

From Peasant to Queen: The Necessity of Realism in Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats's *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*

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Theatre

The collaboration of William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory in the writing of their 1902 play *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* has been painstakingly outlined and examined by numerous scholars of early Irish Drama.¹ Thanks to this scholarly work, sole authorship of the play is no longer credited solely to Yeats, and *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* must henceforth be considered a Yeats-Gregory collaboration. But as recently as 2010, The Abbey Theatre, Ireland's National Theatre, continued to market *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* as a play written solely by Yeats.² The two prior productions at the Abbey, one in 1990 and the other in 1984, also made no mention of Lady Augusta Gregory's contributions to the script in their programs or marketing materials.³ Both productions presented *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* as part of an evening of Yeats plays and both imposed a style on the early drama that was more appropriate for the later experimental plays of Yeats. Critics of these interpretations of *Kathleen*, as seen in press cuttings in the Abbey Theatre Archives, received these versions poorly.⁴ This paper will closely examine the 1984 production of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* presented by the Abbey Theatre using video, programs, and press cuttings from the Abbey Theatre Archives and will compare the production's success and effectiveness with that of early realistic productions of the play including the 1902 premiere. I will argue that the failure of the 1984 production lies in the director's decision to thematically and stylistically

¹ See James Pethica's *Collaborative One-Act Plays, 1901-1903* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), his "Our Kathleen" in *Yeats Annual No. 6* Ed. Warwick Gould (London: Macmillan, 1988), and Colm Toibin's *Lady Gregory's Toothbrush* (Madison: U of Wisconsin, 2002).

² *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* was part of the "Reading Yeats" series at the Peacock Theatre in 2010. Abbey Theatre website: www.abbeytheatre.ie/archives/production_detail/5083.

³ Abbey Theatre. *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*, 08 Aug 1990 [programme]. Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, 0813_MPG_01 and Abbey Theatre and *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, 12 Jun 1984 [programme]. Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, 2862_MPG_01.

⁴ Abbey Theatre. *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, 12 Jun 1984 [press cuttings]. Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, 2862_PC_0001.

link *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* with Yeats's later Noh Dramas, thereby viewing the play as a purely symbolist Yeats drama and ignoring the realistic elements of the play that belong to Gregory and are necessary to the play's success.

Throughout history *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* has been credited as W.B. Yeats's sole creation, and it is likely that the play was credited to him alone in its 1902 premiere. Joseph Holloway, a frequent attendee of Dublin Theatre who kept a diary during the early years of the Abbey Theatre and attended the 1902 premiere, calls the play "Mr. W.B. Yeats's one-act play."⁵ The piece was certainly marketed as Yeats's play alone in the 1904 program of the Abbey Theatre Opening.⁶ Later programs and reviews of the play in both Ireland and America mention only Yeats's name as author of the piece. Today, claims could be made that Yeats's name is included and Gregory's excluded due to name recognition or popularity, but at the turn of the twentieth century both figures were successful authors and prominent figures in Dublin society. Lady August Gregory co-founded the Abbey Theatre, Ireland's National Theatre, with Yeats and Edward Martin in 1904, an enterprise that first began as the Irish Literary Theatre (1901) and then became the Irish National Theatre Society (1904).⁷ It was at her house, Coole Park in county Galway, that much of the planning for a National Theatre was done and their statement created: "We propose to have performed in Dublin in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature."⁸ With plays such as *Spreading the News* and *The Rising of the Moon*, Gregory became a popular playwright at the Abbey with works filled with Nationalistic fervor and dialogue that sought to accurately present speech of the Irish people. In line with the Realism of the twentieth century that was so predominant at the time, Gregory presented real and sometimes everyday situations in order to show "the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland."⁹

Realism in theatre is generally understood as the representation of real life onstage whereas Symbolism is the search for deeper meaning through the use of Symbols. In *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* we see both of these motifs—a peasant family reminiscent of the other true to life peasants Gregory portrays in works such as *Spreading the News* and a strong symbol in the figure of the Old Woman or Kathleen who represents Ireland. In the character of Kathleen we see the early

⁵ Holloway, Joseph. *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre; a Selection from His Unpublished Journal, Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer*. Ed. Robert Goode Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1967),17.

⁶ See Figure A.

⁷ Gregory, Isabella Augusta Lady. *Our Irish Theatre*. (New York & London: Putnam, 1914.)

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

hints of Yeats's more experimental and symbolist dramas such as *At the Hawk's Well* where characters include "An Old Man," "A Young Man," and "The Guardian of the Well."¹⁰ The strength of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* lies in the symbolism of Yeats confronting the realism of Gregory, and it is only by establishing the natural peasant scene as something to be disturbed or disrupted by the symbolic Kathleen that the play's true effect can be realized. Omission of Lady Gregory's name from twenty-first-century programs does more harm today than in 1902, both because her co-authorship has been proven and because omitting her name allows directors to omit her style in favor of Yeats's, thus presenting a version of the play that goes against the intentions of both authors.

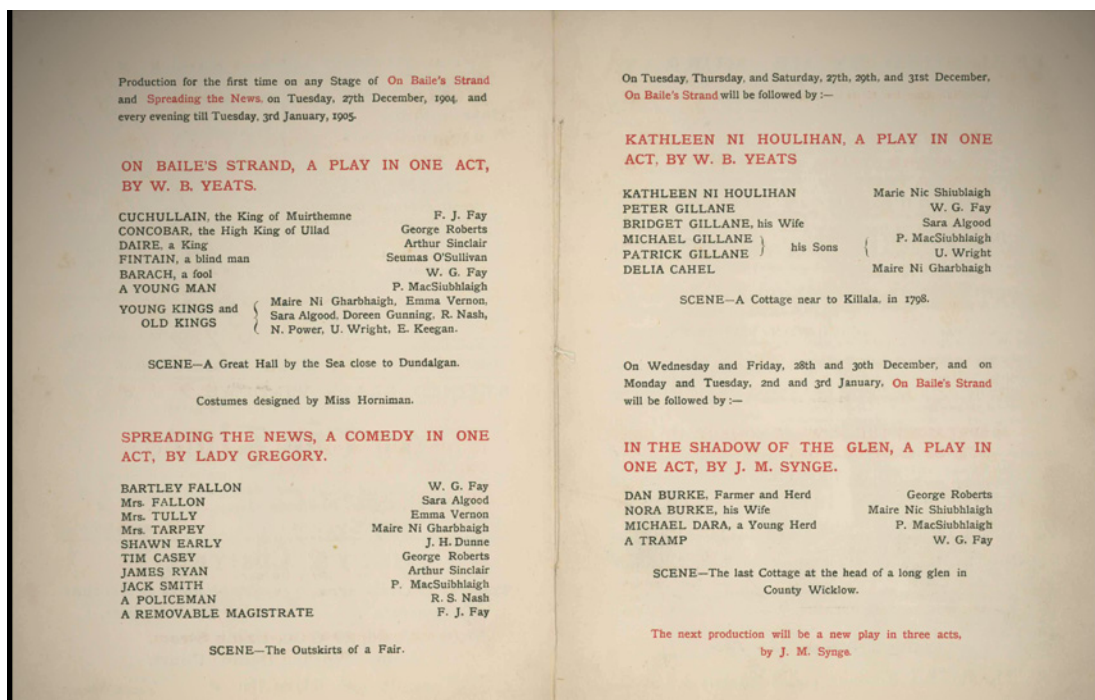


Figure A. Opening Night Program of the Abbey Theatre, 1904.

The Premiere

W. B. Yeats provides extensive notes and comments on *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* in the first edition of his *Plays in Prose and Verse*.¹¹ Numerous remarks speak to his desire for a realistic representation of life in *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*, chief among them his dedication to Lady Gregory: "I could not get down out of that high

¹⁰ Yeats, W. B. "At the Hawk's Well." *Modern and Contemporary Irish Drama: Backgrounds and Criticism*. Ed. John P. Harrington. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 20.

¹¹ Abbey Theatre. *Kathleen ni Houlihan*. 27 December 1904 [script]. Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, 10299_S_0001, 225.

window of dramatic verse, and in spite of all you had done for me I had not the country speech".¹² Here we see that Yeats was seeking a dialogue that mimicked the real "country speech" of Mayo. In the opening moments of the play Bridget says, "I suppose the boys must be having some sport of their own. Come over here, Peter, and look at Michael's wedding clothes".¹³ The family's preoccupations with money, clothes, the wedding, and even greyhound puppies are certainly a far cry from the poetic speech of the Old Woman/Kathleen who sings about men who have died and refuses the worldly possessions of food and money.

In addition to his desire for realistic peasant dialogue, Yeats advocated for realism in the acting of *Kathleen*. In describing Maud Gonne's original performance in relation to a few early performances of *Kathleen* in America, Yeats emphasized the importance of the character being presented traditionally as an old woman. He explains: "Since then the part has been twice played in America by women who insisted on keeping their young faces [...] The most beautiful woman of her time, when she played my Cathleen, 'made up' centuries old, and never should the part be played but with a like sincerity."¹⁴ This insistence on a true-to-life representation is consistent with early accounts of the play from individuals who saw the performances, actors who participated, and newspaper reviews.

Early accounts of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*, which premiered on April 2, 1902, continuously comment on the realistic depiction of peasant life that the play represents and the true to life acting of the performers. It is clear from letters between Maud Gonne, the original Kathleen, and W.B. Yeats that the stylistic intention of the play was realism from the first rehearsals. Gonne explains that George Moore, who assisted in creating the Irish Literary Theatre with Yeats and Gregory, came to visit the rehearsal room and "wanted Kathleen to get up when she talked about her beautiful green fields & to walk to the door & come back again, in fact he wanted her to be wandering round the cottage all the time & make most of her remarks from the front of the stage instead of from the corner of the fire."¹⁵ Gonne goes on to explain her aversion to Moore's directions, insisting that Moore's ideas were not true to life and that they should instead keep the original blocking in order to "keep up the idea of the poor old weary woman who would certainly sit down & rock herself over the fire & not get up & walk about until the

¹² *Ibid.*, 218.

¹³ Gregory, Augusta and W. B. Yeats. "Kathleen Ni Houlihan." *Modern and Contemporary Irish Drama: Backgrounds and Criticism*. Ed. John P. Harrington. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 439-40.

¹⁴ Abbey Theatre. *Kathleen ni Houlihan*. 27 December 1904 [script]. Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, 10299_S_0001, 218-219.

¹⁵ Macbride, Maud G., William B. Yeats, and Anna M. White. *The Gonne-Yeats Letters: 1893-1938; Always Your Friend*. (London: Hutchinson, 1992), 151.

idea of meeting her friends comes to her.”¹⁶ Next, Gonne describes the costume she will wear for the performance, and once again reinforces her desire for the most accurate representation of the “old women in the west”: “I have a beautiful untidy grey wig, a torn grey flannel dress exactly like the old women wear in the west, bare feet & a big blue hooded cloak. You would give me a penny in the street if you saw me & I look 60 at least.”¹⁷ An early photograph of this 1902 production corroborates Gonne’s descriptions of a realistic representation of the Gillane family and the Poor Old Woman who visits them.¹⁸ The production photo shows four actors on Willie Fay’s set that includes a window, a door, and a table and chairs. The table even has a cup and a pitcher on it, items presumably used by Bridget Gillane when offering the Old Woman a drink of milk (Figure B).



Figure B. Maud Gonne (Far Right) on the realistic set of the 1902 premiere of *Kathleen*.

A final indicator for the premiere’s realistic representation lies in the stylistic choices made for George Russell’s *Deirdre*, the play that preceded *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* on the night of its premiere. Padraic Colum, an actor in these productions

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ See Figure B.

said, “Willie Fay had decided to produce *Deirdre* behind gauze veils.”¹⁹ Joseph Holloway described the effect in his diary: “the gauze curtain between the audience and the performers added much to the weird and dreamy effect of the play upon the listeners.”²⁰ With such a stylistic choice for *Deirdre*, the decision to perform *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* without this gauze curtain, something that easily could have been employed for both productions, is quite telling. While Russell’s *Deirdre* was meant to leave a “dreamy effect” on the audience, *Kathleen* was, according to Holloway, “realized with creepy realism by the tall and willowy Miss Maud Gonne.”²¹

Further Productions

By September of 1908 *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* had been performed 105 times by the Abbey Theatre’s company of actors.²² The Abbey Theatre Archives, though not possessing a complete production history, provide insight into how popular the show was, for the Yeats-Gregory play was performed at least once a year (and often more frequently) at the Abbey Theatre or on tour from the time the Abbey opened in 1904 through 1920.²³ The play was often placed as a popular and familiar opener to precede new plays, and by 1912 *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* was often presented with J. M. Synge’s controversial *Playboy of the Western World*. This likely had to do with the setting of both plays, as outlined by Lady Gregory in “An Explanation” to *The Arrow* on June 1, 1907:

I am sorry Mr. Synge laid the scene of his play in Mayo if Mayo people are offended. He might have mentioned some undiscoverable Irish district. Yet if Mayo has cause to complain it may remember that Mr. Yeats has made his young bridegroom, who gives up love, home and all to follow Cathleen ni Houlihan, a Mayo man.²⁴

The choice to pair *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* with the riot-inducing *Playboy* speaks to the play’s universal appeal while its continual inclusion in the repertory of the Abbey Theatre speaks to its popularity.

¹⁹ Colum, Padraic. “Early Days of the Irish Theatre”. *The Abbey Theatre: Interviews and Recollections*. Ed. E. H. Mikhail. (London: Macmillan, 1988), 66.

²⁰ Holloway, Joseph. *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre*, 16.

²¹ Holloway, Joseph. *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre*, 17.

²² Abbey Theatre. *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, 08 Sep 1908 [programme]. Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, 0321_MPG_01, 5.

²³ Abbey Theatre Digital Archives.

²⁴ Gregory, Augusta. *Our Irish Theatre*, 195.

These subsequent productions of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* continued to be performed in the realistic style established by the original 1902 production. The published script of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* was eventually included in a compilation of Yeats's work, *Plays in Prose and Verse*, and a copy of this book, published in 1922, served as an early prompt book for the Abbey Theatre in which actors or perhaps the stage manager wrote blocking.²⁵ This book-turned-prompt-book includes a sketch of the set that includes walls and a window, a fire, a dresser, a table, and a door. Thus in 1922, and likely into future years, the Abbey Theatre was still performing *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* on a very realistic set. Stage directions and blocking written into the text show the actors interacting with the furniture and holding props that contribute to the realistic presentation of the play: Bridget "X to dresser with clothes" or "Michael shuts door X to window."²⁶ All indications seem to show that the original 1902 staging of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* was preserved for many years and continued to work successfully for the company.

First hand accounts and newspaper articles that detail various performances of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* over the years speak to the success of the productions and the realism employed by the actors. In speaking about the October 9th, 1903 performance of the play Joseph Holloway says, "Anything more natural than some of the peasant scenes enacted by these plays I have never seen."²⁷ Holloway spends a large part of his entry commending the "natural" acting of Sara Allgood, who played Bridget Gillane in the production (though she would go on to play the title Kathleen hundreds of times throughout her career). Holloway claims that her acting "ceased to be acting and became nature."²⁸ Thus the focus on realistic acting continued into subsequent productions of the play and is in keeping with the early acting styles of the Abbey Theatre actors. The success of the play from 1902 to the Abbey Theatre's official opening on December 27th, 1904 can also be surmised from *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*'s inclusion in the historic opening of the Abbey Theatre. Holloway, who attended the opening, states, "*Cathleen ni Houlihan* which followed was exquisitely enacted, and all present were thrilled by the weird beauty and intense pathos of Miss Maire nic Shiubhlaigh's embodiment of 'Cathleen'."²⁹ By 1923, Holloway was still not tired of the one-act drama by Yeats and Gregory, for his September 10th diary entry states, "I went on to the Abbey and was just in time to see the curtains rise on *Cathleen ni Houlihan*...Sara Allgood was impressive in the title role."³⁰ Through Holloway's diary entries it is clear that

²⁵ Abbey Theatre. *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, 27 Dec 1904 [script].

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁷ Holloway, *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre*, 27-28.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 220.

Kathleen Ni Houlihan was quickly established as an important play of the new Irish Theatre movement and one that could always attract an audience when revived.

Newspaper reviews from Ireland, London, and New York speak positively of the play throughout the years. *The Irish Times* in 1906 stated, “The second part of the programme, ‘Kathleen Ni Houlihan,’ by Mr. W. B. Yeats, was very well received,” and by 1908 the play is called a “tried favourite.”³¹ In 1909 the same paper calls *Kathleen* “the ideal National play of Ireland,” and a 1938 review says that the play’s “appeal has in no way lessened.”³² By December of 1909 the play was also “well known in London,” and a 1911 review in the *New York Times* states, “the plot is probably familiar” and references an earlier performance of the play.³³ The popularity of this play in three countries must be considered alongside the staging methods and character interpretation of the Abbey actors. The presentation of the drama as a realistic representation of peasant life cannot be taken for granted, and it is not a coincidence that the true-to-life acting and staging as outlined by Holloway in his diary entries and as seen in the early prompt books coincided with the success of this show. The writings of Yeats and Gregory, newspaper reviews of productions, and first hand accounts of the play show a link between a realistic interpretation of the script and the success of the performance.

Scholars of the play agree that the play’s success lies in the artistic marriage of Gregory and Yeats. As James Pethica says, “The transition enacted between its initially realist register and the symbolic and supernatural mode with which it closes is achieved almost seamlessly, such that—in this play, at least—the two writers’ differing styles augment each other powerfully rather than jarring or contrasting awkwardly.”³⁴ Nicholas Grene in his article, “Strangers in the House” aptly states, “The effectiveness of the play in part derives from the very concrete ordinariness of the peasant setting as established by Gregory in the first scene.”³⁵

³¹ “PUBLIC AMUSEMENTS: ABBEY THEATRE”. *The Irish Times* (1874-1920); Nov 19, 1906; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Irish Times and The Weekly Irish Times pg. 6 and “ABBAY THEATRE.” *The Irish Times* (1874-1920); Aug 25, 1908; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Irish Times and The Weekly Irish Times, 8

³² “ABBAY THEATRE”. *The Irish Times* (1874-1920); Mar 17, 1909; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Irish Times and The Weekly Irish Times pg. 6. And “ABBAY THEATRE: TWO EARLY PLAYS” *The Irish Times* (1921-Current File); Aug 9, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Irish Times and The Weekly Irish Times, 8

³³ "The Stage Society." *Times* [London, England] 7 Dec. 1909: 10. The Times Digital Archive. Web. 8 July 2015 and “IRISH PLAYERS GIVE THREE LITTLE DRAMAS”. *New York Times* (1857-1922); Dec 2, 1911; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times, 13.

³⁴ Pethica, *Collaborative One-Act Plays*, xxxix.

³⁵ Grene, Nicholas, “Strangers in the House,” in *Modern and Contemporary Irish Drama: Backgrounds and Criticism*, ed. John P. Harrington. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 427.

Despite a scholarly understanding of the play's success as a collaboration and a production history that advocates for a respect for both the realistic elements and the symbolist ones, the two most recent fully staged productions of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* at The Abbey Theatre chose to forego any sense of the ordinary in the opening moments of the play, even as they failed to credit Lady Gregory as co-author. Both Raymond Yeates's 1984 production and James Flannery's 1990 production emphasized stylized, non-realistic movement and introduced the character of the other-worldly Kathleen in the opening moments of the play rather than halfway through as Yeats and Gregory intended.³⁶ These productions suffered from directorial choices that stylistically linked *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* to Yeats's later Noh Dramas, thereby ignoring the elements of realism and disregarding authorial intention.

1984 Production

The Abbey Theatre's 1984 Production of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* was produced as part of *4 Yeats Plays*, including *At the Hawk's Well* (written in 1916), *The Cat and the Moon* (1926), and *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919) with *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902) finishing the performance.³⁷ The dates alone show that *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* is out of place with the other three plays. Raymond Yeates directed this show, which opened on Tuesday, June 12th, and newspaper reviews described the production as "highly-stylized," "untheatrical," "visually and aurally fascinating," and "eclectically [*sic*] chosen."³⁸ The archival video of *4 Yeats Plays* shows a performance that relies on movement, heavy make-up, puppets, and masks.³⁹ One newspaper even called them "plays of masks and faces", and a newspaper feature on Maire O'Neill who played the "1st Musician" and "Kathleen ni Houlihan" stated, "The actors also received instruction in puppetry, karate and percussion."⁴⁰ These theatrical devices are not unusual for Yeats's Noh dramas, where character descriptions call for musicians with "their faces made up to

³⁶ Due to the close spelling of the surnames of Raymond Yeates and W. B. Yeats, all references to the director will use his full name, Raymond Yeates, while the use of only the surname Yeats will refer to the playwright.

³⁷ Abbey Theatre. *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, 12 Jun 1984 [programme], 2.

³⁸ Abbey Theatre. *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, 12 Jun 1984 [press cuttings]. Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, 2862_PC_0001, 7-8.

³⁹ Abbey Theatre. *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, 12 Jun 1984 [video]. Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, 2862_V_001.

⁴⁰ Abbey Theatre. *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, 12 Jun 1984 [press cuttings], 4-5.

resemble masks” and some characters “wearing a mask,” but the presentation of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* with these same elements was never Yeats’s intention.⁴¹

After writing *The Cat and the Moon*, Yeats said, “I intended [*The Cat and the Moon*] to be what the Japanese call a *Kiogen* (brief farces in colloquial language, introduced early in the development of Noh drama as interludes between the more serious ritualistic plays), and to come between, let us say, *The Hawk’s Well* and *The Dreaming of the Bones*.”⁴² The program for the 1984 production further acknowledges the similarities between the three plays by describing them all as “plays for dancers,” though *The Cat and the Moon* was not part of Yeats’s original *Four Plays for Dancers* published in 1921.⁴³ Additionally, all three of the Noh plays call for “Three Musicians” who serve as narrators and participate throughout the plays. In contrast, the stage directions for *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* call for no masks or make-up of any kind and instead call for the “interior of a cottage” to be represented onstage.⁴⁴ Other stage directions call for realistic actions from the characters such as Bridget “undoing a parcel” or Patrick “goes out, leaving the door open.” *Kathleen* does not use musicians and in fact calls for Kathleen to sing her own songs in the production, which should be sung, according to Yeats, “as the country people understand song.”⁴⁵ Here we see that Raymond Yeates does in fact follow the intentions of Yeats for the first three plays in his production but fails to do so in his presentation of *Kathleen*, thereby favoring directorial interpretation over the main ideas of the authors.

Not only did Raymond Yeates use the same tone and theatrical masks throughout *4 Yeats Plays*, he also used Kathleen as a through-line for the performances, introducing the character long before the final play began. His production opened with singing: Kathleen’s song about “yellow-haired Donough that was hanged in Galway.”⁴⁶ Additionally, in-between each play Raymond Yeates inserted hints of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*, including songs and pieces of dialogue that served as a precursor for what was to come. Eventually, the actor playing the “1st Musician,” Maire O’Neill, became “Kathleen” in the final piece. *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* was performed on a dark stage with disembodied masks

⁴¹ Yeats, W. B. “At the Hawk’s Well”. *The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats*. (London: Macmillan, 1960.)

⁴² Abbey Theatre. *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, 12 Jun 1984 [programme], 3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Gregory, Augusta and W. B. Yeats. “Kathleen Ni Houlihan.” *Modern and Contemporary Irish Drama: Backgrounds and Criticism*. Ed. John P. Harrington. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 439-40.

⁴⁵ Abbey Theatre. *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, 27 Dec 1904 [script]. Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, 10299_S_0001, 225.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

serving as puppets to speak the dialogue. The *Irish Times* described the piece as follows: “In ‘Cathleen Ni Houlihan’ the mortals became mere disembodied masks, the immortal Old Woman was masked and the young man who offered himself to her became wholly unmasked,” and the *Evening Herald* stated, “in quarter light, masks are held at arm’s length by hooded [*sic*] figures.”⁴⁷ The entire play was performed in this way, from beginning to end, with no sense of change or transition when Kathleen entered the space.

Raymond Yeates’s choice to introduce the character of Kathleen in the first moments of his 1984 production is counter to decisions that Yeats and Gregory made about the show in their early work on the play. Yeats’s initial impression of the success of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* in 1902 was not entirely positive, and he found himself questioning whether certain changes should be made to the script. Yeats found that audiences were laughing during the opening scene in the Gillane’s house and therefore they could not immediately grasp the “tragic meaning of Kathleen’s part,” which led Yeats to question whether he should “have struck a tragic note at the start.”⁴⁸ Yeats went on to say, “I have an idea of revising it before I put it in a book & of making Kathleen pass the door at the start. They can call her over & ask her some question & she can say she is going to old ‘so & sos’, & pass on.”⁴⁹ Yeats’s instinct to alter the tone of the opening scene of the Gillane family was tempered by Gregory who wrote, “the simple enjoyment of a comfortable life, without any shadow of what is to happen, is the best opening.”⁵⁰ And thus it is in the published script, for though the character of Kathleen is hinted at and commented on by the young Patrick, there is no initial conversation with her to disturb the humorous and lifelike tone of the opening scene.⁵¹

Raymond Yeates’s staging of this realistic drama in a highly stylized way was jarring to most reviewers, and the overwhelming consensus among them was that his choice was ultimately unsuccessful. Desmond Rushe in the *Irish Independent* said of *Kathleen*: “It clearly demands different handling, but it is played with disembodied masks the predominant feature, and however excellently they are lit by Leslie Scott, they serve no purpose whatever other than to make a

⁴⁷ Abbey Theatre. *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, 12 Jun 1984 [press cuttings], 7-8.

⁴⁸ Yeats, W. B. *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*. Ed. John Kelly et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 167. www.nlx.com/collections/130

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Pethica, *Collaborative One-Act Plays*, xxxix.

⁵¹ It is true that Raymond Yeates’s production is, in some ways, following this initial instinct of W.B. Yeats, (which was rejected by Gregory) to introduce Kathleen at the top of the play. The success of versions that do *not* introduce Kathleen too soon and the fact Yeats never adapted the text in later years seems to advocate for Gregory’s interpretation over Yeats’s.

work of considerable significance in its time olok [sic] coltishly affected.”⁵² Other reviewers agreed. John Fiengan of the *Evening Herald* enjoyed the “stylization” of the first three pieces, but he disagreed with the presentation of the final one:

However the fantasy approach fails todofull [sic] justice to the most famous play of the quartet, ‘Cathleen Ni Houihan’ (a personification of Ireland lametning [sic] the loss of her four green fields). Invariably staged in a realistic setting, it is here presented as a surrealistic drama in whcih, [sic] in quarter light, masks are held at arm’s length by hodded [sic] figures. Maire O’Neill speaks the haunting lines so beautifully that one would wish to have herrd [sic] them in the usual environment.⁵³

Writing for *In Dublin*, Martin Armstrong said, “the director imposes a thematic unity on the plays,” and perhaps the most straightforward and clear explanation of the problem was given by David Nowlan in the *Irish Times* who said the performance “lacks consistency and is ultimately unfaithful to both the spirit and the letter of the author’s intent.”⁵⁴ It is clear from these reviews that Raymond Yeates’s inclusion of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* in a night of Yeat’s Noh plays did not work successfully. By attempting to link *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* to Yeats’s later plays, Raymond Yeates failed to present the dramatic tension that comes from a realistic and true to life domestic scene being interrupted by the symbolic and other-worldly force of Kathleen Ni Houlihan. This error comes from looking at the play through a lens that belongs strictly to Yeats rather than through the lens of Gregory.

1990 Production

Following Raymond Yeates’s 1984 presentation of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*, the play was not seen again at the Abbey until 1990.⁵⁵ This time *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* was presented as part of the “Annual WB Yeats International Theatre Festival” and was performed with *The Dreaming of the Bones* and *Purgatory*.⁵⁶ Once again *Kathleen* was grouped with two of Yeats’s later more symbolist plays and suffered because of it. Once again the director, James W. Flannery, introduced the energy and tone

⁵² Abbey Theatre. *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, 12 Jun 1984 [press cuttings], 7.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 14, 7.

⁵⁵ Both the 1984 and 1990 productions of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* were performed on the Peacock Stage, the Abbey Theatre’s smaller second stage.

⁵⁶ Abbey Theatre. *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, 08 Aug 1990 [programme]. Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, 0813_MPG_01.

of the otherworldly Kathleen far too early. Flannery started the play with three women slowly rolling on the floor and moving through the space while eerie music played. The slow pace continued throughout the opening scene with not a single word spoken until eleven minutes into the performance.⁵⁷ This style and tone erased the energy and humor established by Lady Gregory's dialogue and resulted once again in a lack of contrast between the real and the symbolic. *The Irish Times* described the night as such:

Slow motion was the order of the night in the Peacock Theatre's first night of the second annual Yeats festival. 'Cathleen Ni Houlihan' started with human forms blowing shapeless on to the stage like tardy clumps of tumbleweed and stayed like that, dead slow, until the Gillane family began to wonder who was the old woman coming up the path towards the house.⁵⁸

Thus James Flannery fell into the same trap as his predecessor, Raymond Yeates. The omission of Lady Gregory's name from both the 1984 program and the 1990 program shows an effort to claim what is probably Yeats's most popular and familiar work, *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*, as his own success and perhaps justify or explain his later, less produced work. But by forcing a style on *Kathleen* that is against not only Gregory's original intent but also Yeats's original intent, Raymond Yeates and James Flannery decisively show that *Kathleen* doesn't work as a purely symbolist, purely Yeatsian play.

The continued presentation of classic plays like *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* requires a constant evaluation of what makes the play important or exciting to a modern audience. Just as the Abbey Theatre has a responsibility to present the historically significant plays that made the National Theatre a success during the time of Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats, they also have a responsibility to present those works in different ways that speak to their audience members. Raymond Yeates and James W. Flannery cannot be faulted for trying something new or for trying to connect to their audiences. But by ignoring the intentions of both authors of *Kathleen* they fail to present the main idea of the play: that something bigger, something more symbolic and perhaps a bit otherworldly could arrive at any moment to interrupt every day waking reality. The way individuals respond to this collision of the extraordinary with the normal is what *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*

⁵⁷ Abbey Theatre. *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, 08 Aug 1990 [video]. Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, 813_V_001.

⁵⁸ Nowlan, David. "Drama diffused by distracting images: Yeats festival opens at the Peacock". *The Irish Times* (1921-Current File); Aug 9, 1990; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Irish Times and The Weekly Irish Times pg. 10.

explores. In order to grasp the larger meaning of a play that has spoken to generations of audience members, future directors must acknowledge that *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*'s success lies in the confrontation between the realism of Lady Gregory and the symbolism of W.B. Yeats. Just as Kathleen's transformation into a queen means nothing unless she has been established as a peasant, the brilliance of Yeats cannot be recognized without the foundation set by the equally brilliant Lady Augusta Gregory.

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