

Lost works return to stage

Retta Blaney | Oct. 1, 2010



Teresa Deevy

She had six plays produced at Dublin, Ireland's Abbey Theater in six years in the 1930s. When her seventh met with rejection, she began writing for radio, despite having been deaf since 19, the result of Ménière's disease. In 1954 she was elected to the prestigious Irish Academy of Letters. The *Irish Times* called her one of the most significant Irish playwrights of the 20th century. Yet few people in Ireland today and even fewer in America know the name of Teresa Deevy.

The Mint Theater Company, an award-winning off-Broadway theater in New York City, plans to tackle that obscurity over the next two years with its Teresa Deevy Project, which will produce two of her plays as well as offer readings, recordings and publications.

"I found her because I asked the question, 'Who were the woman writing plays in the first 50 years of the Abbey?' said Jonathan Bank, the Mint's artistic director. "I began with the perception that the history of theater in Ireland was a lot of men and then, oh, yeah, there was Lady Gregory."

He found that other women's plays had been produced, but only Deevy's had been published, and then only a few.

"What gets remembered and produced is a little bit arbitrary," Bank said, sitting in his midtown office one hot summer afternoon during rehearsals for "Wife to James Whelan," the play rejected by the Abbey in 1937 and subsequently only produced once, in 1956, when it received a critically acclaimed production at the small but influential Studio Theatre Club in Dublin. It has never been seen anywhere since. This should not be criteria for judging the play, Bank said, but many people think that if they haven't heard of a work, it must not have been good in the first place.

"That's not a great measure of talent of the playwright and the worth of the play, but once that idea gets set, it's hard to overcome, which is why we're trying to throw as much muscle as we have behind her," he said.

What Bank found in all of Deevy's work was a deep spirituality rooted in her Catholic upbringing. Born in 1894 in Waterford, Deevy, who died in 1963, was one of 13 children. Two of the seven girls became nuns, the

other five never married. One of the boys was a priest, an uncle was a Jesuit. Teresa was a boarder at the local Ursuline school, where her writing was published in the school magazine.

"She was a devout, daily-Mass-attending Catholic," Bank said. She also made yearly pilgrimages to Lourdes as a stretcher-bearer for the sick, and on a trip to Rome had an audience with the pope.



Some of her works reflect this more directly than others. "The Wild Goose" was

about the persecution of Catholic priests in the 1690s; "Supreme Dominion" focuses on the 17th-century Irish priest Luke Wadding. The two plays the Mint is producing -- "Wife to James Whelan" and "Temporal Powers" -- have plots that are less directly Catholic, although the characters are.

"Wife to James Whelan," which has been extended through Oct. 3, is set in a small town in the middle of Ireland and tells a story of conflict between ambition and happiness as a young man must choose between the hometown woman he loves and his desire to make his mark in Dublin. The Irish Times called it "a play of tragic proportion," likening the central character to King Lear -- "a tormented figure, passionate yet ambitious, kindly yet prone to blinding anger."

"Temporal Powers," which will be produced in 2012, presents "the eternal question of salvation," Bank said. A couple, having lost their home, takes shelter in an abandoned building where they find a great deal of money stashed in a wall. The wife wants to keep it; the husband asks what good it will do them if in keeping it they face damnation.

Deevy "does not come down on one side or the other," Bank said. "She makes a really balanced argument and we're left to make that decision ourselves. That's true of all her work. You can't quite find her point of view."

The Abbey's rejection of "Wife to James Whelan," after six straight years of acceptance, can be attributed to political factors, Bank said, mentioning the new Irish constitution of 1937 that made it illegal for married women to work. The prevailing atmosphere would have been unfavorable to a woman playwright, even one who wasn't married. That her plays are unknown now is because so few of them were published. The Mint hopes to publish her collected works.

"Her people are so complex," Bank said about her characters. "The world she draws us into is a bit like a novel. In two hours you come to know people in a way we're unaccustomed to in the theater. It's more like the experience of reading a book."

He credits a heightened sensitivity that she may have been born with or might have developed because of her deafness. It was her handicap that actually led her to a life in the arts. After her family sent her to London to study lip-reading, she fell in love with the theater and decided to pursue a career as a playwright.

"She had a profound insight into human behavior, human psychology," Bank said.

In preparing to launch the Teresa Deevy Project, Bank made his first visit to Ireland to meet with her family and study her writings, which were heaped in boxes with no filing system. ?Wife to James Whelan? had disappeared for 40 years because the envelope it was in had been misfiled. Pages from some plays were missing, rendering them useless for production. Her family told him stories of her life and allowed him to copy her work.

?She was a very spiritual Catholic,? Bank said. ?She took it to heart. It was not knee-jerk to her. Although her plays are to a certain extent thrashing with this issue, they don?t read as a woman without conflict. As firm as her beliefs would have been, so were her questions.?

[Retta Blaney is the author of *Working on the Inside: The Spiritual Life Through the Eyes of Actors.*]

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