

**“The Shakespeare of the Irish”
A Bibliography of John Millington Synge’s Works
in Hungarian Translation and of the Books,
Book Chapters, Articles and Reviews about
His Works Written by Hungarian Authors**

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The present bibliography is compiled with the aim of honouring the occasion of the 110th anniversary of the opening of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in December 1904, which later gained the status of the National Theatre of Ireland. Its inception and early history is strongly intertwined with the anti-colonial movement in the country, which rapidly intensified during the late 19th century. In terms of the Act of Union (1800), at that time Ireland was still an internal colony of Britain (until 1921), and its national struggle for independence took various forms. Cultural nationalism came into being as part of the many-sided process of decolonization, and became an intellectual force supporting and underpinning the unfolding literary activities the goal of which was to give voice and visibility to the Irish as a colonized people. The writers embarked on reviving, translating and integrating aspects of the distinctive Irish cultural heritage and native traditions into new, often radically experimental forms and modes of literature. Hence the name Irish Literary Revival for the period spanning the decades from the 1880s to the 1920s.

The Revival produced its best fruit in the domain of drama, because theatre productions had a compelling immediacy and could be attended and enjoyed even by illiterate people. Being aware of this kind of potential in the genre, the revivalists decided to establish a theatre. The Irish Literary Theatre was founded by a handful of enthusiasts including Lady Augusta Gregory, W. B. Yeats and Edward Martyn in 1899. This formation promoted the writing and production of plays on Irish themes, thereby consciously opposing the colonial tradition of theatre practices in Ireland which employed simplifying or often degrading stereotypes of Irishness, mainly in melodramas. However, the founders did not yet possess a permanent theatre building or a theatre company, therefore a search for funding was begun. As a result, in 1903 they managed to establish the Irish National Theatre Society and got hold of a building for the Abbey Theatre, then represented by a small company.

Its first directors were W. B. Yeats (1865–1939), Lady August Gregory (1852–1932) and J. M. Synge (1871–1909). On 27th December 1904, on its first night the theatre staged three one-act plays by Yeats and Gregory. Following this well orchestrated and successful beginning, the theatre mounted plays in English as well as in Irish which drew on Irish folklore, heroic legends, scenes of Irish country life and native traditions as their subject matter. Each of the trio of directors wrote plays, laying stress on keeping art free from direct politicizing as much as it was possible at that time; instead they favoured and fostered an experimentalist aesthetic in style and dramaturgy. In a few years the Abbey embarked on touring its best productions to the United States, attracting the attention of, for instance, the young Eugene O’Neill there in 1911.

Time has shown that of the three Abbey director-playwrights Synge emerged as the most lasting talent, in spite of his unfortunately short life. However, his plays, except for *Riders to the Sea* (1904) and *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (completed by Gregory and produced posthumously in 1910), did not garner success when first performed in Ireland. True, Synge’s works far from provided an idyllic picture of Ireland and the life of Irish country people. Instead, Synge explored the conflicts and constraints that fragmented the society and curtailed desires and ambitions to achieve individual freedom, particularly in the case of women and marginalized segments of the population. While *The Well of the Saints* (1905) inspired merely some hostile feeling and resentful criticism largely on account of staging dirty beggars as the protagonists, *The Shadow of the Glen* (1903) met with immense disapproval on the part of the nationalist audience (including Maud Gonne, Yeats’s beloved, leader of a patriotic women’s group). They resented the play because its young female protagonist, Nora, leaves her old husband’s house with a tramp. Many thought that this implied a defilement of the morals of Irish womanhood, and that the play gave a perverted and false portrayal of the Irish marriage in general.

Undoubtedly, the biggest scandal during the early years of the Abbey was generated by the premiere of Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). It is a satirical comedy, exposing the petty-mindedness and hypocrisy of most of the characters in a Mayo village, contrasted by the struggle for autonomy and self-discovery represented by the protagonist, Christy Mahon (played by William Fay in 1907). The first minutes of the performance already called attention to something unconventional and strange on offer for the people who eagerly occupied the seats of the Abbey that night. Their confusion increased and led to visible outrage when Christy uttered the word “shift,” meaning a piece of ladies’ underwear in the drama text. Most members of the audience were not willing to accept an apparently unflattering portrayal of their countrymen as innovative art; they were incapable of valuing the play’s mixture of realism with the fantastic and its achievement of a creatively hybrid style by its poetically shaped Hiberno-English language. In spite of the verbal and even physical violence taking place during the first performances, the play was not withdrawn from the theatre. Performances,

however, could go ahead only under police inspection because the so called “Playboy riots” were really quite unusual. Hardly surprisingly, the reception was ambiguous in the United States too, given the influence of the nationalist spirit there among the Irish-Americans. Learning from the initial scandals of *The Playboy*, Synge thought that his last completed play, *The Tinker’s Wedding* (1908) had better not premiere in Ireland because of its anti-clerical elements. The play was first performed in London in 1909, not long after the untimely death of the author.

It took some years before Synge’s dramatic genius was fully recognized in his homeland. Clear-sightedly, G. B. Shaw gave him the label “the Shakespeare of the Irish.” After his death Synge’s international fame grew rapidly, and his plays, especially *The Playboy* but certainly not just that masterpiece, have been on an unending journey in the theatres of Ireland and the world ever since. For the last two-three decades an enormous bulk of criticism has been produced on his work, discussing it in the context of postcolonial, gender and comparative studies, as well as among the most distinguished representatives of Irish modernism. The following bibliography intends to demonstrate that Synge is conspicuously present in Hungarian culture through the translations and theatre productions of his works, poems and plays, as well as through reviews and critical reflections.

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