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How Cathleen Became Mrs Monihan: Sara Allgood's 'Grave Acting' and Irish Female Performance

Sara Allgood was an integral member of the Abbey Theatre from its opening in December 1904, yet her presence in its histories or in the growing national theatre movement of the time tends to be rather peripheral. Drawing on archival research in the Berg Collection and the Abbey Theatre Archives, Elizabeth Brewer Redwine argues here for the centrality of Allgood in the experiments of William Butler Yeats and Lady Gregory, and reveals the complicated class and religious fissures that surrounded the performance of Irish female identity in which Allgood was embroiled. By tracing her own trajectory, Redwine also challenges the dominant narratives of the Abbey Theatre that present it as distinct from earlier nationalist theatre movements, exploring the impact of the tableaux of the all-female street theatre group on the images of women presented on the Abbey stage. Further, she draws important connections between Allgood's work on the stage and her later work in Hollywood film, showing how she challenged stereotypes consistently to present a new kind of Irish female performance. Elizabeth Brewer Redwine lectures in the English Department at Seton Hall University, New Jersey, and is the co-editor with Amrita Ghosh of the forthcoming *Tagore and Yeats: a Postcolonial Re-Envisioning*. Her current research project, titled *Written for Her to Act: Female Performance and Collaboration*, examines Yeats's and Synge's collaborations with actresses at the Abbey Theatre.

Key terms: Yeats, Abbey Theatre, tableaux, street theatre, Inghinidhe na hÉireann.

IN 1909, a few months after J. M. Synge's death of Hodgkin's Lymphoma, William Butler Yeats asked Sara Allgood to perform the final lines of *Riders to the Sea* that she had made famous:

Michael has a clean burial in the far North, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied.¹

This small, private graveside performance is significant, showing Yeats's need for the performance of a particular form of Irishness at key moments in his life – female, 'authentic', and distinct from his own middle-class Protestant upbringing.

Synge's death reinforced to Yeats his own embattled position at the Abbey Theatre. As his friend and supporter John Quinn noted, he 'has made a great many enemies among the younger writers in Dublin'; and, in May

1909, Susan Mitchell attacked his dramatic work publicly in the pages of *Sinn Féin*.² The loss of Synge, compounded by the daily infighting at the Abbey, resulted in a sense of extreme loneliness and disillusionment. Yeats was also isolated from his countrymen, who he believed betrayed Synge by their riotous reaction to *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1907.³ According to his father, he believed that Synge 'died of Ireland', figuring the nation as a disease to die 'of' rather than an ideal to die 'for'.⁴

Yet Yeats chose a steadying female performance to express his isolation, an embodiment of stillness that Allgood had perfected both in her work with nationalist street theatre groups and in her many performances on the Abbey stage since its opening in 1904. This example suggests that, although treated as tangential in much scholarship, Allgood was central to the national theatre movement in Ireland. The language of her signature lines from *Riders to the Sea* verbal-



Portrait of Sara Allgood in 1938 by Carl Van Vechten.
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izes the acceptance and stillness that came out of the dramatic movements that preceded the Abbey, while the moment at Synge's grave demonstrates how her performance of Irish femininity presented an idea of the motionless in the face of tragedy.

Allgood only appears peripherally in the numerous histories of the literary and dramatic scene in Ireland at the turn of the last century. Her presence is limited to examinations of particular directors or the development of well-known plays, or as one of a group of actors dealing with changes in the theatre, and her role as a central yet critical interpreter of key roles lacks serious attention.

A close reading of her embattled position as a Catholic woman from a working-class background challenging stereotypical roles is absent in both current theatre criticism and Irish studies scholarship. Mary Trotter's work to broaden the scope of the Irish dramatic movement, for example, barely mentions Allgood, while *Hollywood Irish*, Adrian Frazier's account of the Abbey alumni in Hollywood, fails to examine the specific links between

Allgood's Dublin performance history and her work in film.⁵

By the same token, most histories of the Abbey begin with the Irish National Theatre Society (INTS) that became the Abbey, thus ignoring the all-female street theatre groups that provided the INTS directors, Yeats and Lady Gregory, with the women who performed – and, in some cases, revised – seminal roles in the Irish theatre. In its 2003 exhibition of Carl Van Vechten's photographs, the Yale University Library stated that Allgood 'began her acting career as a member of the Abbey Theatre in 1904', repeating the story that ignores her involvement with *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* (Daughters of Ireland) in the years leading up to the Abbey.⁶

Building on the research of Trotter, Frazier, and others, in this article I want to explore the relation between Allgood's performances with *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* and at the Abbey Theatre and her later work in film, and extend the accepted conclusion that Allgood's performances in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s were born out of the 'complex web of collaborations that built up the Abbey Theatre' to show the influence of *Inghinidhe's* patriotic tableaux and magic lantern shows in Dublin in the early 1900s.⁷ I thus argue for a link between nationalist theatre in early twentieth-century Ireland and American cinema.

A Catholic, working-class girl from a large Dublin family, Allgood decoded female 'Irishness' to audiences both at the Abbey Theatre and in Hollywood at historically fraught moments, questioning what it meant to be a working-class woman of Irish ethnicity. She translated the lamenting cottage mothers she perfected on the Abbey stage into Irish servants in her American films, bringing depth to otherwise two-dimensional characters.

Allgood's family background is important, since it informed her roles, performance style, and the audience's reception of her work. Allgood and her sister, the actress Maire O'Neill (originally Molly Allgood), brought the gestures and speech of their maternal grandmother into their peasant roles at the Abbey. Synge, always searching



Photograph from the 1906 production of *Riders to the Sea*, featuring from left to right Annie Allgood, Sara Allgood and Máire O'Neill (Molly Allgood). Abbey Theatre Archive.

for female authenticity in his own plays, mined these memories of the Allgood sisters.⁸ Like Yeats, he depended on them to express a version of female Irishness that was different, alluring, and previously inaccessible to him.

The Allgoods' father, George Allgood, hoped to raise his children as Protestants, while their mother brought them up Catholic in secret, necessitating a certain amount of role playing that perhaps encouraged an early interest in the theatre. Many of the other seven Allgood children became involved in the Abbey Theatre as stage hands and costumers, with Sara noting comically that Molly changed her name because 'otherwise the whole damn family would be in the programme'.⁹ A photograph in the Abbey Theatre archive dated 2 February 1906 shows the little-known Annie Allgood in a *Riders to the Sea* tableau alongside Molly and Sara, creating an onstage family that audience members would have known reflected an actual family.

This background, along with Allgood's short and stout body type, made her indis-

pensable to the Abbey in playing mothers, but limited the roles that its Protestant, upper-class directors offered her and thus her ability to break out of this stereotype. It also put her and her sister in a position that contrasted sharply with those of Yeats, Gregory, and Synge.

Allgood's Beginnings with Inghinidhe

When Allgood first joined the Abbey in 1904, she was described to the playwright Padraig Colum as 'someone out of Inni', referring to Inghinidhe na hÉireann.¹⁰ According to Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, the actress and activist who moved from Inghinidhe to the Abbey with Allgood, the women of Inghinidhe na hÉireann used tableaux to show 'a scene from some period in Irish history or illustrate some legend'.¹¹ Allgood's beginning in Inni is significant for two reasons: one, she began acting in an all-female political group; and two, her first exposure to theatre was in nationalist tableaux.

Inghinidhe members, led by Yeats's unattainable muse Maud Gonne, started a

women's nationalist group, announcing their goals in the *United Irishman* on 13 October 1900. Raised in the milieu of imported English melodramas and Punch and Judy shows that cast the Irish as subhuman figures of fun, the group hoped to 'combat in every way English influence' and counter those English stereotypes with 'the study of Gaelic, of Irish literature, music, and art, especially among the young'.¹² One of the most effective ways of revising Irish self-perception was through the performance of tableaux dramatizing moments of Irish myth and history on busy Dublin street corners. According to Tanya Dean, the theatre

was used by notable groups like the Irish Literary Theatre and Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Ireland) as a prime battleground to reassert national authority over depictions of the 'real' Ireland and the Irish, and to offer an alternative to the (mis)representations of Irishness emanating from a colonial force.¹³

Dean's use of 'real' is important here. In search of authenticity, the Abbey directors used Allgood to display maternal Irishness, as did the Hollywood casting agents of the 1940s, who usually cast her in the role of the domestic servant. Her interpretations of roles both in the theatre and in film forced audiences to consider these two-dimensional figures as more complex, while she also tried to challenge the stereotype and play female roles that lived outside the confines of the cottage drama.

The early street performances thus provide an important link between her work on the stage and her anti-colonial and feminist activity. Another legacy of the early tableaux was Allgood's tendency towards considered stasis in performance, which developed into the 'Abbey stare' and also contributed to Yeats's vision of masked drama.¹⁴

Catherine Morris notes that *tableaux vivants* gained currency in the Dublin street performances of Inghinidhe na hÉireann and were used as a form of female political protest against colonial repressions:

With its roots in English and French state censorship of spoken language in theatre, the voiceless form of *tableau vivant* also proved, because of the

suppression of Irish, to have a special potency in the colonial (and immediately post-colonial) context of Ireland.¹⁵

Those tableaux continued to be used in such a way – female Republican hunger strikers used *tableaux vivants* in Kilmainam Jail in 1923. As noted below, Allgood's performance in Gregory's *The Old Woman Remembers*, also in 1923, shows the continued links between Irish Republican visions of nation on the stage and off. The very figures of Ireland as a poor old woman, or 'Shan Van Vocht', central to Allgood's career, hark back to a ballad of the failed rising of 1798, so playing an old woman on an Irish stage in the early twentieth century was itself a political act.

Maria Tymoczko traces the image from Bardic storytelling through ballads of the failed rising of 1798 and James Clarence Mangan's early nineteenth-century poetic versions of an old woman as a code for Mother Ireland asking for the sacrifice of the young, expendable male.¹⁶

Inghinidhe's public tableaux presented visions of Ireland as an idealized woman and dramatized women's roles in Irish mythology. The group took the tableau out of upper-class drawing rooms and on to the Irish street with a diverse group of women spanning the class structures of early twentieth-century Dublin. Indeed, Allgood's socio-economic position was not unusual in Inghinidhe. Led by the aristocratic, Protestant Gonne and the middle-class Alice Milligan, the group was a mixture of women from different faiths and social classes. Founding member Helen Molony recollected:

Now there were some young girls in Dublin, chiefly members of the Irish classes of Celtic Literary Society. . . . They were (with one exception) all working girls. They had not much gold and silver to give to Ireland. Only willing hearts, earnestness, and determination.¹⁷

Mary Trotter explains that Inghinidhe's all-female performance reinterpreted classic images of Irish womanhood and empowered the women performing.¹⁸ These female representations of Ireland in the street performances developed into major productions: the group sponsored the 1902 premiere of Yeats's



Photograph from the 1902 premiere of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* at the Abbey Theatre, featuring Sara Allgood (second from left) and Maud Goone (far right). Abbey Theatre Archive.

Cathleen Ni Houlihan, which starred Gonne in the title role. It is this history of performing patriotic and political tableaux that Allgood drew on years later to widen the film audience's perception of her film *Irishwomen*.

Yeats recalled the experience of seeing an Inghinidhe performance: 'I came away with my head on fire. I wanted to hear my own unfinished *Baillie's Strand*, to hear Greek tragedy spoken with a Dublin accent.'¹⁹ But what was it about this form of acting that excited Yeats and made him determined to bring the Allgoods to the Abbey? According to Trotter, he admired 'the gravity and simplicity and quietness' of the acting, and the fact that the actors

moved about very little, they often did no more than pose in some statuesque way and speak; and there were moments when it seemed as if some paintings upon a wall, some rhythmic procession along the walls of a temple had begun to move before me with a dim, magical life.²⁰

Padraig Colum similarly remembers seeing Allgood for the first time on the Abbey stage:

But what part had the new girl been given in *The King's Threshold*? Now she was on the platform reading her lines – she was one of the king's daughters coming to plead with the poet who had determined to die of hunger on the steps of the king's house. Suddenly she had taken on an extraordinary dignity.²¹

Frazier argues that the directors' insistence on stillness was a means of privileging their words at the expense of the actors.²² I would argue, however, that actors like Allgood brought this form of acting to the Abbey from the tableau movement and nurtured its emphasis on minimal movement in collaboration with the directors, the most successful being Yeats.

The actress May Craig claimed, 'I owe all the control of my emotions to Sara Allgood,' and recounts Allgood upbraiding her for over-acting: 'Have you ever felt grief? When you feel grief you turn to stone. You have no feelings.'²³ Allgood's 'dignity' struck Yeats and Colum, among others, when they first saw her on the Abbey stage, and the same steadiness brought supporting characters to the fore years later in Hollywood.

Cathleen Ni Houlihan

The Abbey Theatre minute books offer detailed accounts of the meetings between the directors and players of the Abbey and show the active role Allgood played in the company, attending nearly all the meetings for the 1904–05 season. Despite upsetting Abbey benefactor Annie Horniman with a performed reading in support of women's

suffrage that nearly cost Allgood her job, she soon became a key player performing important characters. She was given major roles in the three one-act 'Irish Plays' that opened the Abbey Theatre in December 1904, playing one of the kings in Yeats's verse play *On Baille's Strand*, Mrs Fallow in Gregory's *Spreading the News*, and Bridget Gillane – the mother – in Yeats and Gregory's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*.

Although she was originally cast as the mother, Allgood hoped for years to play the title character in *Cathleen*. In the play, Bridget Gillane loses her son to the elderly Cathleen, as a personification of Ireland, who comes to the cottage door to ask for a young man's sacrifice. The setting is Kinsale in 1798 and Ireland is here asking for sons to give themselves to the rebellion. The young man follows her out to his mother's and fiancée's dismay.²⁴ Cathleen incants: 'Many that are red-cheeked now will be pale-cheeked,' and, in a vampiric twist, the old woman transforms into a young beauty with 'the walk of a queen'.²⁵

While Lady Gregory famously claimed in 1919 that all that was needed to perform *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was a 'hag and a voice', Allgood explains her own political interpretation of the role, which she took over in 1906.²⁶ She remembers 'I fill myself with joy', celebrating sacrifice and rebirth.²⁷ She insisted that in her reading of the play, Cathleen's seduction of Irish youth to fight for Ireland was a joyous story, and she played the role as a celebration. In *Memories*, Allgood's unpublished autobiography, she claims, 'Kathleen looks to the future,' thus breaking the figure out of the cycle of violent sacrifice.²⁸

Although Yeats and Gregory wrote *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, the play was originally staged by Inghinidhe na hÉireann, as noted above, and Allgood clearly felt years later that she had the right to her own interpretation of the role. The story of these texts, then, goes beyond the collaborative writing, and should include the interpretations of the roles.

I single out *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* because, as Cathleen, Allgood was able to play a part that often eluded her. Predominantly cast as

the mother in cottage plays, Allgood writes that she enjoyed playing Cathleen because, with the lines in verse, the role brought her away from her usual folk parts and peasant dialogue. She recalls her happiness when she was given the part: 'I had wanted it for years; I got it.'²⁹

In Yeats and Gregory's play, Allgood inserted herself not only into a dramatic history of collaboration, but also into the story of 'the poor old woman', revised over the years since the figure's bardic origins. Her trademark stillness created on the stage the 'intensity of trance' that Yeats hoped for in order to transform an audience's perception of Ireland as a woman. It also brought to the stage an expression of human emotion

through ideal form, a symbolism handled by the generations, a mask from whose eyes the disembodied looks, a style that remembers many masters, that it may escape contemporary suggestion. . . . In the supreme moment of tragic art there comes upon one that strange sensation as though the hair on one's head stood up.³⁰

Yeats hoped for acting that would lead the audience to this state, which Marjorie Howes describes as 'transporting [the audience] to an alternative psychic realm'.³¹ Having already used tableaux to bring Dubliners to a new understanding of their own history, Allgood strove to use stillness in seminal roles like *Cathleen* to achieve this transportation on the stage. In this way, her career maps an actress's attempt to broaden directors' and audiences' interpretations of type as she fought for larger roles and brought elements of tableaux to stock characters.

Allgood's *Cathleen* revised the one made famous by Gonne, who, in Yeats's words, was 'the most beautiful woman in Ireland'. In the 1902 premiere, Gonne came up through the audience 'and her great height made *Cathleen* seem a divine being fallen into our mortal infirmity'.³² Writer Stephen Gwynn was in the audience on that first night and famously reported:

The effect of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* on me was that I went home asking myself if such plays should be produced unless one was prepared for people to go out and shoot and be shot. Yeats was not alone responsible; no doubt but that Lady Gregory had

helped him get the peasant speech so perfect. But above all Miss Gonne's impersonation had stirred the audience as I have never seen another audience stirred.³³

The impact of this performance reverberated through the years; volunteers for the Easter Rising in 1916, the doomed rebellion followed by executions of leaders and soldiers, recalled the production of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, and Gonne's performance in particular, as galvanizing them to action.

In 'The Man and the Echo', one of Yeats's last poems, he wrote the couplets:

I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers right.
Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?³⁴

The Irish poet Paul Muldoon (in *Meeting the British*, Faber, 1987) answered Yeats: 'Certainly not.' Muldoon was perhaps taking Yeats to task for attempting to take dubious credit for the Rising when the poet, during Easter Week 1916, was comfortably ensconced in an 'idyllic cottage in the Cotswolds' of his friend William Rothenstein.³⁵

Much was at stake, then, in performing Cathleen, and Allgood had worked hard to get the part. Her Cathleen had no 'great height', and she, not 'the most beautiful woman in Ireland', looked like many in the audience. Indeed, this Cathleen resembled the figures in the cottage with whom Allgood was associated by theatregoers. Rather than personifying an otherworldly, ethereal version of Mother Ireland, Allgood, bringing years of playing realistic mothers in peasant plays, asked a different kind of question in the doorway of the cottage. Performing the required sacrifice with 'joy', her Cathleen asked the young man to leave with a female version of Ireland that looked like one of his own, not the nation as a ghostly other.

'The Old Woman Remembers'

In something of a coda to her performance of Cathleen and her work in countless productions that envisioned Ireland as female, Allgood returned to the Abbey in 1923 to

perform Lady Gregory's long poem 'The Old Woman Remembers' as a monologue. Allgood and Gregory had had a close relationship since the actress first appeared on stage in 1904 as a girl of seventeen. Gregory had assured Allgood's mother that she would look after her like a daughter, and, class difference aside, she acted as a guardian, cautioning Allgood against flirtation and championing her as her favourite actress.³⁶

By 1923, Gregory and Allgood shared another bond. Gregory's son, Major Robert Gregory, was shot down over France in 1916, a death immortalized in Yeats's 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death', while Allgood lost both of her children and her husband to the Spanish influenza while on tour in Australia in 1918.³⁷

Gregory wrote 'The Old Woman Remembers' during the Irish War of Independence (1919–1921), and the performance in the years soon after the ceasefire featured Allgood recounting Irish history in the persona of the Shan Van Vocht, the poor old woman who embodies Ireland. Allgood played Cathleen Ni Houlihan in aged form, without the transformation into beauty and youth at the end.

The critic from *The Independent* noted the lack of 'declamatory gestures', suggesting Allgood deployed vestiges of her tableau training in a performance that recalled the street theatre of Ighinidhe. The old woman is still for much of the play, not walking up through the audience or asking for sacrifices on the doorstep, but quietly naming and lighting a candle for those who have given up their lives:

This is our rosary of praise
For some whose names are sung or said
Through seven hundred years of days
The silver beads upon the thread.³⁸

As a Protestant playwright, Lady Gregory cast the Catholic Allgood to perform this rosary, and the latter's performance without embroidered movement appealed to her. The recitation of the names of the dead echoes Yeats's 'Easter, 1916', another feminized account of honouring martyrs in the persona of the mother he has introduced:

I write it out in a verse –
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.³⁹

Although predicated on change, this act of naming recurs again and again, 'now and in time to be', in ballads, theatres, and street corners. Allgood's 1923 recital joins her voice to the chorus of women in Kilmainham Jail, who performed tableaux of resistance during their hunger strike in the same year.⁴⁰ All of Allgood's voice work with Yeats came into play in that 1923 performance, as did the stillness that she developed from her earliest performances with Inghinidhe na hÉireann.

The Dublin Magazine noted that Allgood's performance 'moved a packed audience profoundly'.⁴¹ Her Old Woman echoed to the audience Allgood's performances as Betty Gillane, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, and Maurya in *Riders to the Sea*, lamenting yet accepting the death of her sons and husband at the hands of the intractable sea. The central theme for all these old women is loss, and showing loss with motionless grief became Allgood's signature response in film as well.

Irish female characters were weak and emotional in the penny dreadfuls and melodramas of British nineteenth-century imports to Ireland. Inghinidhe na hÉireann sought to counter.⁴² Years later, working against an image of the immigrant, working-class woman in nativist 1940s America, Allgood's women lament through silent tableaux in film, often at thresholds and doorways in a bizarre echo of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*.

Prejudice at the Abbey

Before she became type cast as playing maids in Hollywood, Allgood had plenty of practice negotiating prejudice at the Abbey. Yeats's letters concerning her work show his difficulty in imagining a woman of Allgood's class and appearance as anything other than a serving woman or peasant. His complicated need for a certain kind of woman to 'spur [him] into song' resulted in his

penchant for importing willowy actresses of Anglo descent and built like Maud Gonne to play the leads in his verse plays.⁴³ His reaction to tall, aristocratic women like Gonne, in contrast to his problems imagining the shorter, heavier Allgood as anything other than a folk part, reveal what she was up against vying for certain kinds of roles at the Abbey.

Yeats spent years experimenting in his attempt to bring his heroic drama to the Abbey stage. One problem was his belief that the company was better at Gregory and Synge's folk plays because Catholic actresses like Allgood did not have 'sensitive bodies' and lacked the ability to realize legendary roles in his work.⁴⁴ He told Gregory that Catholic women lacked the 'passion' necessary to play roles that demanded 'emotional acting' or 'acting which arises out of the expression and definition of passion as distinguished from character'.⁴⁵

Imagining Florence Darragh, the well-known London actress, in the title role in *Deirdre* thus had a profound effect on Yeats's ability to draft the play: 'The moment I thought of her for Deirdre I began to write better . . . and ventured and discovered subtleties of emotion I have never attempted before.'⁴⁶

After a heated argument with Frank Fay, who wanted Allgood for the title role, Yeats insisted on Darragh as Deirdre and Allgood as the First Musician. To Yeats's surprise, however, Darragh failed to move the audience while Allgood carried the production. In the words of one reviewer, 'the music of Allgood's voice was some compensation for the total want of it in the lady who played the leading part'.⁴⁷ This complicated episode began to show Yeats he had underestimated Allgood's range.

Yeats's prejudice against Catholic, working-class actresses saw him also bring Florence Farr and Mrs Patrick Campbell in to play the leading female roles in his verse plays, causing resentment among the Abbey players.⁴⁸ However, Allgood's success and versatility in playing the First Musician, this time to Campbell's Deirdre, continued to surprise Yeats and saw her singled out by

critics not only in Dublin, but also in England, where the production toured in 1908.

Her performance again shifted the audience's focus to the part of the First Musician, and she continued to garner the most enthusiastic responses. *The Times* stated: 'Miss Sara Allgood, who appears in London too seldom, gave great significance and compelling charm to the figure of the singing woman.'⁴⁹ Another reviewer claimed that 'the simplicity and emotional sincerity of her performance further shows her merits as an actress in poetic drama'.⁵⁰

In a scene that theatregoer Joseph Holloway described as Allgood's 'Waterloo' at the Abbey, Yeats cast her sister as Deirdre in 1911 after seeing Molly Allgood in Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, a play that she helped Yeats to complete after Synge's death.⁵¹ Yeats was, at least, opening the roles to women beyond the type embodied by Darragh, Campbell, and Farr, all three of whom could have been Gonne's sisters. Likewise, Sara Allgood's tenacity led the wealthy and more powerful Yeats to choose her for his extensive vocal experiments.⁵²

Yeats and Allgood ended up collaborating successfully on many of his verse plays. Despite his initial concerns about women from her background, he found in Allgood an Abbey player who could collaborate with him and Mrs Patrick Campbell to develop this new art. He named her as one of only 'three people . . . who could chant or sing modern poetry'.⁵³ Allgood and Mrs Pat continued their friendship into old age in Hollywood.

Years after the productions of *Deirdre* and the vocal experiments, Yeats said that she had 'made whole masses of emotion possible which otherwise would have lain latent in the mind of the author'.⁵⁴ Seeing Allgood perform, then, helped him to compose his plays, even after his early resistance to her physical type and background. Through talent and force of will, she had made a success of the very plays that Yeats tried initially to keep out of her reach. Allgood learnt to teach audiences, directors, writers, and players with bigger names about the importance of serving-woman roles.

The Move to Hollywood

The last link in the chain that brings the early all-female nationalist tableau movement through the Abbey to American film is the necessary conclusion to this article. The names of Allgood's roles as a contract player for the studios in 1940s Hollywood illustrate the extent to which she was type cast. Some are described namelessly as 'Charwoman', 'Waitress', or 'Landlady', while other small roles include Mrs Brennan, Mrs Fogarty, Mrs Monahan, and Mrs Connor: the list goes on to more than fifty such roles.⁵⁵

While she also had a handful of larger roles, only John Ford's 1941 film *How Green Was My Valley* allowed her a major supporting role with plenty of dialogue.⁵⁶ In the majority of the fifty-four films in which she acted under contract, she played small parts such as someone working in a home, often as a form of class-marker and substitute-mother figure. As Vivien Leigh's mother in *That Hamilton Woman* (1941), for example, Allgood functions as a reminder that Leigh's character comes from a poor family.⁵⁷ Likewise, in *Cheaper by the Dozen* (1950), the all-American family is thrown into relief by Allgood's Irish maid.⁵⁸

In many of these parts, however, she does much with very little, and her few scenes provide the emotional ballast for the film. When, as the maid Bessie, she lets a young Jane Eyre leave in Robert Stevenson's 1941 film adaptation, one sees Maurya from *Riders to the Sea* in the still look of loss in her face.⁵⁹ The sadness she expresses with very little movement as the mother in *The Fabulous Dorseys* (1947) has its roots in years of playing grieving mothers at the Abbey.⁶⁰

Directors clearly recognized the power of this kind of acting, and the camera often lingers on her. While her approach can be jarring next to the different forms of film acting around her, the stillness forces the filmgoer to take notice and refuses to allow the small Irish servant roles to fall into a stereotype.

The 1946 horror film *The Spiral Staircase* shows Allgood's efforts to perform a role with the power and dignity she brought

from her years at the Abbey in the face of slurs against the working class. She plays Nurse Barker, whose job is to watch over Ethel Barrymore's Mrs Warren, a sickly elderly woman filled with hate and class prejudice. Barrymore's character reprimands Allgood's character – 'Don't touch me!' – as if her physicality and lower-class position were contagious.⁶¹

When the latter overhears the other servants in the house musing on her true gender she comes to the doorway of the kitchen and stands stock still with her trademark 'Abbey stare'. The effect is both to shame the speakers in the kitchen and also to heighten the tension in the film.

Allgood's bearing also brings strength to this stereotypical character that was built on years of nativist portrayals of Irish maids and nurses on film. M. Alison Kibler argues that the Irish servant was often played in vaudeville by men in drag, which contributes to the gender ambiguity of such characters in early North American film.⁶² It is also a descendant of what Trotter calls 'the Savage Celt' of British melodrama, a monstrous, gorilla-like source of fear and danger.⁶³

Ironically, Allgood's own career was an effort to combat such negative and stereotypical roles common to British melodrama, first with *Inghinidhe*, then at the Abbey. An aging Allgood, however, needed the money and the exposure of a film like *The Spiral Staircase*, which promised to be a hit. Further, she, again, manages to subvert the stereotype, where the subtlety of her own performance in concert with Barrymore's encourages audiences to sympathize with the beleaguered nurse and judge those who speak ill of her harshly.

Allgood came closest to realizing her dream of Hollywood fame in *How Green Was My Valley*. Her performance of Beth Morgan, the maternal centre of the film and the protagonist's mother, was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Supporting Actress. Much of the film involves the daily life of a Welsh mining family coping with changes in the industry and their way of life. In many ways, the story is a lament for a lost past and an acknowledgement of modernity.

The film's central moment, when the father of the family dies in a mining accident, is shown by focusing the camera on Allgood's face. She is absolutely motionless, silent, and staring as a mining shaft elevator slowly comes up empty, proving the death of her husband. Again, she is at a threshold awaiting news, framed in the doorway of the empty mineshaft.

The audience sees in her response to this loss her history in tableaux and her years of work at the Abbey to develop a particular way of acting in moments of extremity that 'suppressed all but essential movement'.⁶⁴ Instead of the histrionics typical of melodrama, her response is stillness. A surviving photograph of Allgood in *Riders to the Sea* – her head covered, staring ahead with the acceptance and intensity characteristic of her work at the Abbey – is nearly indistinguishable from her expression at this pivotal scene in *How Green Was My Valley*.⁶⁵

One of Allgood's last moments on film before her death is typical of her interpretation of supporting roles on film. In *Cheaper by the Dozen* Allgood plays the family maid, Mrs Monihan. Again, it is a small role without many scenes, and when she is on screen her character is limited to the kind, steady maid with only a few words of dialogue – she is there to prove the American status of the family by contrast. In the final moments of the film, the patriarch of the family dies suddenly, leaving his wife and twelve children. The death comes as a shock, and, in the midst of this rollicking family comedy, the film turns into a tragedy.

Allgood silently creates a tableau with the smallest child, a boy. The camera lingers on her holding the boy on the threshold of the home for a minute, comforting him in a classic tableau of mother and child. When the boy cries, 'My daddy's dead!', her understated acting saves the moment from all-out melodrama. Allgood died of heart failure in the year of the film's release. Colum remembered her in an article for the *New York Times*:

Integrity is a great word, but it seems a cold and distant word to use of Sara Allgood. Around this integrity of hers was geniality, playfulness, and the humour of a Dubliner that had no malice.⁶⁶

Of course, this tribute makes the seriousness of Allgood's work in re-envisioning Irish women anodyne – 'playfulness' is not a word to describe her unsettling stillness that so affected audience members who saw her in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, *The Old Woman Remembers*, and *How Green Was My Valley*.

In his 1923 acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature, Yeats praised the Allgood sisters:

And they came to us for patriotic reasons and acted from precisely the same impulse that had made them teach, and yet two of them proved players of genius: Miss Allgood and Miss Maire O'Neill. They were sisters, one all simplicity, her mind shaped by folk song and folk stories; the other sophisticated, lyrical, and subtle. I do not know what their thoughts were as that strange new power awoke within them, but I think they must have suffered from a bad conscience, a feeling that the old patriotic impulse had gone, that they had given themselves up to vanity or ambition. Yet I think it was that first misunderstanding of themselves that made their peculiar genius possible, for had they come to us with theatrical ambitions they would have imitated some well-known English player and sighed for well-known English plays.⁶⁷

A young woman raised in working-class Dublin, even with a grandmother from the country, would probably not have been immersed in 'folk song and folk stories'. Of course, Colum and Yeats reassessed Allgood's strengths for their own ends. Colum expressed nostalgia for a certain kind of Dubliner, whereas Yeats used Allgood as a link to an authentic folk Irishness that was far from her actual roots. He also misread her start in acting. It is unlikely that someone who had started with Gonne in Inghinidhe na hÉireann would look uncritically to English plays, although, in Yeats's reading she was saved from this fate by his theatre project.

Unfortunately, many critics have followed Yeats's lead, starting Allgood's career with the Abbey and ignoring her early years with Inghinidhe. In *Memories*, Allgood theorizes her own approach to collaborative theatre, proposing to focus not only on the directors and writers, but also on the 'cabbages and kings' that make up a successful theatre move-

ment.⁶⁸ Tracing the afterlife of her street theatre and Abbey career into her later film work may restore some neglected attention to a performer who developed the 'Abbey stare' for particular ends, revising established readings of both gender and nation.

Notes and References

1. Sara Allgood, *Memories*, typescript of unpublished autobiography, Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library.
2. R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats, a Life: the Apprentice Mage 1865–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 404–8.
3. At the premiere of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* at the Abbey Theatre on 26 January 1907, the violent reaction of the Dublin audience to the mention of 'shifts' and what many Dubliners saw to be Synge's 'libel . . . against Irish peasant girlhood' resulted in what came to be known as the 'Playboy Riots'. (*The Freeman's Journal*, 8 January 1907.) Sara Allgood and her sister Molly, who was also Synge's fiancée, performed the incendiary roles in that production.
4. Foster, *Yeats: a Life*, vol. 1, p. 404.
5. Mary Trotter, *Ireland's National Theaters: Political Performance and the Origins of the Irish Dramatic Movement* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001); Adrian Frazier, *Hollywood Irish: John Ford, Abbey Actors, and the Irish Revival in Hollywood* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2011).
6. Wall text, *Extravagant Crowd: Carl Van Vechten's Portraits of Women*, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven.
7. Trotter, *Ireland's National Theaters*, p. 133.
8. Ann Saddlemyer, ed., *Theatre Business: the Correspondence of the First Abbey Theatre Directors: William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, and J. M. Synge* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 1982), p. 40.
9. Allgood, *Memories*, p. 6.
10. Padraig Colum, 'Tribute to the Late Sara Allgood', *New York Times*, 24 September 1950.
11. Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, *The Splendid Years* (Dublin: Duffy, 1955), p. 168.
12. Maria Luddy, *Women in Ireland: 1800–1918: a Documentary History* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), p. 3.
13. Tanya Dean, 'Staging Hibernia: Female Allegories of Ireland', in 'Cathleen Ní Houlihan and Dawn', *Theatre History Studies*, XXXI, No. 1 (2014), p. 71.
14. Adrian Frazier describes the acting style that became known as the 'Abbey stare' as 'that look into the far distance in which a character saw the future or the meaning of things or the spirits of the next world' (Frazier, *Hollywood Irish*, p. 196). Yeats became increasingly interested in masked drama and Japanese Noh traditions. In his introduction to *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*, he reveals the class basis of his fascination with masks, lauding Japanese Noh for a connection with an ancient Ireland, far from the 'common people', and linked to 'all that high breeding of poetical style where there is . . . nothing crude, no breath of parvenu or journalist' (Ezra Pound, *Certain Noble Plays of Japan: from the Manuscripts of Ernest Fenollosa*, Dundrum: Cuala Press, 1916), p. ix. In fact, it was Allgood's performance style

that reflected Yeats's ideas of tragic joy (distance in the face of tragedy) and his theories of the mask, while his writing about theatre suggests a response to her performances in the development of his theories.

15. Catherine Morris, *Alice Milligan and the Irish Cultural Revival* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012), p. 135.

16. Maria Tymoczko, *The Irish Ulysses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 104.

17. Helena Moloney quoted in Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism* (Dublin: Pluto Press, 1989), p. 69. While working with Inghinidhe, Allgood had a day job in a furniture shop to help support her now widowed mother and seven younger siblings. She continued to support her family financially throughout her career.

18. Trotter, *Ireland's National Theatres*, p. 92

19. W. B. Yeats, quoted in Ronald Schuchard, *The Last Minstrels: Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 172.

20. Trotter, *Ireland's National Theatres*, p. 36.

21. Padraig Colum, 'Tribute'.

22. Adrian Frazier, *Behind the Scenes: Yeats, Horniman, and the Struggle for the Abbey Theatre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 41.

23. Craig, quoted in E. H. Mikhail, *W. B. Yeats, Interviews and Recollections* (London: Macmillan; New York: Barnes and Noble, 1977), p. 178.

24. William Butler Yeats, *Plays in Prose and Verse: Written for an Irish Theatre and Generally with the Help of a Friend* (London: Macmillan, 1922), p. 88.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

26. Lady Isabella Augusta Gregory, *Lady Gregory's Journals, Volume One*, ed. Daniel J. Murphy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 56. The online Abbey Archive lists five productions for Sara Allgood as Bridget Gillane between 1904 and 1905. In 1906, she began playing Cathleen and performed this part in nine different productions in the next two years. For more information and a chronological list of her Abbey Theatre roles see <www.abbeytheatre.ie/archives/person_detail/10019>.

27. Allgood, *Memories*, p. 10.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

30. William Butler Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 245.

31. Marjorie Howes, *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 92.

32. Yeats, *The Collected Poems*, p. 233.

33. Stephen Gwynn, quoted in Alexander Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968), p. 51.

34. Marjorie Perloff, "'Easter 1916': Yeats's World War I Poem', in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 52.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Mary Lou Kohfeldt Stevenson, *Lady Gregory: the Woman Behind the Irish Renaissance* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), p.183.

37. Frazier, *Hollywood Irish*, p. 105. The absence of

any mention of these deaths in her letters or her autobiographical writing is noticeable.

38. Lady Isabella Augusta Gregory, 'An Old Woman Remembers', *The New Republic*, 20 February 1924, p. 339.

39. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 228–30.

40. Morris, *Alice Milligan*, p. 135.

41. Quoted in Robert Goode Hogan and Richard Burnham, *The Years of O'Casey, 1921–1926: a Documentary History* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992), p. 154. The author of the review was 'Pierrot', the anonymous pen name for Seumas O'Sullivan, or James Sullivan Starkey, founder and editor of *The Dublin Magazine*, and contemporary of Yeats and James Joyce.

42. Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, p. 40.

43. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 359.

44. Saddlemyer, *Theatre Business*, p. 67.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *Modern Irish Drama: a Documentary History, Vol. 3, The Abbey Theatre: the Years of Synge 1905–1909* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1978), p. 76.

47. O Cobaine, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 65.

48. For a thorough examination of how class and salaries played out at the Abbey Theatre, see Frazier's *Behind the Scenes*.

49. *The Times*, quoted in Schuchard, *The Last Minstrels*, p. 253.

50. *Ibid.*

51. Holloway, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 285.

52. Hogan and Kilroy, *Modern Irish Drama*, p. 68.

53. W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Plays* (London: Macmillan, 1934), p. 40.

54. Quoted in Frazier, *Hollywood Irish*, p. 154.

55. 'Sara Allgood', at the *Internet Movie Database*: <www.imdb.com/name/nm0021329>.

56. John Ford, dir., *How Green Was My Valley* (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox, 1941).

57. Alexander Korda, dir., *That Hamilton Woman* (Beverly Hills: United Artists, 1941).

58. Walter Lang, dir., *Cheaper by the Dozen* (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox, 1950).

59. Robert Stevenson, dir., *Jane Eyre* (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox, 1943).

60. Alfred E. Green, dir., *The Fabulous Dorseys* (Beverly Hills: United Artists, 1947).

61. Robert Slodnak, dir., *The Spiral Staircase*, (New York: RKO Pictures, 1946).

62. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), p. 68.

63. Trotter, *Ireland's National Theatres*, p. 46.

64. W. G. Fay and Catherine Carswell, *The Fays of the Abbey Theatre* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1935), p. 105.

65. Wall text, *Extravagant Crowd: Carl Van Vechten's Portraits of Women*.

66. Padraig Colum, 'Tribute'.

67. W. B. Yeats, Nobel Lecture: 'The Irish Dramatic Movement', 15 December 1923 <www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1923/yeats-lecture.html>.

68. Allgood, *Memories*, p. 12.