

The Abbey Theatre and Annenberg Center present 'The Plough and the Stars'

History made present

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Sean O'Casey wrote *The Plough and the Stars* 90 years ago, setting his then-controversial drama during Ireland's Easter Rising, the 1916 violent birth of the Irish Republic. However, the Abbey Theatre production now touring the United States is re-imagined from an in-your-face contemporary perspective that might bother some purists. It also makes history many Americans might not know fresh and relevant.



Liam Heslin in the Abbey Theatre's production. (Photo by Ros Kavanagh)

Loud and bright

Sean Holmes's intense production begins with a Mollser (Rachel Gleeson), a shy girl, singing a patriotic song into a microphone. Midway through, she's stopped by her intense coughing, and expels blood onto her lyric sheet. Horrified, she runs off, and the curtain opens to reveal Jon Bausor's minimal set, featuring a three-story scaffolding unit that suggests an austere modern tenement building. We're blasted by Philip Stewart's modern punk music, Paul Keogan's lighting

features cold florescent tubes but is also colorfully abstract, and Catherine Fay costumes the impoverished Dublin ensemble of characters in mostly modern clothes.

This production's concepts and designs might remind Philadelphia theatergoers of a Wilma Theater show; that is high praise.

Without changing dialogue, Holmes's actors mix a naturalistic approach with some deliberately different ideas. Characters often turn to address the audience directly, and cross the stage to borrow Mollser's microphone for added emphasis. This heightens many laughs — O'Casey's story, for all its realistic tragedy, is quite funny — but it also helps us focus on individual characters' plights.

World class acting

The Abbey, founded in 1904, premiered O'Casey's plays including *The Plough and the Stars*. As one should expect from a world-renowned company, the acting is superb. Kate Stanley Brennan plays Nora Clitheroe, a pregnant woman understandably concerned about her husband Jack (Ian-Lloyd Anderson), who serves in the Irish Citizen Army, opposing the occupying British troops. Colorful characters live among them in their poor tenement, including Fluther Good (David Ganly), Bessie Burgess (Hilda Fay), The Young Covey (Ciaran O'Brien), Rosie Redmond (Nyree Yergainharsian), and Peter Flynn (James Hayes), plus Mrs. Gogan (Janet Moran), and daughter Mollser. The play has been criticized since its first riot-inspiring performance for its characters's loose morals and unheroic attitudes, but their genuine humanity makes the revolt's violent events devastatingly tragic.

The Abbey's production broadens the play's focus: it's not only a play about Irish history, but also a probing drama about war's effects on ordinary people.

The second act's farcical action, set in a local pub, is offset by the rising political tensions at an offstage rally. The characters hear the leader's speeches through the bar's television, of course. In Act III, a graffiti-strewn wall is the backdrop for the tenement residents' reactions to nearby street battles. In the final act, that three-story tower is lowered to its side, becoming a platform upon which the revolt's painful costs are revealed. When British soldiers finally appear in the play, they're dressed in modern combat uniforms and carrying today's weapons and gears. They could be American troops in Afghanistan, Iraq, or, soon, Syria.

The imagery is unmistakable and brutal, and this production both honors this classic play and delivers its larger theme: bloody history is occurring now, all over the world.

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