

Update of Irish classic

Radical reimagining of “The Plough and the Stars” is still moving.

By Julia M. Klein
 FOR THE INQUIRER

This isn't your Irish grandmother's *The Plough and the Stars*.

With its stark fluorescent lighting, percussive musical underscoring, modern dress, presentational acting, and prodigious use of stage blood, the Abbey Theatre's revival recalls Belgian director Ivo van Hove's recent, controversial Broadway productions of Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* and *The Crucible*.

In Sean Holmes' radical reimagining of Sean O'Casey's 1926 classic, characters grab microphones when they burst into song, an offstage voice emanates from a remote-controlled television, and a looter hauls a 21st-century washing machine. Such touches may seem jarring to audiences already struggling with the play's political complexities and Irish brogues. But there's no denying this production's musical and comic brio, or the quality of its ensemble.

Holmes' ahistorical approach is ironic for an undertaking so steeped in history. This touring production celebrates the centenary of the Easter Rising of 1916, Ireland's failed but imaginatively stirring rebellion against British rule. The event serves as both setting and subject of the play, in which a group of Dublin tenement dwellers quarrel, gossip, drink, and make love before becoming agents, witnesses, or victims of the violence.

It was the Abbey Theatre that originally premiered *The Plough and the Stars*, whose title references the flag of the Irish Citizen Army. O'Casey's obvious disillusionment with the bloody Easter Rising, already romanticized in popular memory, occasioned riots among playgoers.



Ian-Lloyd Anderson and Kate Stanley Brennan are Jack and Nora Clitheroe, whose stormy marriage is at the center of “The Plough and the Stars.” ROS KAVANAGH

THEATER REVIEW

► The Plough and the Stars

Through Oct. 16, presented by the Abbey Theatre, at the Annenberg Center, 3680 Walnut St.

Tickets: \$25-\$55.
 Information: 215-898-3900 or annenbergcenter.org

At the drama's tragic heart is the stormy marriage of Jack and Nora Clitheroe. Jack (a fiery Ian-Lloyd Anderson) embraces the nationalist cause. Nora (the heart-stirring Kate Stanley Brennan) wants him home and is willing to brave danger and scorn to exert her claim.

Around them circle an array of types: As the carpenter Fluther Good, a likable Everyman intent on swearing off drink, the great David Ganly owns the show's comic moments. Bessie Burgess (Hilda Fay) spikily proclaims her loyalty to Britain, while sparring with Mrs. Gogan (Janet Moran), a gossipy charwoman improbably clad by costume designer Catherine Fay in jeans and high-heeled sandals. Ciarán

O'Brien's Young Covey, an ardent socialist, battles with Nora's old-fashioned uncle, Peter Flynn (James Hayes).

O'Casey's concerns — the dangers of mass movements, the impact of war on ordinary people, the need to put aside sectarian and religious differences — today seem unobjectionable. When a television demagogue intones the rhetoric of Irish rebel leader Patrick Pearse, “Bloodshed is a cleansing and sanctifying thing,” the effect is chilling.

Jon Bausor's set disdains realism in favor of scaffolding for the tenement building and a smattering of furniture for the Clitheroes' apartment. Lighting designer Paul Keogan bathes the stage in fluorescents and violet lights, and Philip Stewart's music and sound design energize the show.

The juxtaposition of O'Casey's poetic vernacular and historical specificity with contemporary props, costumes, and music risks incoherence. But when Brennan's Nora makes her desperate, agrieved antiwar case, *The Plough and the Stars* casts its customary spell.

