

A PRINCELY PLAY

Grandchild of Kings, adapted by Hal Prince from O'Casey's autobiographies, is acted by The Irish Repertory Theatre

The Irish Repertory Theatre Company, co-founded by actors Charlotte Moore and Ciarán O'Reilly, has not known an empty seat since its inception in 1988. The luck of the Irish continues with its current, most ambitious production, *Grandchild of Kings* at the Theater for the New City on First Avenue and Tenth Street in Manhattan. Adapted from the autobiographies of famed Irish playwright Sean O'Casey by Harold Prince and directed by him, this is part one of a planned trilogy based on the six volumes of O'Casey's epic work.

During a recent visit to PLAYBILL Ms. Moore and Mr. O'Reilly explained how

this expansive project came about. "It all started when Hal's wife Judy gave him all six volumes of O'Casey's autobiography for his birthday," Moore recalls. "Judy had been a great admirer of O'Casey and his works and had written him a letter in 1956. Months later, she received a nice reply from him, which she cherishes to this day."

O'Reilly adds: "Hal read the books and told Judy that they were so visual that he kept seeing them on the stage. 'Well,' she asked, 'why don't you put them on the stage?'"

It took Prince two years to adapt O'Casey's first two volumes—*I Knock at*



Members of The Irish Repertory Theatre Company in a scene from *Grandchild of Kings*

by Louis Botto



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The play, with a cast of 19 actors and four musicians, covers O'Casey's life from birth to his early twenties

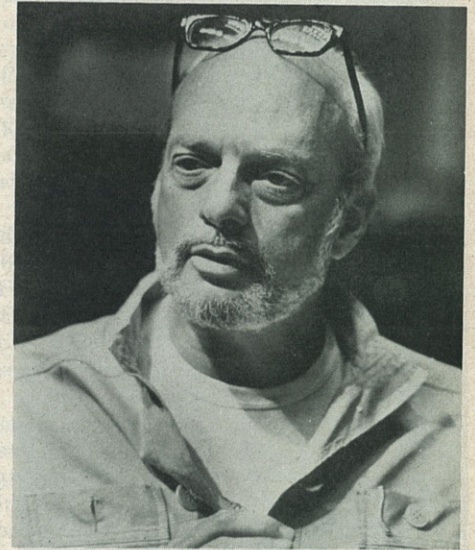
the *Door* and *Pictures in the Hallway*—to a two-act play. “I imagine that his biggest problem,” says Moore, “was condensation. After Hal was finished we had to cut a great deal of gorgeous material.”

The play covers O'Casey's life from birth to his early twenties. It has a cast of 19 actors and four musicians—large for an Off-Broadway show. Happily, although announced for a limited engagement, the play has been extended, thanks to sold-out houses.

When Prince sent his finished script to Moore and O'Reilly, they were both mad for it. “Hal asked us if we could round up our company for a reading,” Moore recalls. “We did and invited only four or five people—including Judy Prince—to hear it. We had great fun reading it. It was alive and wonderful. We knew immediately that we had a viable project.”

O'Reilly remembers that they had trouble finding a proper theatre for it. “We needed a big empty space. We looked at Theater for the New City but discovered that it was in a state of chaos. Later, when we went back, we found they had done a lot of work on the theatre. Among other things they had raised the roof six or seven feet, which made it the perfect space for this play.”

Set designer Eugene Lee, who worked with Prince on two of his most distinguished environmental productions, *Candide* and *Sweeney Todd*, winning Tony Awards for both, has enveloped audiences at Theater for the New City in a re-creation of Dublin—a typical Irish pub, interiors and exteriors of shops and homes, city streets and even public conveyances. Prince, a master of environmental theatre direction, sets spectators in the midst of the action, from the very moment they enter the theatre. “Eugene Lee's set is marvelous,” says Moore, “because as soon as people walk into the theatre, they feel as if they are in Dublin. I often stand by the door, and I see the expression on their faces. It's great fun.”



It took director Hal Prince two years to adapt O'Casey's work for the stage

Before the play begins a piano player and singer entertain the audience with a medley of Irish songs. At the performance we attended the house was jammed with Irish theatregoers who knew these songs and joined in singing them. It was a lively warm-up for the story of O'Casey's early days in Dublin.

The play depicts O'Casey's troubled youth when his ulcerated eyes kept him from attending school. Three actors play O'Casey at different ages: Padraic Moyles as a boy, Patrick Fitzgerald as a teen-ager and Chris O'Neill as the writer in his old age. Mr. Fitzgerald looks remarkably like the old O'Casey and acts as the play's narrator. Pauline Flanagan, who actually met O'Casey and has played leading roles in many of his works, acts the playwright's mother in this production. Ciarán O'Reilly, Ciarán Sheehan and Michael Judd play O'Casey's three brothers.

In part one of this trilogy O'Casey, despite his poor eyesight, reads the Bible and the classics and begins discovering the

Grandchild of Kings is another feather in the caps of Moore and O'Reilly, founders of The Irish Repertory Theatre



Moore and O'Reilly bring a "native understanding" to Irish and American drama

richness of literary language. He becomes involved with a local amateur acting company, which inspires his interest in writing for the stage. There is an uproarious scene in which he rehearses the death scene of *Richard III* in Shakespeare's play. During these years he also takes a tedious position in an industrial office, becomes involved with the surging political movements in Dublin and has his first sexual experience. Up to this point in the play, his name is John Cassidy. At the play's end a co-rebel who is rallying against the English inspires him to Gaelicize his name to Sean O'Casey.

An ingenious stage that is part of Eugene Lee's setting serves as the rowdy background for O'Casey's acting adventures. A three-woman trio of musicians and singers called Morning Star (composed of Mary Courtney, guitarist and bodhran player; fiddler Carmel Johnston;

and whistle and flute player Margie Mulvihill) add to the play's convivial spirit.

In order to accustom the large cast to environmental staging, the complex setting was built before rehearsals started. "We could not have rehearsed this play in a studio or rehearsal hall," Moore reports. "Hal's plan of having us rehearse in the completed set really worked out. Every rehearsal was like a technical run-through. I was Hal's assistant on the production. He worked on the larger aspects of the play—he has wonderful 'large vision'—he really makes things happen on the stage. I worked with the actors on specific scenes. I was sort of a drill master with the actors of my company that I know so well. Hal would say to them, 'Now Charlotte will drill you.' Judy Prince attended many of the rehearsals. She cried a lot. She's very sentimental about O'Casey and the Irish. And she's very astute about the theatre."

For Moore and O'Reilly the success of *Grandchild of Kings* is still another feather in their caps. Moore hails from a small town in the southern tip of Illinois; O'Reilly, who has a mellifluous Irish brogue, from a town 50 miles outside Dublin, Ireland. They met when they did a play together called *Summer* by Hugh Leonard at the Hudson Guild Theatre in New York. "We also did it in Palm Beach," Moore recalls, "and Pauline Flanagan, who's in our current play, was in it, as well as Brian Murray, who directed it."

According to O'Reilly, he and Moore wanted to produce an Irish play together with Moore directing it and O'Reilly appearing in it. They chose O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* and presented it in 1988 at the 18th Street Playhouse. "That was the beginning of The Irish Repertory Theatre," says Moore, "and we jam-packed the theatre every night. You have no idea of the appeal that O'Casey and The Irish Repertory Theatre had for people."

"It was incredible," O'Reilly adds. "We

had no money for advertising, yet we had a waiting list of people who wanted tickets. We used some of our own money to produce the play and raised more money from friends. We did three more plays that season—*I Do Not Like Thee, Dr. Fell* by Bernard Farrell; *Yeats: A Celebration . . . in his own words*; and *A Whistle in the Dark* by Thomas Murphy."

The Yeats project, conceived and directed by Moore, was invited by Joe Papp to give additional performances at his Public Theater; and *A Whistle in the Dark* was moved to the South Street Theatre on 42nd Street.

"After that," O'Reilly states, "we did a lot of plays at the South Street Theatre. We're really an itinerant theatre looking for a permanent home."

"We like to keep our standards high," Moore says. "We hire people we know are good. Most of our actors were either born in Ireland or are of Irish descent. We're really a tightly knit family group."

Highlights of the second season in-

cluded a splendid revival of Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* and a special performance of Samuel Beckett's radio play, *All That Fall*. Gardiner McKay's critically acclaimed *Sea Marks* ran in repertory with the U.S. premiere of *English That For Me*, an evening of storytelling by the famed Irish narrator Eamon Kelly. Another N.Y. premiere—*End-words*—a one-man show based on Beckett's writings—starred Chris O'Neill.

The company's most recent productions have been *Playboy of the Western World*; the New York premiere of Brian Friel's *Making History; A Tribute to Beckett*, featuring the New York premiere of *Stirrings Still*; and *Alive, Alive Oh!*, starring Milo O'Shea and Kitty Sullivan.

"We're a non-profit company," Moore says, "and we haven't made any profit. But we get all our bills paid. Our goal is to give theatregoers an opportunity to see Irish and American drama, performed professionally with a native understanding." □

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