

## THAT DREADFUL PLAY.

(By PAT.)

Dublin audiences are said to be very critical, and those at the Abbey Theatre are said to be the most critical of them, but they have not yet permitted themselves to see "The Playboy of the Western World," and I hope the plucky players will play on until there is a chance to understand, when the screaming has exhausted itself. The screamers do not know what they are missing.

In a way there are two plays, one within another, and unless the inner one is seen, I am not surprised at the screaming about the outer one, which in itself is repellent, and must so remain until seen in the light of the conception out of which it arises, as when we welcome a profane quotation in a sermon, recognising a higher purpose that it is employed to emphasise. "The Playboy of the Western World" is a highly moral play, deriving its motive from sources as pure and as lofty as the externals of its setting are necessarily wild and vulgar; and I cannot but admire the moral courage of the man who has shot his dreadful searchlight into our cherished accumulation of social skeletons. He has led our vision through the Abbey street stage into the heart of Connacht, and revealed to us there truly terrible truths, of our own making, which we dare not face for the present. The merciless accuracy of his revelation is more than we can bear. Our eyes tremble at it. The words chosen are, like the things they express, direct and dreadful, by themselves intolerable to conventional taste, yet full of vital beauty in their truth to the conditions of life, to the character they depict, and to the sympathies they suggest. It is as if we looked in a mirror for the first time, and found ourselves hideous. We fear to face the thing. We shrink at the word for it. We scream.

True, a play ought to explain itself; but then, the audience has not yet permitted it to explain itself. Perhaps the externals are unworkably true to the inherent facts of life behind them; but that is a superficial matter, and though it is hard for an artist to select language less strong than the truth impelling him, I think a working modification may be arrived at without sacrificing anything essential. Mr. Synge must remember that the shock was sincere.

"Pegeen" is a lively peasant girl in her father's publichouse on the wild wayside by the Western sea, and it is arranged for her to marry "Shaneen Keogh," the half idiot, who has a farm, but not enough intelligence to cut his yellow hair. There is no love. Who could think of loving "Shaneen"? Love could not occur to her through him. He has not enough intelligence to love. He has not enough character to have a single vice in him, and his only apparent virtue is a trembling terror of "Father Reilly." Yet there is nothing unusual in the marriage of such a girl to such a person, and it does not occur to her that love ought to have anything to do with the matter.

Why is "Pegeen" prepared to marry him? "God made him; therefore, let him pass for a man," and in all his unfitness, he is the fittest available! Why? Because the fit ones have fled. He remains because of his cowardice and his idiocy in a region where fear is the first of the virtues, and where the survival of the unfittest is the established law of life. Had he been capable, he would have fled. His lack of character enables him to accept the conditions of his existence, where more character could but make him less acceptable, and, therefore, less happy. Character wants freedom, and so escapes, but the "Shaneens" remain to reproduce themselves in the social scheme. We see in him how the Irish race die out in Ireland, filling the lunatic asylums more full from a declining population, and selecting for continuance in the future the human specimens most calculated to bring the race lower and lower. "Shaneen" shows us why Ireland dies while the races around us prosper faster and faster. A woman is interested in the nearest thing to a man that she can find within her reach, and that is why "Pegeen" is prepared to marry her half idiot with the yellow hair. "Shaneen" accepts terror as the regular condition of his existence, and so there is no need for him to emigrate with the strong and clever ones who insist on freedom for their lives.

Such is the situation into which the "Playboy" drifts, confessing in callous calmness that he has killed his father, and claiming sanctuary as pot boy in the publichouse—not, by the way, a convincing position in which to disguise a murderer. Women do not choose murderers for their husbands, but

the "Playboy" is a real, live man, and the only other choice is the trembling idiot, who would be incapable even to kill his father. Instinctively and immediately, "Pegeen" prefers the murderer. Besides, there is the story of why he "stretched his father with the loy." The father had wanted to force him into a marriage with a woman he hated. The son had protested. The father had raised the scythe, but the son's blow with the spade had fallen first. Murder is not pleasant, but what of the other crime—that of a father forcing his son to marry a woman he hated? Were it not for this crime, the other could not have followed. A real, live man was new and fascinating to "Pegeen," even a parricide, and the man who had killed his father, rather than marry a woman he hated, might at least be capable of loving sincerely. Then, he was a man who had achieved something, if only murder, and he had achieved the murder obviously because his better character had not been permitted to govern him. When trembling idiocy tends to be the standard of life, intelligence and courage can easily become criminal, and women do not like trembling men. In their hearts, they prefer murderers. What is a woman to do in conditions of existence that leave her a choice only between the cowardly fool and the courageous criminal?

The choice itself is full of drama, the more tragic because it is the lot of a community. The woman's only alternatives are to be derelict or to be degraded; poor "Pegeen" personifies a nation in which the "Shaneens" prevail, and in which strong, healthy men can stay only to be at war with their surroundings. It is the revolt of Human Nature against the terrors ever inflicted on it in Connacht, and in some subtle way of his own the dramatist has succeeded in realising the distinction; so that even when the guilt is confessed, we cannot accept "The Playboy" quite as a murderer, and we are driven back to the influences of his environment for the origin of his responsibility, feeling that if we do not permit men to grow morally, we are ourselves to blame for the acts by which they shock us. Such are Synge's insights into life and character in Connacht. Can the Western peasantry have a truer friend than the one who exhibits to criticism and to condemnation the forces afflicting their lives?

The peasant women of Connacht are no more partial to murderers than other women in other countries, but we must take the conduct of women anywhere in the light of their environment, and we must take the conduct of men in the same way. The difference between a hero and a murderer is sometimes, in the comparative numbers they have killed, morally in favour of the murderer; and we all know how the "pale young curate" loses his drawingroom popularity when the unmarried subaltern returns from his professional blood-spilling. It is not that women love murder; it is that they hate cowardice, and in "Pegeen's" world it is hard for a man to be much better than a coward. Hence the half-idiot with the yellow hair, who, controlling his share of the nation's land, can inflict his kind on the community generation after generation.

The fierce truth and intensity of the dramatist's insight make strength of expression inevitable, but, confining myself strictly to the artistic interest, I feel that the language is overdone, and that the realism is overdone. They irritate, and, worse still, they are piled up to such excess in the subsidiaries of expression as to make us lose sight in some measure of the dramatic essentials. As to the discussions on feminine under-clothing, I have often heard discussions more familiar among the peasantry themselves, without the remotest suggestion of immorality, and if Dublin is shocked in this connection, it is because its mind is less clean than that of the Connacht peasant woman.

In itself, the plot is singularly undramatic by construction, suggesting drama rather than exploiting "cheap" effect. We have to think down along the shafts of light into Connacht in order to realise the picture at the end of the vista, but when we see it we find it inevitable and fascinating. The play is more a psychological revelation than a dramatic process, but it is both.

I have not said much to suggest "comedy," which is the official adjective for this play. I have tried to bring out the unseen interests that await criticism and appreciation while the Abbey street audiences scream. It is a play on which many articles could be written.

There was a large audience last night, mainly there to "boo," but they must pay to come in, so that the management stands to make money, and to be heard in the end.

Five men in the Government service were arrested at Chatham yesterday, under a warrant, for conspiring to steal a large quantity of metal from the dockyard.