

DRAMA *Works*

Plays Through Practice

THE SHADOW OF A GUNMAN

by

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EXTRACT

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Extract

WORKING THROUGH THE TEXT IN A PRACTICAL WAY

It should go without saying that, for this practical work to be useful, careful records need to be made by each student of all work undertaken and the practical decisions made.

THE OPENING STAGE DIRECTIONS AND CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

1. The play begins with a detailed description of the setting. Look carefully at the first paragraph, which details the furnishings. Davoren and Seumas' 'return-room' [rented room] is the only setting throughout, so it needs to be both interesting and practical in terms of the action through the play.

a) On a large piece of paper, first of all work out a ground plan according to O'Casey's own description. Apart from the table and a single chair, most of the sparse furnishings are around the edges of the room, making sure that there is enough space for all the action of the play.

b) Using such rostra and furnishings as you have in your drama space, map out this same layout on your performing space. There is only one entrance and exit in the play, which O'Casey places up stage right, above Seumas' bed. Try bringing a number of people at a time into this space where the door would be and see what it reveals about the layout and general acting space. Might it be better to have this door both angled, towards the audience, and raised? How far, if so, would you want the raised area to jut into the room? Enough for a number of people to stand on and be seen? Or enough for a couple of people to hover on and still be seen whilst others stand on the floor just below? Later on in the play, such a decision could be important and allow for easier manoeuvring and crowd visibility. An angled door allows incomers to be 'framed' and gives them extra focus and prominence on their entrance.

Is the table in the optimum position or does it cut-off too much useful acting space? Experiment with this.

Carefully record all decisions made - and the reasons for them.

c) O'Casey was familiar with the techniques of naturalism and the setting proves this. It is clear he envisaged a 'box-set' - a room actually built on the stage, which gives the atmosphere and feeling of a largeish house, divided up into similarly rented rooms and of the outside world of slum-area Dublin.

Either working in groups or individually, try to create a model box-set with the scaled dimensions of your performance space. Try to show the shabbiness of the room through the colours you choose for its walls. What is visible through the door? A dingy corridor? What is visible through the windows? A 'yard' as suggested? Or the street? Decide whether the room is on the ground floor or higher up and how your decision will affect the view through the window.

d) Individually research the period. Go to a library or the internet and see what photographs of Dublin in the early part of the last century you can find. Then convene with such information as you have found and discuss what dressings the set would need to add atmosphere.

O'Casey has made clear the need for the Roman Catholic accessories. These are important to place the audience firmly into context.

Would you have the windows dirty? Curtained or uncurtained? If curtained - just a filthy piece of netting? The view through the window gives the audience an opportunity to see other tenement buildings, such as this one, and what they look like from the outside - i.e. our view of the building they are living in can be given a further dimension in this way

perhaps. Every decision made should be justified.

O'Casey mentions the mess; how would you achieve this without endangering the space requirements too much? An open cupboard door helps, of course.

What floor covering would you have? A rag mat on dark-stained wood, perhaps?

e] Having explored the naturalistic option and come up with solutions, discuss if any other form of setting would work. For instance, might a more symbolic set help? Keeping the furnishings of the room the same, could you suggest that, instead of walls, the characters are hemmed in by ... what? Anger? Poverty? Propaganda? Religion? How could you show such ideas? Could the perimeters of the space be made from something else? Corrugated iron and barbed wire, perhaps - like the structures that are built round police stations and pubs in Belfast, for instance? [I haven't visited Belfast since the 1980s, but this was the case then.] Or screens on which can be depicted 'pictures' of the outside, including photographs of the Irish Troubles from throughout its history?

Once again - whatever you come up with, check for its practicability and that the action is not minimised by too much extraneous material. Careful decisions need to be made here. For instance, you might decide to keep the setting simple and drab - though without a box-set [which is rarely used nowadays] - keeping the idea of a back-wall, for instance, with two free hung windows - which can act as screens at the end of the play - or at useful times - to display 'real' photos. Or there can be a permanent cyclorama with tenement buildings etched on it, the 'windows', like empty frames hung close to it. The wall-less room could be simply defined by the furnishings alone. A more open space like this could give rise to more interesting entrances, where we can see people before they come into the room, congregated in the street outside, at the back of the stage. This would add excitement, especially to the ending, with the soldiers visible in this way before their official 'entrance'.

A performance in the round might also be an option and is worth discussion. This would make for added involvement from the point of view of the audience and the single entrance would then be through the audience itself. The fly-on-the-wall aspect of the round can add claustrophobia, as the audience create the walls. Discuss carefully. Some of the furnishings suggested might not be practicable here. Would that matter? If you feel it does, perhaps an Arena setting, with the audience on three sides would be an answer, allowing essential larger items to be on the free 'wall'.

Hopefully, the above, which gives some options and suggests their implications is a starting-point. Whatever personal decisions you make, remember that they must all be justified. Your setting will be revisited in further work at a later time. Your decisions at this time do not need to be final. Keep an open mind at this stage and as you explore the play further, you may find a final decision becomes easier.

2. Now read the character description of Donal Davoren. O'Casey describes Davoren in terms of two sets of polarities: weakness and strength; activity and 'rest'. He suggests that the 'war between weakness and strength' is 'eternal' and that the 'tendency towards rest' is 'unquenchable', negating the 'desire for activity'. We thus get the impression that Davoren is in a constant state of paralysis, pulled between two opposing extremes which will cause him to achieve nothing. On top of this, O'Casey quotes from George Bernard Shaw's *A Doctor's Dilemma* to describe the idealistic view that beauty redeems all aspects of life, which is Davoren's ruling belief. It is interesting that the playwright gives the actor only inner states to work with; of the outer description, we only have that he is about thirty and that he has had a hard life which is 'written' on his body -

as are the sufferings of the creative life - also 'written' upon him.

Discuss in what ways physical deprivation and 'the struggle for expression' could affect the body. Is he thin? Gaunt? Too pale? Does he suffer eye-strain from studying in poor light? Does he have a tendency to mouth words, as if trying out 'forms of self-expression'?

Which of the above can actually be translated into the actor's physicalisation of the character? Since thinness etc. cannot be acted as such, can the deprivation of his upbringing be suggested in his stance? the way he walks? sits? any mannerisms?

As a solo activity, play with these ideas physically - though beware of ending up with too cluttered a portrayal. You don't want to end up with a character that is a twitching mass of nervous tics!

Sometimes it is helpful to try some physical theatre approaches, exaggerating certain things. Out of such exaggeration an inner state can be identified and the exaggerated movements of over-physicalisation can be pulled back into a more naturalistic form of expression. Bearing this in mind, try the following exercises:

Solo: Imagine being physically pulled in one direction and then the other. [Up/down; side to side; front to back.] Show this with your body. Make it comical. Then make it look agonising - tragic.

Now imagine being pulled in both directions at the same time - the body will be still, but with every muscle engaged in tension. Again - try this with a comical expression and with a tragic one.

Go back to the idea of being physically pulled in two directions, but show how the body alters dependent on the direction in which it is travelling: from weakness to strength and back again; then from energy to apathy and back again.

Do these for long enough to gain a definite feeling about the state being explored. It may be that you simply feel exhausted - or frustrated. I think you will have discovered an important fact: being unable to make your mind up about things is extremely tiring. You are in a constant state of tension.

Hang onto this thought and the feelings you have stirred up in yourself. Can you see some ways in, now, to Davoren's characterisation? Tense nervy movements, perhaps, contrasted with moments of complete lack of energy; sharp frustrated fingers brushing through the hair contrasted with hunched rounded shoulders, head in hands.

To help your exploration further, try a short solo in which Davoren is alone and trying to write a poem. He searches for the right words; he divides his time between searching for inspiration with energy and slumping into frustrated despair.....

3. Next comes the character description of Seumas Shields. Here we have more description of externals. What does O'Casey's vision of him suggest? 'heavily built', 'dark-haired and sallow-complexioned'. Of course, this does not mean a thin blonde actor cannot act Seumas - but a certain type is being suggested here and that type can be acted by anyone, with enough thought. Couple it with the suggestion that 'the superstition, the fear and the malignity of primitive man' is 'frequently manifested' in him and what do you come up with?

It is clear from reading Seumas' speeches that over this primitive side there is a veneer of learning; Seumas doesn't speak like an uneducated man - he is full of smatterings of knowledge, probably gleaned from the sound Catholic education administered by monks that most Dublin boys went through. Lest we should be lulled by this into thinking that Seumas is more than he is, O-Casey gives us the description of him that he does at the beginning. It should serve as a caveat for the actor playing him.

So what O'Casey is telling us is that Seumas has no more than this skin of education; under it he is a mass of superstitions, fears and 'malignity'. Certainly the

superstition becomes evident in the play, and the fears. The word 'malignity' may give a clue as to how his behaviour with the landlord and Maguire should be motivated - also his frequent rantings against 'the Irish'. This is the kind of man who blames the world for his own inadequacies - and he has the Irish gift of the gab with which to pour out his malice.

There are a number of physical ways of looking 'heavy' and 'thickset' through acting alone. Try the following:

**walking as if you have huge heavy weights in the soles of your feet
the weights are in the base of your stomach
the weights are pressing between your shoulders at the base of your neck
your head is twice as heavy as normal**

Try combinations of the above too and move around the room, sitting, lying down, getting up again.

When you have come up with a type of movement through weight redistribution, try to give the character an expression that shows it's always someone else's fault. This tends to make the eyes a little shifty - always looking for the catch in whatever happens or whatever anyone sends. Next try adding a suitable voice.

As a solo, show Seumas entering a pub, looking around for someone to pay for his drink, finding no one and reluctantly going to the bar to pay for his own.

4. While these two characters are still freshly stirring in your minds, try a pair improvisation, where Seumas and Donal Davoren meet for the first time in a pub. Donal is looking for somewhere to stay.

Try to work out what it is that draws the two characters to each other.

After these improvisations are seen, discuss and try to pin this down. Is Seumas just after a quick buck from Donal? A way of helping towards the rent? Is he impressed by Donal? In what ways? What's in the relationship for Donal? Does he like Seumas - at first? Is he taken in by him, do you think? Keep adding detail that will help make these characters real.

THE FIRST DUOLOGUE BETWEEN SEUMAS AND DAVOREN [PAGES 4-8
Faber; 80 - 83 Pan]

Paraphrase the meaning of Davoren's poem in one line.

What does the language of it tell us about Davoren?

The message of the poem is an uplifting one. Is this a clue to the mood to be set at the opening of the play? Why do you think OCasey starts the play with this piece of verse?

I would expect the students to come up with words like Romantic, lush, over-adjectival, over-descriptive perhaps. The last phrase is clumsy. It means that life is what's left to us, with sorrow etc. all powerless - in fact 'dead.' But the word 'only' is negative, and somewhat blurs the sense.

Bearing this in mind, once you are sure the students understand the verse, such as it is, have a couple of them rendering it aloud.

What is noticeable about the sounds of the lines?

What is noticeable about the pace of them, when read aloud?

Does this help us with setting Davoren's own mood and state of mind? He seems, in fact, to be in a dream-world of pretty summer, love and flowers, romanticising love by likening it to summer. This will contrast comically and directly with the interruptions at the window and the realities of their life in the drab tenement.

Now try performing the verse

a] as if composing it there and then, i.e. repeating words - testing them on the tongue - swinging backwards on his chair - searching the air - chewing his pencil - finally jotting a word down - crossing out another, etc.

b] as if having finished it but testing the sound of it out aloud, meditatively, stressing its rhythmic qualities, etc.

c] a combination of the two - pretty pleased with the result

d] a combination of the two but dissatisfied with the last line...

Which do you prefer?

Who could it be at the window and at the door, trying to wake Seumas for Mass? It is clear that they are people who live in his tenement building. Perhaps you can make them characters that we see properly later - but I think it is better if they are not. We need to get a sense of a teeming life in this slum area - over-crowded and so on. The play requires a sense of crowds - as when the auxiliaries come and search, herding people out into the street. Even though there are few lines for these people, if you have the street outside the window visible, they have a use for building up atmosphere, and there are plenty of moments when they could crowd half-in at the open door to the passageway.

The play ought to be done in a Dublin accent. This is softer than the Northern Irish accent. If possible, tape someone reading some of the lines and have the whole class studying to reproduce the vowel sounds and the rise and fall of the sentence structure. I find that if you draw the tongue back and up towards the roof of the mouth, coupled with the rise and fall of the lilt, a fair starting point can be made. Many years ago, when I was directing 'The Playboy of the Western World' by John Synge, I found a nun in a nearby abbey who came from the Arran Isles; she happily read large chunks of the play for us and it was hugely helpful. Some research may find someone near you similarly from the Dublin area.

Having said that, it is clear that the accent is more exaggerated, even comically so, in the case of the 'lesser' characters. Seumas' accent is also quite thick, but Davoren has a veneer of 'education' taking the edge off his Irishness. Play around with the accent, making sure that you do not sacrifice understanding of the lines to it; this can be a danger.

Notice how Seumas refers to the Irish People, as if he were not one of them. He is trying to link himself with Davoren, who he feels is a cut above his neighbours in the tenement. Further attempts at making this link are his classical references - rather tentatively made - he is not sure of Morpheus and the poppy 'emblem.' He wants Davoren to see him as an educated man too - which may be a clue as to why he has offered his room as a refuge. Nonetheless, later he recognises the quote from Shelley - so something of his schooling has stuck.

Much of the comedy of Seumas lies in the double standards he constantly uses. It is all right for him to do something, but if anyone else does the same thing, then it is the hopelessness of the Irish that is blamed. **Looking carefully through these lines, up to Page 8, see how many of these 'double standards' you can find.** I have given the answers in brackets for teachers! [up at 9.0, packed and ready, can't depend upon the word of the individual, lazy, Church and the Truth, 'almost too lazy to wash

himself.]

It is clear that these shoddy standards also apply to the goods he is selling. Pick out the examples of this there are too. [forks - bendable, braces - not strong, numbers in packets]

Discuss a] how to bring out this comedy in the playing of the scene and b] what it adds to our impression of Seumas.

Read the whole dialogue now, noting carefully the stage directions and general movement of the scene. Then try improvising the scene, using, as much as possible, what you have learned from your earlier character explorations.

THE ENTRANCE OF MAGUIRE. [PAGE 8 - 9, Faber. 83-84 Pan]

Maguire is in some way a 'business' acquaintance of Seumas'. Perhaps he is the one who provides some of the shoddy goods which Seumas peddles. Or perhaps he and Seumas sometimes divide the peddling between them, working together, or both knocking at doors on different sides of the street and then sharing the proceeds. I think it is a bit of both: Maguire supplies the goods and, very occasionally, accompanies Seumas. The tone of Seumas' speeches concerning Maguire doesn't suggest a close acquaintanceship. And this is backed up by Seumas' surprise at the contents of the bag left in the room by Maguire; a friendship on any level would mean that both parties would be aware of the political sympathies of the other.

This is the only sight we have of Maguire, who is not in himself important. The contents of his bag, however, are. Can the nature of the contents of the bag be suggested - subtly - by his manner and the way he handles the bag? This must indeed be subtle - just enough for the audience to remember his behaviour when they later find out that the bag contains explosives, but not enough for them to guess already.

O'Casey describes his entrance: 'Maguire rushes in with a handbag.' The handbag is of course not a woman's bag, which is what a modern 'handbag' is, but something like a Gladstone bag, perhaps - the old style doctor's bag - or a leather toolbag. Something along those lines anyway. He is in a hurry - why? Is he anxious to get rid of the bag? Does he know that the British Army are already alerted to something being up? Since he is the one who is killed at the ambush at Knocksedan, it is clear that Maguire is a firm Republican and probably in a state of high excitement having received orders to take part in the ill-fated ambush.

There are two distinct ways of approaching Maguire. Either he is a 'small' character, a tiny cog in the Republican wheel, who just happens to be caught up in the action and made memorable by being killed at Knocksedan, or he is a more 'heroic' figure all together - like the 'gunman' who so inspires the inhabitants of the tenement. Either way, the portrayal of him can act as a potent counterpoint to the meaning of the play.

If he is played as an insignificant character - as is suggested by Seumas' less than respectful treatment of him - then it makes a comment about the kind of people who are caught up in the rebellion and ultimately makes a cynical comment about the rebellion itself. [This would accord with O'Casey's own cynical feelings about it.] Played this way, Maguire becomes a cocky little character, rather in love with his own air of mystery and dropping hints of his great dealings with his talk about 'catching butterflies.' His words, coloured with this attitude, will be portentous, dropping heavy hints, trying to make himself sound important.

If played 'heroically', then Maguire becomes genuinely mysterious, entering as if a hunted man, clutching the bag to him, muttering his words darkly, even sinisterly. This version will make the audience pay more attention to the bag and perhaps alert them to its possible contents. Seumas' attempts at lording it over him, in