

## **RE: SOURCES**

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**Edited by Angela Weaver**

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### **THE DUBLIN GATE THEATRE ARCHIVE AT NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY**

The state of theatre archives in Ireland was a major subject of the recent Irish Theatre History Conference (subtitled Archives, Historiography, Politics) held at the National University of Ireland, Galway, in November 2001. Many of the theatre-related collections in Ireland discussed at the conference, despite the best efforts of their curators, have historically lacked the resources to make materials fully accessible to scholars or to catalog their holdings comprehensively. This trend has changed in recent years, however, and new efforts in managing Irish theatre resources are planned. It seems an appropriate time to discuss one major Irish theatre collection that is both fully cataloged and readily accessible, although it is located at some distance from its original home.

The Dublin Gate Theatre Papers, 1928–1979, were purchased by the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections at Northwestern University in 1973. The collection contains a large body of materials originally collected by the Gate, widely considered one of the most important theatres in Ireland, second only to the Abbey. The home of modernism and cutting-edge design in what was otherwise a conservative country for theatre, the Gate is also known for developing the careers of Orson Welles, James Mason, Cyril Cusack, and other prominent actors. Hilton Edwards and his partner Micheál MacLíammóir founded the Dublin Gate in 1928. (Its name was, in part, homage to Peter Godfrey's Gate Theatre in London, although there was, ultimately, no substantial relationship between the theatres.) Edwards, an Englishman who had played the Old Vic before touring Ireland with Anew McMaster's Shakespeare company, was eager to expand his acting and singing career into one of producing contemporary theatre. MacLíammóir, an accomplished actor, skilled scene and costume designer, and budding playwright, was fascinated by Celtic

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culture. Despite his English birth and heritage, the man originally known as Alfred Willmore learned the Irish language so thoroughly he “passed” as an Irishman throughout his life. Edwards and MacLíammóir were life partners, as well as professional partners, and despite socially conservative Irish society, both were feted upon their deaths for having made major contributions to Irish culture.

Together, Edwards and MacLíammóir founded a theatre that was seen from the beginning as groundbreaking. Throughout the 1920s, the Abbey— Ireland’s only professional alternative to music-hall, cinema, and touring English productions—had been dominated by a repertory of realistic plays, a genre that, following the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, found favor in a nation consolidating an identity distinct from Britain’s. Realism, however, did not offer much opportunity for the cultivation of a modernist sensibility, as Sean O’Casey discovered when his attempt to abandon urban realism for a more expressionistic mode in *The Silver Tassie* was rejected by the Abbey Theatre. Artists and intellectuals eager to participate in more experimental, Continental movements in the theatre were at first restricted to amateur groups, like the Dublin Drama League, but by 1928 Edwards and MacLíammóir judged Dublin ready for a professional troupe that would showcase the best of modern world drama, presented in truly modern fashion.

The theatre’s initial production, *Peer Gynt*, reflected the founders high design standards and innovative production techniques. Despite the limitations of a tiny stage, rented from the Abbey, Edwards (as director and lighting designer) and MacLíammóir (as scene and costume designer) successfully conveyed the vast sweep of Ibsen’s play through the skilled manipulation of crowds and of minimalist, suggestive design elements. Denis Johnston’s *The Old Lady Says “No!”* was produced in 1929 and employed a stunning set design by Micheál MacLíammóir (Fig. 1), which presented a nightmare version of familiar Dublin scenes that thoroughly complemented the expressionist techniques employed by the playwright and provided an unsettling backdrop for the chanting and unison movements of Edwards’s actors. The production of this complex, satirical play, rejected by the Abbey, was the Gate’s most successful application of modernist staging methods to the tangled subject of Irish nationalism and culture, and its remarkable success secured the Gate Theatre’s place in history.

Despite early financial difficulties, the theatre soon found a permanent home in Dublin, thanks in part to the support of the Earl of Longford (who eventually set up his own producing organization, following creative disputes). The Gate Theatre became a cultural fixture in Ireland and the acknowledged alternative to the Abbey. A series of tours in Britain and throughout the world helped cement the theatre’s reputation. In particular, several productions of *Hamlet* (Fig. 2), including both Celtic-tinged and modern interpretations, helped to make names for MacLíammóir as an actor and Edwards as a producer-



**Figure 1.**

Set design by Micheál MacLíammóir for Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says "No!"* (1929). Courtesy of the McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

designer. Although plagued by financial difficulties throughout much of its existence and, thus, not always in full possession of the Gate Theatre building, the company known as Edwards–MacLíammóir Productions continued to present stimulating work until the deaths of MacLíammóir and Edwards (in 1978 and 1982, respectively). Perhaps most famous abroad in these later years were the one-man shows based on the lives of Oscar Wilde (Fig. 3) and William Butler Yeats, in which MacLíammóir toured internationally throughout the 1960s. The Gate company also staged the premiere of Brian Friel's groundbreaking play *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* in 1964 (one of several Friel premieres), and the highly regarded first Irish production of Peter Shaffer's *Equus* in 1977–1978. The Dublin Gate Theatre remains a successful enterprise today, under the direction of Michael Colgan, who has gained international renown for his productions of Beckett.

The archival collection at Northwestern contains a broad spectrum of theatrical materials, reflecting the producers' ongoing concern for preserving their own records. The most useful items include a series of sixty-nine press cuttings books compiled by agencies, containing newspaper clippings and programs from the time of the theatre's inception. (Two books are missing.) In addition to Gate reviews and publicity pieces, the books contain clippings

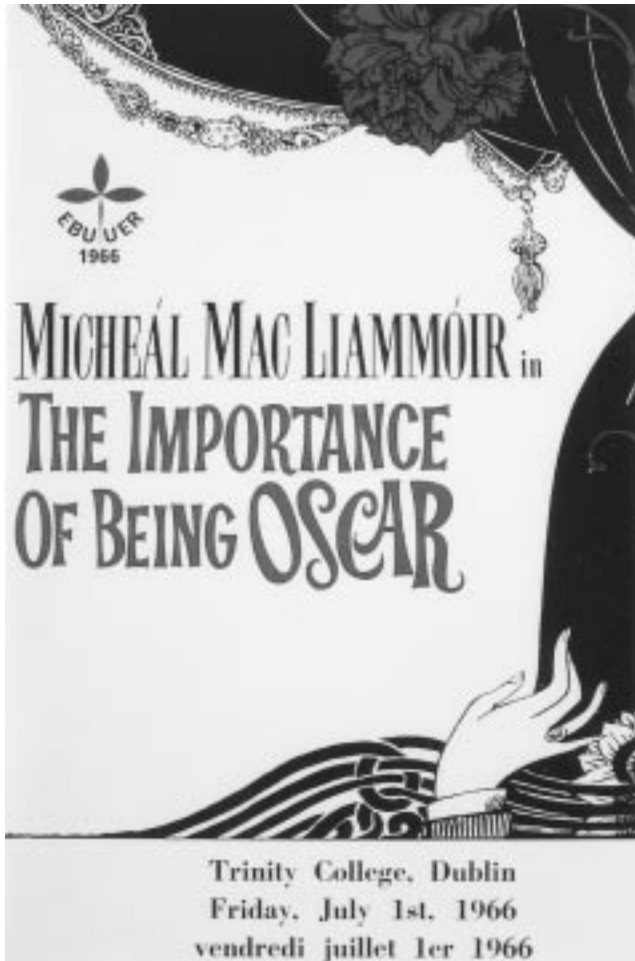


**Figure 2.**

*Hamlet* (n.d.), with Micheál MacLíammóir as Hamlet. Courtesy of the McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

relating to ancillary undertakings, such as MacLíammóir's work with Irish-language theatre companies in Galway and Dublin. The bulk of the collection is in 130 production boxes, which contain scripts for the theatre's productions, including marked-up actors' rehearsal scripts, prompt copies, and Hilton Edwards's production notebooks. The collection of bound books received a significant addition in the 1980s when the McCormick purchased Edwards's library of plays and fiction considered or used for production, many heavily annotated. Edwards's lighting plots fill three boxes, while several folders contain costume designs (Fig. 4), publicity posters, and other art pieces. Production photographs include shots of most shows from 1928 to 1970. There is a large collection of musical arrangements and orchestrations, since live music, both classical and original pieces, was frequently employed at the theatre. Production materials are listed by title. There are twenty-nine boxes of correspondence from 1952 to 1970, including business and personal letters. A manuscript collection includes drafts and proofs for many published works by Edwards and by MacLíammóir, including MacLíammóir's autobiographies and plays, books on theatre by both men, and one box of Edwards's writings during his time as the director of drama for Irish national radio.

Though the collection is large, not all types of items exist for every production. The papers have, however, been thoroughly cataloged (by



**Figure 3.**

Program for *The Importance of Being Oscar* (1966). Courtesy of the McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

Manuscript Assistant Ellen V. Howe, with Northwestern Special Collections Curator Russell Maylone), and the resulting guide is held in hard copy at the library. Plans are underway to make the collection-finding aid available through the library's Web site, [www.library.northwestern.edu](http://www.library.northwestern.edu). (It may be available by the time this issue of *Theatre Survey* is published.) The library's collection of books and other secondary sources about the Gate Theatre, as well as a number of sound recordings featuring the Gate company, can be found through the online library catalog. The library also has a number of items of potential interest to



**Figure 4.**

Costume sketch for Orson Welles as Chosroes in Padraic Colum's *Mogu of the Desert* (1931). Welles appeared in six productions at the Gate as a teenager. Courtesy of the McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

Irish theatre researchers, including several letters of Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, W. B. Yeats, and Lady Gregory, and a collection of newspaper articles about the Abbey Theatre and its tours in the United States.

Theatre and drama are one of Ireland's great claims to fame and have enjoyed world significance out of proportion to the country's small population.

The Dublin Gate Theatre Archive at Northwestern University contributes to the work of theatre historians at Irish universities, government archives, and theatres, from Dublin's Abbey to Belfast's Linenhall, in strengthening and linking Irish theatre resources. While its location may concern researchers in Ireland, the high quality of the Gate Theatre Archive's organization and maintenance in the McCormick Library make it a valuable resource for researchers everywhere.