning. This leaves us time to run the play early in the week and to note and re-rehearse any set pieces in need of exploration.

The first run-through on Monday morning is for ‘close family’, meaning only the core production and stage management team are in attendance. By Friday, there are representatives from press and marketing, wigs, hair & make-up, wardrobe, and technical departments, as well as Ben Power, Deputy Artistic Director, and Rufus Norris, Director of the NT, who are watching for the first time and will feed back with thoughts on our progress. With every run – and the subsequent notes session with Jeremy – we find greater nuances everywhere and begin to question received truths about the play. There’s a well-known adage that a director should treat, ‘every new play like a classic, and every classic like a new play’, and the latter is definitely the case in our rehearsal room: we try to mine contemporary resonance to deliver a searingly truthful account of the lives depicted on stage, while never wilfully obfuscating the story O’Casey is telling.

As we move through this week, I discuss the music for the production with our composer, Stephen Warbeck, who has written an original score for several scenic transitions, and who has also been guiding members of the company through the songs in the script. Music has a pivotal role in The Plough and the Stars, as it does in most (if not all) of the plays of Sean O’Casey. In view of this, Stephen (whose previous work includes his Academy Award-winning soundtrack for the film Shakespeare in Love and several previous collaborations with Howard Davies at the National Theatre, including the 2014 production of The Silver Tassie) was hired to create music which could become another ‘character’ in this story.

Friday is our last day in the Paccar Rehearsal Room, which we have developed a real affection for in recent weeks. As we strip the walls of the research images and take the mark-up tape from the floor, it’s a significant reminder of the transience of what it is we’re engaged in as theatre-makers: that we’re here to create a piece of work that will exist only for a short time, which will hopefully have an influence on those who see it, but which is only a small contribution to the rich history of this place and the decades of productions it has seen come and go.

On Saturday morning, the cast get the opportunity to see Vicki’s set design in all its epic glory. A towering, crumbling tenement house, which first showcases the home of the Clitheroes, then revolves to a pub next to the meeting led by Patrick Pearse, then again into the street outside the tenement house, and finally up to Bessie Burgess’ attic room. It’s a huge feat of design and one that we’re eager to get to know intimately as we embark on technical rehearsals with members of all creative and technical departments. Indeed, a lot of demands will be placed on the set. Only when we start experimenting with it will we know whether many of the decisions that have been made in the rehearsal room are, in fact, the most effective choices for the Lyttelton stage. A team of scenic artists work tirelessly to achieve the detail such a socially realistic design requires, as well as an army of carpenters, stage technicians, armourers, and others who visit us over the course of the technical rehearsals to supervise specific effects.

By the end of the first day, we have already overseen the transition between the first two acts, flying in a very large piece of set stored in the fly tower above the stage to build the bar frequented by Rosie Redmond and many others.

Now that we are in technical rehearsals, the next stage will be the first preview on Wednesday evening. It will be our job to focus on creating the best possible experience for our audiences every night. Now that we’ve left the rehearsal room and entered the dark space of the theatre, there’s a feeling of ‘close of day’ – to quote Yeats’ great poem, ‘Easter, 1916’ for the final time – that one episode in the life cycle of this production has come to an end and that another is about to begin. It will be incredibly rewarding to see the actors finally take ownership of the Lyttelton with these characters (many of whom we have come to view as old friends, despite having only spent a few weeks in their company) and our previews will be a process of honing what works and avoiding what doesn’t in the same spirit of experimentation that we established in our very first week together.
Arnott’s – oldest and largest department store in Ireland, founded at No 14 Henry Street in 1843; the original store was destroyed in a fire in 1894, but rebuilt the following year.

Bodenstown – site of a cemetery in Co Kildare where the grave of the republican hero, Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763-1798), is located.

Boland’s Mills – complex of buildings, situated on the south side of the city on Grand Canal Dock, seized by members of the 3rd Battalion of the Irish Volunteers led by Eamon de Valera (1882-1975); perhaps as few as 100 poorly armed Volunteers were involved to guard this key strategic location, which controlled the railway line as well as the main road from Kingstown (now known as Dun Laoghaire) towards the city centre; it held out until the Sunday of Easter Week 1916, when Nurse Elizabeth O’Farrell (1884-1957) was tasked with bringing news of the rebels’ surrender.


Brian Boru (926-1014) – ‘“Brian of the Tribute”. Having subdued Munster and Leinster and defeated the Danes established around Dublin, he gradually extended his domain until he became árdrí, or “High King”, of Ireland. At the age of eighty-eight, after victory over the Danes at Clontarf, he was slain in his tent’ (Ronald Ayling, Seven Plays by Sean O’Casey, p.518).

Chloroform – potion concocted to ‘induce extraordinary slumber’ (Charles Dickens and Percival Leigh, ‘Some Account of Chloroform’ in Household Words, p.152).

Consumption – infectious disease caused by the bacterium mycobacterium tuberculosis, now commonly known as tuberculosis; the classic symptoms of active tuberculosis are a chronic cough with blood-containing sputum, fever, night sweats, and weight loss.

Covey – ‘Dublinese for a smart alec, a know-it-all person’ (Ronald Ayling, Seven Plays by Sean O’Casey, p.512).


Deuce – referred to twice in the play: i) two-pence piece; ii) card with a value of two.

Dragoon – soldier of a cavalry regiment of the British Army.

Dublin Fusiliers – Irish infantry regiment within the British Army created in 1881, one of eight Irish regiments raised and garrisoned in Ireland with its home depot in Naas, Co Kildare.

Dum-Dum Bullets – design of projectile designed to expand upon its impact to produce a larger diameter wound for maximum damage; two typical designs are the hollow-point bullet and the soft-point bullet.

Dunboyne – ‘village about ten miles from Dublin’ (Ronald Ayling, Seven Plays by Sean O’Casey, p.517).

Fenian – ‘name given to the new organisation by John O’Mahony [1816-1877] in 1859. O’Mahony, as a Gaelic scholar, found inspiration in the legend of the ancient warrior, Fiona MacCумhail, and his elite legion, the Fianna [...] the orthodox Fenians thought that no issue should be allowed to blur the single overriding goal of an independent Irish Republic’ (Robert Kee, The Green Flag: A History of Irish Nationalism, p.310; 358).


Foresters – O’Casey; ‘the Foresters is merely a benevolent Society, and those who wear the costume worn by Peter are a subject of amusement to intelligent Irishmen’ (Sean O’Casey, The Plough and the Stars [ed. Christopher Murray], p.102).

GPO – ‘the General Post Office, dominating Sackville Street [now O’Connell Street] and its immediate environs, where the first act of the 1916 Rising would be unveiled’ (R.F. Foster, Vivid Faces, p.10).

Haporth – value equivalent to a halfpenny.

Helga – ‘HMS Helga, a fishery protection vessel (usually described as a “gunboat”, but technically an “armed yacht”) currently serving on an anti-submarine patrol duty, had come up from Kingstown on Tuesday afternoon, and sent a few three-inch shells into the republican position at Boland’s. [...] Early on Wednesday morning, the Helga lay off Sir John Rogerson’s Quay and opened fire on Liberty Hall [which] was steadily reduced to a burnt-out shell’ (Charles Townshend, Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion, p.191).
‘I Do Like S’nice S’mince S’pie’ – British music hall song written by Worton David (1872-1940) and Bert Lee (1880-1946) in 1914 and famously performed by Jay Laurier (1879-1969).

Imperial Hotel – located opposite the General Post Office on O’Connell Street, it was the property of William Martin Murphy (1844-1919), ‘perceived since the 1913 lock-out as the arch-enemy of Dublin’s proletariat’ (R.F. Foster, Vivid Faces, p.231). The Irish Citizen Army’s flag, The Starry Plough, was raised over the Imperial during the Easter Rising, but it was one of the first buildings to go down in flames.

‘Keep The Home Fires Burning’ – 1914 song written by Ivor Novello (1893-1951) and popular during World War I.

Lancers – cavalry regiment of the British Army; a troop of the 5th and 12th Lancers, part of the 5th Cavalry Reserve Regiment, were some of the first soldiers to see action on the first day of the Easter Rising.

‘Lead Kindly Light’ – 1832 hymn written by Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890), a convert well known to Dubliners, since he founded the Catholic University of Ireland (later, University College Dublin) at St Stephen’s Green in 1854.

Liberty Hall – the headquarters of the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union and of the Irish Citizen Army, located in Beresford Place in Dublin.

Loch Erinn – to ‘drink Loch Erinn dry’ was a colloquial expression for extreme thirst; it presumably refers to Loch Erne in Co Fermanagh, one of the largest lakes in Ireland.

Malt – whiskey.

Man of Java – popular name given to a group of fossils discovered on the Island of Java in 1891 and 1892; the discovery was made by Eugène Dubois (1858-1940), who argued the fossils represented the ‘missing link’ between apes and humans in the evolutionary series, a theory that has now been largely discredited, but which was groundbreaking well into the early 20th century.

‘Mary of the Curling Hair’ – traditional Irish love song; origin unknown.


Nelson’s Pillar – large granite column capped by a statue of Lord Horatio Nelson (1758-1805), built in the centre of Sackville (now, O’Connell) Street; completed in 1809 and unscathed in the Easter Rising – in spite of its close proximity to the GPO – it survived until 1966, when it was severely damaged by explosives planted by nationalists, before the last few remnants were later destroyed by the Irish Army.

North King Street – the massacre of 15 civilians at North King Street in Easter Week 1916 remains one of the worst acts committed by British forces in Ireland in the whole of the 20th century; General William Lowe (1861-1944), commander of the British forces, had ordered that, ‘no hesitation was to be shown in dealing with these rebels; that by their actions they had placed themselves outside the law and that they were not to be made prisoners’ (Tim Pat Coogan, The Easter Rising, p.154).

‘O! Where’s The Slave’ – poem by Thomas Moore (1779-1852) from Irish Melodies (1807).

O’Connell Street – previously known as Sackville Street; renamed in 1924 in honour of Daniel O’Connell (1775-1847), nationalist leader of the early 19th century; ‘with O’Connell Street in flames and young men marching to imprisonment and execution in a captured city, it could seem that there was another Troy’ (William Irwin Thompson, Imagination of an Insurrection: Dublin, Easter 1916, p.99).

Glossary


Parnell Square – formerly Rutland Square, but it was renamed after the Irish nationalist politician, Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-1891) after his death; Georgian square at the northern end of O’Connell Street and west of Mountjoy Square (where O’Casey lived, in a tenement at No 35, during the Irish War of Independence). On the south side of Parnell Square, was Conway’s Bar (now closed), outside of which Pearse surrendered to British forces on the final day of the Rising.

Phoenix Park – urban park lying north of the River Liffey.

Proletariat – ‘that class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live’ (Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, ‘The Communist Manifesto’ in *Marx: Selected Works: Volume 1*, p.204).

Rathmines – a suburb on the south side of Dublin; ‘butt of local humour for a couple of generations because its residents seem to typify the flunky Irishman; with their strange, synthetic English accent, their snobbery, and their half-hearted desire to be a ruling caste. Rathmines was a phenomenon. It was not a racial group, not a political stronghold, but a spiritual condition. Its people were castaways, wrecked by mischance upon this island called Ireland, and ever scanning the horizon for a ship that would take them and their families away to some of the British colonies’ (Alan Hayes [ed.], *The Years Flew By: Recollections of Madame Sydney Gifford Czira*, p.5).

‘Rule, Britannia!’ – British patriotic song, originating from the poem by James Thomson (1700-1748) and set to music by Thomas Arne (1710-1778) in 1740.

Saint Francis [of Assisi] (1181-1226) – Italian Roman Catholic preacher and founder of the Franciscan Order; he and his followers celebrated, and even venerated, poverty in an attempt to imitate the life and work of Jesus Christ; in 1224, he is said to have received the stigmata whilst experiencing an angelic vision in a state of religious ecstasy, which made him the first person to bear the wounds of Christ’s Passion.

Saint Vincent de Paul – a charitable organisation dedicated to giving food and clothing to the poor.

Sam Browne belt – ‘so named after [the] British army officer who invented it; a leather waist-belt and cross-strap over one or even both shoulders’ (Ronald Aylng, *Seven Plays by Sean O’Casey*, p.513.

Sean Bhean Bhocht – ‘poor old woman’ (Gaelic); personification of Ireland taken from a traditional song from the time of the 1798 Rebellion, led by Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763-1798). ‘The female personification of the land, and the ethnic community as a kinship group, were the fundamental currency of romantic nationalism’ (Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion*, p.161).

Shinner – colloquial term for a member of Sinn Féin, the Irish republican political party founded in 1905 by Arthur Griffith (1872-1922).

Socialist – representative of a socio-economic system characterised by social ownership and democratic control of the means of production.
Glossary

Tanner – six (old) pence; before decimalisation in 1971, there were 12 pennies in a shilling and hence a special coin for sixpence, half a shilling.

Tara – ‘the early Irish kings, priests, and bards used to assemble in consultation in the regal palace at Tara, in County Meath, where wandering poets recited songs and sagas at festive gatherings’ (Ronald Ayling, Seven Plays by Sean O’Casey, p.513).

Tenement – Dublin’s slum apartment housing; in 1916, tenements held up to 800 people to the acre, up to 100 occupants to one building, and up to 20 family members crammed into tiny rooms; ‘In 1900, there were more than six thousand tenement houses in Dublin and over one-third of the population lived in them.’ (Kevin C. Kearns, Dublin Tenement Life, p.1); ‘Like most Irish questions, the slum evil has [...] a legacy of alien rule. It is the fruit of generations of neglect and civic blindness’ (Irish Press, 1 October 1936).

The Figure in the Window – O’Casey’s reference in the character list of The Plough and the Stars to the republican leader, Patrick Pearse (1879-1916); these words are extracts from three of Pearse’s defining speeches: The Coming Revolution (1913), Funeral Oration for O’Donovan Rossa (1915), and Peace and the Gael (1915).


Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763-1798) – the founder of the United Irishmen; Tone’s grave in Bodenstown, Co. Kildare, became a shrine for republicans ever since the centenary of his death in 1898.

The Plough and the Stars – ‘[Irish] Citizen Army flag, depicting a worker’s plough traced out in stars’ (R.F. Foster, Vivid Faces, p.231), representing the aspirations of the Labour Movement.

The Proclamation – delivered on the steps of the General Post Office on Easter Monday 1916, The Proclamation of the Irish Republic was a document issued by the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army. Patrick Pearse’s recitation marked the beginning of the Easter Rising. Addressing ‘Irishmen’ and ‘Irishwomen’, it set out the belief that Ireland, ‘through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom’.

The Servant of the People – the character in The Plough and the Stars who is a member of the Citizen Army.

The Plough and the Stars – 1510 painting by the Italian Renaissance master, Giorgione (c. 1477-1510), with its landscape and sky completed after the artist’s death by Titian (c. 1488-1576); also known as the ‘Dresden Venus’.

‘The Soldier’s Song’ – by Peader Kearney (1883-1942), first published in 1912, later the Irish national anthem after independence; the song was written in 1907.

Tommy – colloquial term for British soldiers; a common belief is that it was chosen by Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington (1769-1852) in 1843 after being inspired by the bravery of a soldier at the Battle of Boxtel in 1794 during the Flanders Campaign: the Duke, in command of the 33rd Regiment of Foot, spotted that the best man-at-arms in his regiment, Thomas Atkins, mortally injured – Atkins said, ‘It's alright, sir. It's all in a day's work’, and died shortly after.

Tossers – coins used in a traditional game of ‘pitch and toss’, a gambling game in which the player who manages to throw a coin closest to a mark gets to toss all the coins while others bet on which side will land facing up.

Tyler’s – ‘British multiple stores had been locating in Dublin since the 1880s – one of the earliest was Tyler’s, the Leicester boot manufacturers, which opened first in Earl Street and then opened in eight locations in the city’ (David Dickson, Dublin: The Making of a Capital City, p.438).

‘When You Said You Loved Me’ – O’Casey adapted the traditional folk song, ‘When You and I Were Young, Maggie’, written by Canadian schoolteacher, George Washington Johnson, in 1864, and set to music by the English-born James Austen Butterfield (1837-1891) in 1866; O’Casey then changed the name ‘Maggie’ to ‘Nora’ for his tragic heroine, Nora Clitheroe, in The Plough and the Stars.
Who is the Young Covey?
His real name is Willie Clitheroe and he goes by Covey because he’s a bit of a smart-alec, he fancies himself as a self-taught intellectual. Part of his role is a means by which O’Casey opposes the ideology of the revolution – they have a similar sensibility in that they see the Irish Citizen Army being absorbed into the Volunteers as a betrayal of [trade union leader] Jim Larkin’s idea for a workers’ revolution.

How would you describe him in three words?

Is the Young Covey a leader or a follower?
I think he’s ultimately a loner and I think it makes him neither, really. What’s interesting in the play is that for all his teasing of Uncle Peter [Flynn] and his rows with Fluther, he’d be lost without them, without that surrogate family.

What are his key values?
He does fundamentally believe in a workers’ revolution but, like a lot of people, he might be afraid, if that actually came into being, how it would work. Ultimately, he’s a unique dichotomy between the external man who’s highly politicised and the internal man who has a great inability to express emotion whilst, at the same time, having a real longing for human intimacy and therefore uses politics as a way of engaging with others.

How does he change in the course of the play?
He changes massively: he goes from mocking the rebel cause but, by the end of the play, he’s shell-shocked at what the Rising’s done to all of their lives in the tenement. For that trio especially – Uncle Peter, Fluther, the Covey – their sense of place is stripped from them and for the Covey, his own ideology is challenged, and perhaps changed, forever.

What’s your favourite and least favourite thing about him?
They’re both intertwined: least favourite would be his cruelty towards Uncle Peter, but that also feeds my favourite aspect of him, which is his vulnerability and also his need for intimacy, as I said, because I think it’s how he expresses himself via social skills that leave a lot to be desired.

What are your thoughts on the language in the play?
It’s currency, first and foremost. Language is important to all of them because they have little else. The potency of language and stories and news and banter are such a huge part of that working-class Dublin culture and then that vivacity of language is offset with the reality of what’s going on in the outside world when their world descends into chaos in the final act. It’s a knockout punch, it’s glorious to play, painting those pictures with the language he gives you.

You acted in Howard Davies’ production of Juno in the Paycock in 2012 – how does this play differ?
Well, with Juno and the Paycock, because it takes place in one place, the overriding context is domestic, so it’s partly to do with scale. Here’s the thing: sometimes you don’t realise how great a play is, as an actor or a director or a designer, I imagine, until you’re inside it. Then, when you’re in it, you see the extraordinary mechanics that are at work. For this play, what’s blown my mind is the scope, the ambition: that he sets it in a tenement house, in a bar, outside in the streets, then back in the tenement with a panorama of characters whirling around and colliding ideologically, socially, culturally. That he’s able to handle each one of those elements with such skill and grace is astonishing.

What do you think O’Casey’s opinion of the tenement dwellers was?
I think he loved them. Because he was from that background, or at least a similar one, he clearly had a great affection for people. Those characters are sometimes based in music hall or vaudeville, but they are also entirely truthful portraits of big characters. It’s definitely true to the vivacity of many Dubliners and many Londoners even nowadays, legends in their own communities living out their lives with passion. And there’s a dignity of people living in the face of poverty, living in the midst of this conflict they haven’t asked to be a part of. We’re just human beings trying to do our best and carry on and I just find that dignity in the play so moving.

How does the play resonate right now?
Sometimes I think contemporary relevancy can be like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole where plays are concerned, but I think this will be staged in a hundred years’ time because there will always be conflict, there will always be war, sadly. It’s a brilliant anatomy of how conflict affects the poorest and destabilises and forces people to move. As happens at the end of the play, there’s a migration of the central characters towards becoming refugees, which isn’t too far from where we are now.
Interviews

Justine Mitchell plays Bessie Burgess

Who is Bessie Burgess?
She’s a woman in her forties, a mother, a Protestant loyalist, and a street fruit-vendor. We don’t know what happened to her husband, which is interesting, but I presume she’s a widow. She’s lonely: she’s been ostracised from the rest of the community within the tenement. When you look it up, her name, ‘Bessie’, means ‘pledged to God’, and she’s extraordinarily religious and often seeks solace in that, drawing strength from her faith. Ultimately, she’s not sentimental, she has these rough edges and she’s a drinker, taking solace from that as well, I think, which is symptomatic of an underlying sadness, which she conceals from the rest of the world. For O’Casey she’s this fascinating provocation because – from what I can tell, at least – working-class Protestant voices weren’t prevalent in contemporary playwrighting. The Protestant voice was shown through an Anglo-Irish ascendancy in the ruling class, so this offers a very different perspective by showcasing a disenfranchised, but incredibly strong, figure.

How did you prepare to play Bessie?
We rehearsed the play, I suppose! We did a lot of research into the historical context, but it’s all in the play. You have to get on top of the language, so really it’s about excavating what’s on the page.

How would you describe her in three words?

What challenges have you encountered in rehearsals?
Well, Act Two is a difficult scene for Bessie, isn’t it? I talked to Eileen Walsh, who played her at the Abbey [in Sean Holmes’ 2016 production] and she felt the same way. It’s very tempting to give her a kind of irony that she simply doesn’t have, and that I might have as someone playing her in 2016. She’s not ironic, she’s incredibly upright. People like her don’t have that sense of distance from themselves, they often take themselves quite seriously. So playing it straight means you play the truth of the scene, I think.

What is your character’s biggest fear?
Losing her son is a terrifying thing to her because then she will have nothing. Destitution and utter poverty are also real considerations. Her role in the community is dependent on such things, so perhaps it’s about dissolution of identity. Death, ironically, isn’t on her mind until the very end of the play when it becomes horrifyingly immediate.

How does she change in the course of the play?
Well, it’s one of those great parts and it certainly challenged my expectations as I got to know her better. What’s interesting is that, particularly with those great female roles in the Irish canon and the broader international canon, you’d assume that they change and gain agency. In this play, Bessie doesn’t change dramatically, but the lens through which O’Casey invites the audience to view her changes their perception, which is glorious. I’ve never played a character where the writing is crafted in that way, where the ‘camera’ seems to zoom out to a wide shot and take more of her in. That was obvious to me on the first reading because of the moment where she gives the milk to Mollser, which is such a pivotal turning point in the minds of the audience, which O’Casey never overemphasises, which is when you know you’re in the hands of a great writer.

What obstacles do the women in this play have to face and, ultimately, overcome?
The usual man-made obstacles, I suppose (not human-made, but man-made, specifically). The consequences of the decisions made by male politicians in positions of power, which women are then forced to deal with, especially those at the base of the social hierarchy. Politically, O’Casey is a humanist and it’s clear that he likes human beings. A lot of people have said to me that they think the men within the play are generally foolish, but there’s a foolishness to the women as well, so I don’t think you can be as binary as that. He loves portraying both sexes in all of their ridiculousness and all of their beauty.
Siobhán Cullen is a member of the Ensemble and understudies the role of Nora Clitheroe.

Who is Nora Clitheroe?
Nora Clitheroe is a 22-year-old woman living in a Dublin tenement house with her uncle, Peter, her cousin, Willie, and her husband, Jack, whom she’s recently married. She’s the centre of the play and everything that takes place is reflected through her in one way or another. O’Casey paints her as an aspirational dreamer quite early on – she’s pregnant and determined to better the lives of her growing family and, as such, she represents the potential of a new generation, which is soon to be desecrated.

How would you describe her in three words?

Can you talk about your role as understudy/ensemble in this production?
My role is a kind of ‘safety net’ in case Judith [Roddy], who plays Nora, isn’t able to perform for whatever reason. It’s to support the main cast and to flesh out the world of the play. For the duration of our rehearsals, the understudies sit in and observe the principal cast in terms of blocking and incorporating any specific notes Jeremy gives them. Whenever we can grab a spare moment, we have our own rehearsals. In terms of our ensemble work, we appear at various points through the action because, within the environment O’Casey has created, his characters are forced to exist in an entirely claustrophobic space. Maybe that’s why O’Casey’s language is so poetic: to create more spacious worlds in their own imaginations.

What obstacles do the women in this play have to face/overcome?
It’s a contradiction in terms, really, because it’s a very patriarchal world that the play is set in, but O’Casey revered women, I think. Apart from the obstacles that everyone had to face, like poverty and illness and war, women had the added constraints of being duty bound to remain at home. The events of the play are generally dictated by men and yet the women are forced to try to reclaim some form of autonomy in the midst of it all, as the consequences of the decisions their male counterparts make impact upon them. As well as this, so many of them are abandoned women. Being alone affects each of them so deeply it changes the course of their character, eventually leading them into frightening new territory. O’Casey seems to be saying that the chief treasure of a person’s existence is their mind and that, in spite of terrible losses, that is a sanctuary of sorts. So, in taking Nora’s sanity from her in Act Four, he commits the ultimate violation.

Who do you hold responsible for Nora’s disintegration?
At a first glance, it seems Jack is culpable, but I don’t think it’s that simple. Like many of his colleagues, he’s a product of an ideology. It’s a domino effect and ultimately not only down to just one person. It’s the system they’re living under: it’s Jack, it’s the leaders of the Rising, it’s the British Empire’s occupation, so I don’t think you can point the finger at any one person.

What do you think O’Casey’s position on women was when writing the play?
I do think he revered women and that he was heavily influenced by his mother, Susan, and his sister, Bella, and by women he grew up with and lived alongside, his friends and neighbours. He could see that, in many cases, it was the women of the tenements who were forced to endure lives that were lived in extremis. They’re the most courageous, the most selfless, who take the most risks, and who are left the most damaged.

And what do you think O’Casey’s opinion of the Rising’s leaders was?
He never really bought into the nationalistic romance of it all and the self-fashioning of heroes and martyrs. Because he was a working-class man, he could see that it was his own people who were most disenfranchised by the decisions taken by those in positions of power.

Do you think the play is still relevant today?
If so, why?
Brexit! In times of political unrest, it is ordinary people who are affected most. It’s really important to remember that these conversations, in rooms we have no access to, have a very real impact on our collective national identity.
Richard Pryal plays Corporal Stoddart

Who is Corporal Stoddart?
He’s a British soldier, part of the Wiltshire Regiment in Dublin at the time of the Easter Rising. He arrives at the tenement house to escort away the corpse of Mollser (which was a fairly standard duty for the Tommies) and to count how many men are there in the building, so that he can round them up and take them away. In terms of his function, because the piece is so richly layered, he and Sergeant Tinley provide a striking contrast in terms of a level of military precision between what we see of the rebels and what we see of them: their equipment’s better, they’re better prepared. At the same time, in an interesting counterpoint, he’s very humanised and supports the Covey’s statement that there’s, ‘no such thing as an Irishman; or an Englishman, or a German, or a Turk’, he’s as human as all of the other characters in the play even though his role is very different. It’s a shock to the system, I think, when we’ve had three-and-a-half acts of getting used to the musicality of the vast spectrum of Irish characters, then suddenly we’re confronted with this contrasting energy.

How would you describe him in three words?

What research have you done during rehearsals?
Have you had any revelations about your character in the course of doing this research?
We did a lot of research as a group and then, individually, I researched and tested out the sounds of soldiers. Actually, even though it’s not a relevant period, I read Legionnaire by Simon Murphy about a British member of the French Foreign Legion serving away from home. What was so striking was the incredible humanity that was in his diaries, his sympathy, but also his ability to compartmentalise the professional aspect of what he did on a daily basis without having to hate the people he’s fighting against. I think I’d always made the assumption that to kill opposing forces you would have to hate them, or at least find a way deep within yourself to hate them, and he doesn’t – actually, quite often, he admires them. That was a major revelation: that the role of the soldier could be conducted from a position of humanity, that you can’t erase the idea of the people you’re fighting against being people.

What are your thoughts on the language in this play?
It seems like there’s a pride in the use of language. Everyone is given a very powerful regional lexicon – even the Tommies! At first, it can seem like they have a harsh way with words, in comparison to the florid poetry of the Irish characters, but they have these visceral turns of phrase – Stoddart says that when they find the sniper, ‘we’ll give ‘im the cold steel, we will. We’ll jab the belly aht of ‘im, we will!’ So, whilst the Irish have a kaleidoscopic, expressive facility with language, nobody is short-changed by O’Casey’s choices. He chooses the most expressive colloquialisms and then embellishes them further with favourite words or phrases, so it’s almost a ‘character’ of its own.

Why do you think O’Casey introduces your character so late in the play?
I think it has greater impact in coming in so late on. O’Casey has an interesting attitude to the Rising as a whole. It’s easy to assume that because someone supports Irish nationalism they would be behind the Easter Rising and we retrospectively reconfigure narratives to suit our own purposes, i.e. that all Irish people were behind it, which was not the case. This idea of ‘Britishness’ as the ‘enemy’ is totally subverted by dropping a character in at the end who looks and sounds like an archetypal occupier but doesn’t behave like one. It questions the simplifying narrative; it questions the way we tell stories about these great political events. And, dramatically, it’s the ace up O’Casey’s sleeve for those closing moments in the final act. My character arrives when he needs to for the good of the narrative.

Do you think the play is still relevant today? If so, why?
Yes, absolutely. In part, because it highlights the simplification of narrative when it comes to our politics nowadays – something is either good or it’s bad, there can be no shades of grey, no complexity. Also, I think, O’Casey points to one of the great, ongoing crimes of humanity, which is that there’s an ever-widening gap between the richest and poorest and in developing nations especially. O’Casey was this pioneering international socialist who believed that the conflict that needed to come to fruition was between the worst-off and those who were keeping them from what they needed to survive. We’re constantly hearing, following the vote for Britain to leave the European Union, that Britain is/was, economically, the fifth most successful nation in the world, which is ironic when we still have people who need to visit food banks, when we still have people who are homeless, when we’ve fashioned the concept of the ‘working poor’ for people who actually work a full-time job and still can’t afford to live. So, the key values O’Casey held onto are still there to be defended. The very thing he’s attacking here is that nationalism is a political tool which is able to draw people’s attention away from the issues that matter and that’s something we continue to live with today.
Vicki Mortimer is the Designer for *The Plough and the Stars*

You’re designing set and costume for this production. When you sit down with a script with an eye to designing a production, what specific things are you looking for in the text?

The reading of the play always happens before the first meeting with the director and, I suppose, my agenda in that first meeting would be to allow them to speak freely about the work in a totally non-physical context (unless there’s something that has already occurred to them). It’s key to have a ranging sense of what their take on the play is and the only way you can have that conversation is for you to know the play comprehensively as well. So, with Howard [Davies, Co-director], he was struck by these personal stories, by how marginalised these characters were within the historical events that were unfolding. That’s where O’Casey’s compassion was fixed, since he keeps bringing us back into the company of those people who are so disempowered and for whom those events had an ambivalent outcome. So, I found that by making the architecture actually quite large in contrast to the figures, it emphasised some of the key elements of our discussion, these ungovernable rooms without the means to make them comfortable. As well as this, the Lyttelton is a surprisingly big architectural stage, so even that begins to dwarf the figures on it when we move into Act Three, exposing them further. It makes them vulnerable and we invest in that vulnerability watching them. We just want them to go inside and shut the door.

What would you say is the essence of your role as a designer?

The work’s always done through conversation so the process, whether you’re working with somebody you’ve collaborated with before or not, is first to work out: what is the conversation that’s going to provoke a shared vision for this project? So, the hard work, I think, is in the conversation itself and then working out how that act of translation happens, so you start to bring in different visual tools, whether that’s things that you’ve both seen – art or film or theatre and so on – and it can be infinitely different depending on what the focus of the production is. *The Cat in the Hat* [at the National Theatre in 2009] is a good example. Katie [Mitchell, Director of *The Cat in the Hat*] said that all young children know what the book looks like in its published form, so our responsibility is to make that double spread as recognisable as possible on stage. Whereas *The Plough and the Stars* evolved with the Co-director Howard Davies through an awful lot of references to *The Silver Tassie* [at the National Theatre in 2014] and the work we did together on that. The threshold when we moved from conversation into the translation of ideas happened when it became clear that the heart of the story was the shared building, the nature of living in a tenement. So, the tenement became the core object in the space.

How do you, as a designer, represent the poverty faced by the characters?

There’s a slight, unbearable fakery to it, if it’s not right. The way that Howard and I ended up talking about impoverishment was by looking back a hundred years and then looking forward and seeing that not much had changed. So that’s why the idea of exposing the containing theatre felt essential – so there’s a dialogue between this moment now when we’re watching the play in 2016 and the historical time and place those characters inhabit. At one point, Howard and I even talked about having some evidence of the nationalist and loyalist campaigning that has happened since 1916.

What would you like people to take away from the production?

I hope an audience takes away a sense of having been let into the passion of the writing. That’s it, to be honest. To create a context in which the audience spend the performance sharing in that accumulating weight of human experience. It’s this writing of profoundly human and humane conviction with an underlying protesting voice that reminds us that those who have a purchase on history have a responsibility to deliver something better.