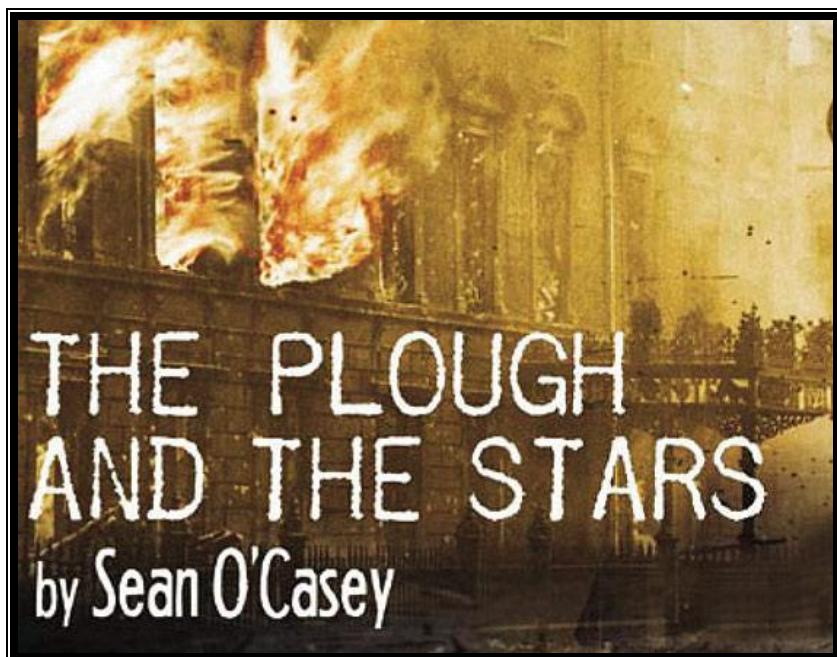


The Plough and the Stars

by

Sean O'Casey



TEN KEY MOMENTS

1. The opening stage directions

How can the stage directions be a ‘key moment’? Because some writers supply important information in the directions that affect how we view a character or the action. Even before the action of the play begins, the theme of escape is introduced indirectly in the stage directions. We are told that the Clitheroes’ room is *furnished in a way that suggests an attempt towards a finer expression of domestic life*. Very few tenement dwellings would have contained pictures of any kind but Nora’s has four: a picture of Robert Emmet, the Irish patriot, hanged in 1803 for organising a rebellion against the

English; Giorgioni's The Sleeping Venus – a depiction of the goddess of love; and two by Millais – The Angelus and The Gleaners. These can be seen as symbols of the main issues discussed in the play: patriotism and the value of dying for a cause; love; religion; the working classes.

Apart from operating as symbols for those in the know, these pictures serve as a sign that there is a desire on Nora's part to rise above her poor background and escape from the tenement into a better life.

2. ACT I - Love scene and discovery of Nora's dishonesty. Jack rejects Nora in favour of the Irish Citizen Army (pp. 26-31)

Music and song are important in O'Casey's plays. They can set the mood of a scene or even provide a comment on the actions of characters. A tender moment is created when Jack sings a sweet ballad to his wife. Touchingly, he has altered the name 'Maggie' in the original version of the song to 'Nora' in her honour. The refrain '...When I first said I loved only you, Nora, and you said you loved only me' evokes wholly committed love, devotion to one person to the exclusion of all else. However, the romance of this moment is swiftly broken by the arrival of Captain Brennan with news that the Citizen Army is preparing to attack Dublin Castle and that 'Commandant' Clitheroe is required. When Jack expresses surprise at being addressed as 'Commandant', it emerges that Nora had destroyed his letter of appointment when it arrived two weeks previously and has been concealing the information from her husband. She believes Jack's primary motivation for fighting in the Citizen Army is vanity. She wants him to place his wife before his political beliefs. His refusal to do so provides an ironic comment on the line from the song, 'When I first said I loved only you...' Jack obviously doesn't love only Nora. In his anger at her deceit, he grabs his wife's arm. When she complains that he is hurting her, he replies chillingly, 'You deserve to be hurt'.

3. ACT I – Dublin Fusiliers on their way to the Front sing *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*

Seconds after Jack's departure, Mollser enters. She is a fifteen-year-old girl dying of consumption. She tells how she envies Nora her health. Together, they listen to a second song, the famous *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*. This semi-comic Irish ballad (written by Jack Judge and Harry Williams) is about the sadness of being separated from the one you love. Ironically, it is being sung by men who are volunteering to be separated from those they love. They have chosen to leave home to fight in the trenches of World War I. O'Casey seems to be suggesting that there is not much difference between those who fight for the Citizen Army and those who fight for the British army. Both are driven by a kind of madness.

4. ACT II – Voice of the Man (throughout the act)

O’Casey pursues the idea of warfare as a kind of madness. From inside a pub, we overhear someone addressing a political rally. The words of the Speaker at the public meeting are, to a large extent, actual quotations from speeches of Padraic Pearse, the leader of the 1916 Rising. O’Casey had known Pearse and had disagreed with his politics. He is criticizing Pearse’s obsession with blood sacrifice and his belief that war was a noble exercise. By setting the high-flown rhetoric of the mysterious Speaker against the petty squabbling inside the pub, O’Casey seems to be suggesting that Pearse’s words have little to do with the real world of Dublin’s poor. It was considered shocking at the time to portray a prostitute, Rosie, in such a down-to-earth manner but in O’Casey’s world view, she has as much right to comment on world affairs as anyone else.

5. ACT II – Clitheroe, Langon and Brennan – Ireland is greater than a mother/wife (p. 53)

O’Casey continues his attack on the obsessive nature of fanaticism. The three members of the Citizen Army arrive into the pub for a quick drink. They have what can only be described as a brief exchange of slogans – it is certainly not a conversation. This is O’Casey’s way of suggesting that most fanatics are incapable of logical thought and prefer to follow a charismatic leader unthinkingly. Caught up in the excitement of the Speaker’s words, they place Ireland before all else: their mothers, their wives, their liberty and their own lives.

6. ACT III – Acts of kindness and bravery: Fluther searches for Nora; Bessie gives milk to Mollser

Six months have elapsed since the end of Act III. It is now Easter week, 1916 (April 24-31) and there is a battle between the rebels who have seized the G.P.O. and the English forces. The streets are dangerous.

O’Casey wants to show the effect war has on ordinary people. Mollser’s condition has deteriorated, a direct result of the poverty of her living conditions. Nora has been desperately looking for Jack, despite the risk to her own safety. Fluther demonstrates bravery by searching the streets through the night, dodging the bullets, finding her and bringing her home.

In contrast with Fluther’s bravery, Nora declares that her husband’s behaviour is cowardly. He is ‘afraid to say he is afraid’.

Although Bessie Burgess is Protestant and loyal to the British side, she is capable of showing huge compassion to her Catholic nationalist neighbours. Her kindness to Mollser is all the more touching for being performed discreetly and silently.

**7. ACT III – Jack Clitheroe rejects Nora for the second time (pp.72-75);
Bessie’s kindness**

Jack Clitheroe and Brennan are seeking medical assistance for Langon, who has been shot in the stomach. Nora begs Jack to stay with her but he refuses, anxious that failure to return to the fight will damage his reputation. As in Act I, he pushes her away violently. It is this trauma, presumably, that triggers Nora’s miscarriage. Again, it is Bessie who comes to her aid and carries her indoors.

8. ACT III – Despite the fighting in the nearby streets, Bessie goes to fetch a doctor for Nora

Later, it is Bessie who risks her own life to go in search of a doctor for Nora.

9. ACT IV – Audience learns of Jack Clitheroe’s death and that Nora has miscarried (p.82)

Act IV is set in Bessie’s dingy attic rooms. A few days have elapsed since the end of Act III. Bessie is taking care of Nora who has suffered a miscarriage – according to Fluther, Bessie has ‘been up with her the past three nights’. Fluther, Peter and The Covey are sheltering there because of sniper activity. A coffin near the window contains the bodies of Mollser, who has died suddenly, and of Nora’s baby.

Brennan arrives, dressed in civvies, with the news that Jack Clitheroe was killed in shooting in the Imperial Hotel. Significantly, his dying words were not that he loved Nora but that he was ‘proud to die for Ireland’. O’Casey is making the point that fanaticism creates a kind of blindness: Jack dies unaware that his wife was pregnant and that she has miscarried; that he has lost a child; that, as a result of the miscarriage, his wife has lost her sanity. Ironically, Brennan declares that Nora will be happy to know ‘she has had a hero for a husband.’

The fact that Brennan is not in uniform raises another issue: he has effectively deserted. As he ran from the hotel to save his life, he saw the flag bearing the plough and the stars (the flag of the Irish Citizen Army) fall as the roof caved in. Bessie mocks his cowardice: ‘You run like a hare to get out o’ danger.’

10. ACT IV – Accidental shooting of Bessie; soldiers drink tea and sing Keep the Home Fires Burning

Nora wanders around Bessie's room in a delirium, searching for her husband and her baby. In an attempt to keep Nora away from the windows because of the sniper activity, Bessie stumbles against a window and is immediately shot by British soldiers. She dies as a result of performing an act of kindness. O'Casey is careful not to over-sentimentalize her death. Although she is the true hero of the play, and has demonstrated true Christianity throughout, O'Casey gives her dying words a bitterness that seems shocking. She dies cursing Nora: 'I've got this through you, you bitch, you!' and declares that she regrets ever assisting her. Her calls for help go unheeded and she is already dead by the time Mrs Grigson arrives.

Soldiers arrive expecting to find the body of an armed rebel but instead find only Bessie, a forty-year-old fruit vendor. Her death is dismissed in a matter of seconds: 'We couldn't afford to take any chances.' As if such deaths were perfectly natural to them, they sit down and help themselves to the tea in Bessie's teapot.

As they drink her tea, soldiers can be heard singing 'Keep the Home Fires Burning' from a nearby barricade. Bessie's killers join in the chorus. Once again, the choice of song is important. The lyrics of this song manage to capture the sadness and the bravery of war but present them as part of a noble enterprise. The nobility of the sentiments are in contrast with the unpleasant reality of war the audience has just witnessed.

Themes and Issues

A number of themes in this play echo those of *Casablanca* and *Lamb*:

- Escape
- Belief in a cause/ Ideals and principles
- Hypocrisy

1. Escape

In all three texts, various people are trying to escape. In *Plough*, Nora is trying to escape from the poverty of her background; she wants a better life. Jack and his comrades in the Citizen Army are trying to help Ireland escape from British rule. The Covey wants to escape from the oppression of capitalism into a world built on socialist principles.

In *Lamb*, Michael and Owen want to escape from the cruel bullying of Brother Benedict. They escape from Ireland in search of a better life. When Michael realizes that it is just a matter of time before the police catch up with him, he helps Owen 'escape' from a doomed existence by drowning him.

The town of Casablanca is not a place that anyone particularly wants to visit; people come there in order to escape from German rule by securing an exit visa to the United States. Casablanca is full of escapees of one sort or another: Rick is escaping from the unhappy memories of an unhappy love affair; Laszlo has literally escaped from a concentration camp.

2. Belief in a cause

In all three texts, characters are driven by a belief in a cause. In *Plough, Irish freedom* is the motivating force behind the actions of many of the characters of the play. However, in a subtle way, O'Casey reminds us that everyone believes they have right on their side by referring to the British struggle for freedom in Europe. He reminds us that far more Irishmen enlisted in the British army during WWI than ever took part in the Easter Rising (over 200,000 versus an estimated 1,600). Nora has her own cause: her family. Bessie's cause appears to be Christianity – she is the most selfless character in the play. The Covey's cause is socialism.

In *Lamb*, Michael also believes in Christianity. Initially, he devotes his life to God and is distraught to discover Brother Benedict's cynicism. Later, he devotes his life to Owen and is driven by a desire to protect him.

In *Casablanca*, Laszlo is driven by a hatred of the German regime. Rick is initially driven by a desire to fight against fascists and political bullies but becomes cynical because of Ilse's treatment of him in Paris. He moves to Casablanca and tries to stay out of people's quarrels. He re-discovers belief in a cause thanks to the selflessness of Laszlo and Ilse.

3. Hypocrisy

All three texts abound in examples of hypocrisy. Jack, Capt Brennan, Nora are all hypocritical in their own ways. Jack declares his love for Nora but actually loves his country more. Captain Brennan deserts the army when the going gets tough. Nora's love for Jack is tainted by her decision to destroy the letter announcing his promotion.

In *Lamb*, Brother Benedict's hypocrisy is breathtaking. The pleasure he takes in bullying and humiliating pupils as well as teaching staff shows how inappropriate the title 'Christian Brother' is for him, for he is neither Christian nor brotherly. He is cruel and arrogant, regarding himself as intellectually superior to those around him - yet he displays contempt for knowledge by forcing a boy to declare a set of bird tracks are those of an eagle when they are obviously those of a much smaller bird.

For most of *Casablanca*, Captain Renault is a hypocritical opportunist who is happy to keep the Gestapo happy as long as they don't interfere with his corrupt routine. Although he is supposed to be the representative of French law and order, he really just looks after his own interests. Because he has no principles, he is intrigued by Rick's record as a freedom fighter and anti-fascist. He is a sexual predator who exploits young women who are desperate for an exit visa. In the closing minutes of the film, through Rick's actions, he discovers a cause in which he can believe.

General Vision and Viewpoint

The general vision and viewpoint of *The Plough and the Stars* is that the world is a harsh place where all attempts to achieve happiness are doomed to failure. It is a world where:

- Poverty is rife; people seem trapped in poverty and are unable to escape
- Most people are insincere
- Almost nobody is entirely committed to a cause – Jack drops out of the Irish Citizen Army when he feels he has been passed over for promotion; Brennan deserts when the fighting becomes fierce
- The Covey takes part in looting, despite his socialist principles
- All causes seem questionable
- Most people are frail and weak.
- Goodness and selflessness are punished – Bessie Burgess is shot by British soldiers in error.

Cultural Context

- Written in 1926, ten years after the Easter Rising, the most significant event in modern Irish history.
- Set during November 1915 and April 1916.
- Could be seen as a questioning of the value of the Rising, nationalism, socialism and Christianity.
- Concerns poor tenement-dwellers seeking to improve their lives.
- Written from the perspective of someone who no longer approves of political violence. O'Casey had long since become disenchanted with Pearse's obsession with blood sacrifice. O'Casey was a pacifist in his later life.

THE PROPS – from *The Irish Times*

Theatrical props anchor a play to a time and place. They transport both cast and audience to the heart of the play. This is especially true at the Abbey, where the current production of *The Plough and the Stars* uses props dating back to the play's premiere in 1926, writes **SARA KEATING**

AT THE Abbey, props – that is “theatrical properties” to give them their proper name – provide a secret history of the theatre. The ghosts of long-dead actors sit in chairs that are still recycled between productions, while the shadow of other plays hover above an original Victorian pram that has been used at the Abbey since its very first years. Such objects accrue stories in the same way that cities or buildings or people do. They are a palimpsest of many different lives and different uses.

They carry legends that are usually lost as actors and artists pass on: nobody thinks to write them down.

The props collected by the Abbey for *The Plough and the Stars* since the play’s controversial premiere in 1926 provide one such alternative narrative of the theatre and the play’s history. The play was censored by the theatre throughout the rehearsal process, with actors refusing to say certain lines and the script being edited right up until opening night, but it still provoked riots as explosive as those that greeted *The Playboy of the Western World*. It was also the play that was being performed on the night that the Abbey burned down, fatally, in 1951.

The final moment of the play involves a group of British soldiers evicting tenants of the tenement and singing: “Keep the ‘ome fires burnin’.” Poetic coincidence, perhaps.

In the Abbey bar, archivist Mairéad Delaney, prop master Stephen Molloy and prop maker Eimear Murphy, introduce me to some of the historical secrets of the play and idiosyncratic details of the contemporary production that lie bound up with the props of *The Plough and the Stars*.

1 UNCLE PETER’S SWORD

A beautiful dress sword with “fine figaries on it”, the Abbey once had a valuable version of Uncle Peter’s sword, which served the theatre for more than 75 years and was so precious it was guarded by the wardrobe mistress.

There are pictures of it in the Abbey’s archive in every production of the play from 1926 to 1964. But then it “suddenly vanished a few years ago”. “That happens to props,” Murphy says, “especially fake money, which we now stamp with the Bank of the Abbey Theatre to stop people stealing it, but maybe that makes it more attractive!”

The sword, known backstage as Uncle Peter’s Sword, hasn’t been seen since the last production of the play in 2002, so Murphy was charged with finding a replacement. “It is a very particular kind of sword,” she says. “Not like one you would use for duelling in Macbeth. It is a ceremonial one. I couldn’t find anything suitable, so we have ended up renting a reproduction one, which I have dressed up with gold lace and tassels and decorations so that it is the fancy sword that the script asks for.”

2 THE TRICOLOUR/THE PLOUGH AND THE STARS

Some of the starker visual moments of *The Plough and the Stars* revolve around flags, those cloth symbols of nation and ideology. The flags have provided no end of trouble for this production, which is using cloth backdrops as the basis of an abstracted set design, but which is also being confronted with the complexities of historical accuracy (or rather inaccuracy) in the original play.

Meanwhile, the Plough and Stars flag, the flag of the Irish Citizen Army, was the subject of some debate, as different websites offered different colour schemes, some more suited to the aesthetic of director Wayne Jordan's production than the brassy green and yellow of the original. To compromise, the flag has been distressed and faded by Murphy, who also made the tricolour from scratch.

“I used calico to give it the homemade feel it would have had back then, and washed it out and distressed it. Broken down: that’s what we call it when we have to make something that needs to look old!”

3 MOLLSER’S COFFIN

At the end of Act Three, the young Mollser dies of consumption and her coffin provides a visual centrepiece to the end of the play.

“We’ve loads of coffins, a whole selection in Finglas,” Molloy says. “But for this production, we ended up making two new ones. The [production team] wanted something very specific at the start, so I made that, but really it looked too much like a coffin when it would have been more like a rectangular box they would have made themselves from scrap wood, so I did that too.”

The cobbled-together coffin, made from leftover floorboards by Molloy in “a couple of hours”, is the one they will use on stage.

“But we played a trick with it,” Murphy says. “A real cheat. The actress playing Mollser is absolutely tiny but even she wouldn’t fit into it, it is so small.” Mollser’s death is the symbol of the sacrifice of humanity for revolution in the play. “So we made it smaller to increase the pathos.”

4 MRS GOGAN’S PRAM

The pram being used for the looting in Act Three is one of the oldest props at the Abbey. An original Victorian pram, it was used in the very first production of the play and every production since. Over 100 years old, it is in a delicate state; “one of the wheels is just taped on at this stage”, Murphy says. It was also badly damaged in the fire of 1951, so that while the frame of the pram is original, its casing isn’t. With its delicate frame and unique wooden handles it is totally authentic, and has been especially reserved over the years for *The Plough and the Stars*.

Murphy is a bit nervous about its performance in this new production, as it becomes the subject of a tug-of-war between Bessie Burgess and Mrs Gogan. The actors are using a different one in rehearsal because “the pram is really on its last legs”.

It will probably retire soon, but the Abbey team wouldn’t dream of getting rid of it. “It will come up to the archive,” Delaney insists, in anticipation of another treasure to add to her trove.

5 BESSIE BURGESS’ SHAWL

For many years at the Abbey, the figure of Bessie Burgess – her face “hardened by toil” and “coarsened by drink” – was defined by the shawl that she wore; a shawl that has been in the Abbey’s costume department since the 1920s.

It is one of a pair of Traveller blankets, striking woven wool blankets that were given to Traveller brides on their wedding day and which were used by Traveller women throughout their life for a variety of purposes.

The first visual evidence of the shawl comes from a production of *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1925 and it has been used in many Synge productions over the years, as well as in every production of *The Plough and the Stars*.

There is a picture of Siobhan McKenna, coddled by the shawl, haggling over the pram, in the 1976 production of the play. “The audience won’t know that, but these sorts of histories really do help the actors. It gives them a sense of connection and authenticity,” Murphy says. It summons the ghosts of their forebears to the stage with them as inspiration.

6 THE ORIGINAL PROMPT SCRIPT

Not quite a prop, but a vital material artefact for this production of the play, is the original prompt script for *The Plough and the Stars*, which was discovered by Delaney at the back of a filing cabinet.

It was rescued from the stage on the night of the Abbey fire in 1951 and is singed at the edges, while some of the pages are charred.

The typed script is still legible, however, but the most interesting text is the layered handwriting of O’Casey himself, a variety of production crew, and actors passing by the stage manager’s table, where the script would have sat.

Some of the notes suggest that changes were being made all the time during rehearsals, and some of the changes are dramatic enough to change the entire interpretation of the play.

Wayne Jordan and the production crew for this most recent production have been consulting it throughout this rehearsal period too, to sort out “loads of practical conundrums”, as Delaney says.

“You wouldn’t believe how important finding something like this is to understanding the play.”