



Above: an early poster for JM Synge's 'The Playboy Of The Western World' at the Abbey Theatre, seen left in 1913 and its auditorium below in 1904.

COURTESY: ABBEY THEATRE ARCHIVE



Laughter and tears

PLANS for an Irish national theatre were being made by WB Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn in the late 1890s when popular interest in theatre was at its height.

With the approach of the new century, new limits on the length of the working week led to a huge increase in the demand for entertainment and popular amusement across the United Kingdom.

Not surprisingly, this period witnessed a great expansion in theatre — the great popular form of amusement of the 19th century. Dublin was no different and theatre experienced something of a boom in the final decades of Victoria's reign. Venues such as the Queen's Theatre, the Gaiety Theatre and the Theatre Royal thrived and were commercially successful. It is worth noting, however, that the Victorian theatre experience was very different from what we might be used to in our own times. In general, the popular theatres were much more raucous places. Patrons expected a lively night out and were not shy about making their feelings known if they didn't like what they were seeing on stage.

This is an era that we associate with the 'music hall' format, which would offer a variety of entertainments in any one show. Songs, recitations, dancing, magic and comic routines might all be part of the programme — some acts being received more favourably than others. In fact, the hostile reception that JM Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* received when it was

Theatre was the centre of entertainment and so varied — even anti-Irish at times — one hundred years ago, writes **PJ Mathews**

first produced on the Abbey stage in 1907 was, in many ways, a throwback to the boisterous conventions of music hall.

Audiences also loved the suspense and emotional intensity of melodrama. The plots tended to be simplistic and the characters generally virtuous 'goodies' or evil 'baddies'. The use of tricks and special effects was hugely appealing too. Theatrical farces also attracted huge houses, with knock-about characters and witty dialogue provoking much laughter.

It is hard to imagine now the impact that theatre had at this time before the existence of the internet, TV, radio and cinema. A casual flick through the newspapers of the period, however, reveals how important the theatre was in cultural life. Almost daily, readers could find reviews and articles about current and forthcoming productions, as well as interviews with leading playwrights and actors. Indeed the celebrity culture of the day, such as it existed, was dominated by figures from the world of theatre.

Towards the end of the 19th century, however, we begin to see a significant change of attitude amongst the intelligentsia in relation to theatre.

The tide begins to turn against what is regarded as an unhealthy obsession with 'triviality'. Writers, artists and intellectuals all over Europe begin to recoil from what they see as the low standards and cheap laughter of popular culture. To those concerned with the erosion of 'high culture', the music halls had become the worst manifestation of a profit-driven, materialist and industrial age. This thinking led to fresh ideas about drama and its role in society, and opened up new possibilities for the theatre.

Henrik Ibsen revolutionised European drama with his 'theatre of ideas', which aimed to make the theatre more than just a place of amusement. He tried to shift the focus from commercial to artistic success. Under his influence new avant-garde theatres were founded in Paris, Berlin and London.

Ireland was not impervious to the influence of mass culture in the late 19th century. Especially in urban areas, English fashions, publications and popular entertainments flourished. And, as was happening all over Europe, Irish intellectuals began to voice their disapproval of popular entertainments.

They were also alert to an added complication — not only were most popular entertainments (as they saw them) vulgar and materialistic, but many were imported and regarded as a threat to local forms of cultural expression.

Not surprisingly, the theatre would become a focus for this kind of critique. Many of the founders of the Abbey were disturbed by the fact that the drama performed on Dublin stages was provided almost exclusively by British touring companies for whom the city was merely another stop on the UK circuit. Indeed it wasn't unusual for visiting companies to mount plays featuring stage Irish characters for the 'amusement' of Irish audiences.

In 1904 the Abbey Theatre was set up to counteract these cultural tendencies. The idea was to provide a space that would encourage Irish playwrights to write plays for Irish audiences. This new venture would provide an alternative to the commercial theatres by aiming for artistic rather than financial success. Nonetheless, some of the greatest plays produced by the early Abbey Theatre (notably those of JM Synge, Lady Gregory and Seán O'Casey) were as influenced by the farce and knockabout of the popular theatres as by the high-minded manifesto of the new theatre.

Dr PJ Mathews is a Senior Lecturer in the UCD School of English, Drama and Film

