

Sean O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie* is a classic whose provocative subject matter — Irishmen fighting for the crown — and huge artistic demands mean it is rarely staged. Now, more than ever, its time has come, says Mick Heaney



In 1990, when he was directing *The Silver Tassie* at the Abbey theatre, Patrick Mason wanted to end his production with a symbolic flourish to unify the play's diverse strands. It was not an easy task, as Sean O'Casey's ambitious drama was full of clashing styles and sweeping themes. Eventually, Mason hit on a way to tie together *The Silver Tas-*

sie's impassioned antiwar message and audacious theatricality.

For the closing scene, when the play's maimed war veteran hero has lost his sweetheart to his best friend at a supposedly celebratory dance, Mason marked the new couple's entrance to the ballroom with an on-stage shower of poppies. As emblems of remembrance for fallen British soldiers, poppies seemed appropriate, chiming with the grim expressionism of the play. Not everyone in the Abbey audience agreed, though.

"I had people on their feet, shouting, 'This is a disgrace!'" says Mason. "Now, this was 1990 and you'd think things had improved, so it was a little surprising. It might just have been a bad night, but it happened, which is a tribute to the power of the play." *

That *The Silver Tassie* could still evoke such reactions only 20 years ago may be a testament to its enduring impact, but it also underlines the play's ambiguous status in the Irish canon. O'Casey's impassioned, innovative drama about Irishmen fighting for the British Army in the first world war was the subject of controversy in Ireland even before it was staged and its subject matter remained out of step with the national self-image for years afterwards.

The play has never achieved the same popularity as O'Casey's famed trilogy of Dublin dramas, not least because it is so rarely seen: Mason's version was the last big staging in Ireland for 20 years.

Given this, the forthcoming Druid production of the drama, directed by Garry Hynes, is an intriguing prospect. In the past, she has brought a fresh perspective to classic works by Irish playwrights, such as her JM Synge revival project of 2005. *The Silver Tassie*, which opens in Galway's Town Hall theatre on August 23, offers the director the chance to present the play to a contemporary Irish audience more attuned to O'Casey's pluralistic attitudes.

It is a risky undertaking. If the drama's subject matter no longer seems so loaded, its narrative sprawl, heightened expressionism and sheer scale are still daunting.

"It presents particular challenges, but good writing always

does," says Hynes. "Because of its size, it's not produced very often, so there's a false perception of it as the runt of O'Casey's work, before he went entirely mad. It's one of those plays that's a bit more famous by name than by being seen."

From the beginning, the play's contentious origins contributed to its mythical aura. When O'Casey began work on *The Silver Tassie*, he was one of the most lauded playwrights of his era. Born in 1880 to a Dublin Protestant working-class family, he first tasted success with *The Shadow of a Gunman*, which opened at the Abbey in 1923. His next two plays, *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars*, also staged by the Abbey, enhanced his reputation internationally. By

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In snubbing the daring ambition of O'Casey, the Abbey forfeited its heritage of artistic dissent when it was sorely needed



Cup winner: Gerald Finley as Harry Heegan in The English National Opera's staging of the play by O'Casey, inset left; below left, Sam McElroy and Geraldine Cassidy in Opera Ireland's production in 2001

the time he moved to London in 1926, the outraged reaction of Dublin audiences to the sexual openness and political disillusionment of *The Plough and the Stars* had boosted his creative self-confidence. The *Silver Tassie* saw O'Casey looking beyond the world of Irish drama for inspiration. Instead, he ended up severing his connection with the Irish theatre that had nurtured him, with unfortunate results for both parties.

The *Silver Tassie* opens in the home of Harry Heegan, an accomplished footballer, who has joined up to fight in France alongside his best friend, Barney Bagnol, leaving behind his earthy family and his sweetheart, Jessie Taite.

As O'Casey chronicled Harry's transformation from heroic athlete to redundant invalid, he abandoned the salty realism of his early plays and embraced the expressionist style of European playwrights such as August Strindberg.

Yet when the play was submitted to the Abbey, it was rejected by WB Yeats, the theatre's co-founder, on the grounds O'Casey had no direct experience of the trenches. Furious at the snub, O'Casey instead premiered the play at the Apollo theatre in London.

The *Silver Tassie* proved a tipping point for O'Casey. Though he continued to write up until his death in 1964, he never repeated the critical acclaim or commercial success he enjoyed with the Dublin trilogy.

Yet by rejecting *The Silver Tassie*, the Abbey also hastened its own decline. Increasingly, the theatre looked to safely populist works of comedy or melodrama to attract audiences, in keeping with the insularity of post-independence

Ireland. In snubbing the daring ambition of O'Casey, the Abbey forfeited its heritage of artistic dissent when it was sorely needed.

Meanwhile, *The Silver Tassie* was, in its own way, more subversive than the Dublin trilogy. The play makes no reference to the nationalist tensions that simmered and then boiled over in Ireland during the war years. For the playwright's characters, fighting for the crown presents no moral dilemma – something that went against the narrative of the newly independent state. In his approach, O'Casey was implicitly indicting the assertive Catholic ethos of the Free State.

The play was eventually staged at the Abbey in 1935, but has only been performed at the national theatre three times since. The dearth of productions is not just due to offended national pieties, however. The play's abrupt narrative shifts and large cast of characters make it hard to get right.

Significantly, the best received production of *The Silver Tassie* in the past decade was Mark-Anthony Turnage's opera version, staged by the English National Opera in 2000 and directed by Mason for Opera Ireland the following year.

Druid's touring version boasts 19 players but Hynes admits that doing justice to O'Casey's epic vision isn't easy. "It's a particularly huge challenge for this company at this time," she says. "It's a very big play – it needs major resources, which we don't have, but in trying to work it out, it's fascinating."

"It speaks more and more to us, and I think this is a good moment for it," says Mason. "And plays do have their time. You can have these sleepers that are in a strange way overtaken by events only to come back. Then you can say, 'My God, he was talking about this 80 years ago'. So it's a tremendous play – any flaws are those of a great theatre imagination breaking the boundaries of his day. And if we're playing catch-up, that's great." □

The Silver Tassie, Town Hall, Galway, Aug 23-Sept 7, then touring