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Behan

The Complete Plays

**The Hostage • The Quare Fellow
Richard's Cork Leg
and three one-act plays**

Introduced by Alan Simpson

B L O O M S B U R Y

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Brendan Behan
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**The Quare Fellow, The Hostage,
Richard's Cork Leg,
Moving Out, A Garden Party, The Big House**

'It seems to be Ireland's function, every twenty years or so, to provide a playwright who will kick English drama from the past into the present. Brendan Behan may well fill the place vacated by Sean O'Casey.' Kenneth Tynan, *Observer*

This volume contains everything Behan wrote in dramatic form in English. First come the three famous full-length plays: *The Quare Fellow*, set in an Irish prison, is 'something very like a masterpiece' (John Russell Taylor); *The Hostage*, set in a Dublin lodging-house of doubtful repute, 'crowds in tragedy and comedy, bitterness and love, caricature and portrayal, ribaldry and eloquence, patriotism and cynicism, symbolism and music-hall songs, all on top of one another, apparently higgledy-piggledy, and yet wonderfully combining into a spiritual unity' (*The Times*); and *Richard's Cork Leg*, set largely in a graveyard, which is nevertheless 'a joyous celebration of life' (*Guardian*). There follow three little-known one-act plays originally written for radio and all intensely autobiographical, *Moving Out*, *A Garden Party* and *The Big House*.

The introduction, by Alan Simpson, who knew Behan well and first directed his work on stage, provides the essential biographical details as well as candid insights into Behan's working methods and his political allegiances. Also included in the volume is a wide-ranging bibliography.

Brendan Behan was born in Dublin in 1923, while his father, a housepainter and Republican activist, was in jail. Behan left school at fourteen but spent two years in Borstal and a further four (1942-46) in prison for political activities. Out of these experiences came his autobiography, *Borstal Boy* (1958), and his first stage play, *The Quare Fellow* (1954). His first radio plays were broadcast in Ireland in 1952 and he was writing a column for the *Irish Press* in 1954; but it was with the enormous success of Joan Littlewood's London productions of *The Quare Fellow* (in 1956) and *The Hostage* (in 1958), combined with Behan's much publicised drinking bouts, that he achieved international fame. A third play, *Richard's Cork Leg*, was left almost complete at his death in 1964 and was edited and directed by Alan Simpson for the 1972 Dublin Theatre Festival.

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BRENDAN BEHAN

The Complete Plays

**The Quare Fellow
The Hostage
Richard's Cork Leg**

**Moving Out
A Garden Party
The Big House**

*Introduced by Alan Simpson
with a bibliography by E. H. Mikhail*

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Brendan Behan: A Chronology

| <i>Play</i> | <i>First performance or broadcast</i> |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| Moving Out (<i>Radio Eireann</i>) | 1952 |
| A Garden Party (<i>Radio Eireann</i>) | 1952 |
| The Quare Fellow (<i>Pike Theatre, Dublin</i>) | 1954 |
| The Quare Fellow (<i>Theatre Royal, Stratford E.</i>) | 1956 |
| The Big House (<i>BBC Third Programme</i>) | 1957 |
| An Giall (The Hostage) (<i>An Damer, Dublin</i>) | 1958 |
| The Hostage (<i>Theatre Royal, Stratford E.</i>) | 1958 |
| Richard's Cork Leg (<i>Abbey Theatre, Peacock auditorium, Dublin</i>) | 1972 |

Introduction

Brendan and I first became acquainted in 1946 after he had been released from political internment in the Curragh Military Camp and I had been released from the Irish Army which had been guarding him. We became good friends and in 1954, not long after Carolyn Swift and I had started the Pike Theatre in Dublin, I heard he had written a play which he had sent to both the Abbey and the Gate Theatres. Neither showed signs of presenting it so I asked him to let me read it with a view to production in our tiny theatre.

While I loved the dialogue I found it somewhat repetitive and involuted and in need of some cutting. He had a lazy habit of starting off on a subject, dropping it, and then coming back to it later on, and so diminishing its dramatic impact.

Brendan was most agreeable about our comments and with a little patient bullying but no acrimony at all we got him to assist in making the necessary alterations.

The Quare Fellow opened in the Pike Theatre on 19 November 1954. The production was greeted mainly with critical acclaim but as the cast was large and the seating accommodation small we could only afford to run for four weeks. I then tried to arrange a new production in one of the large Dublin theatres. However there were political and social prejudices against Brendan as well as dislike (by managements) of the subject matter of the play (judicial hanging) and its realistic setting (Mountjoy Prison). It will be remembered that this was two years before the arrival of the kitchen sink and the dustbin in respectable theatres round the world.

After some time Brendan became impatient and sent the play to Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop. It opened there in May 1956 and was transferred to the West End for a six months' run. It was then very successfully presented by the Abbey Company in their temporary home in The Queen's Theatre, Dublin which had once been managed by Brendan's cousin, P. J. Bourke.

Meanwhile, after the initial success of *The Quare Fellow* at the Pike Theatre, Brendan had been commissioned by the Irish language organization, Gael Linn, to write a play in Irish. The result was *An Giall* which proved the most popular work written in Irish ever to be staged at An Darner, Gael Linn's theatre in Dublin. Subsequently Joan Littlewood persuaded Brendan to translate the play into English. *An Giall* became *The Hostage* which Miss Littlewood produced in London, Paris and New York.

After the international success of *The Hostage* and his autobiography (*Borstal Boy*) Brendan's output began to flag. He was drinking heavily and travelling extensively in the wake of various foreign productions of his plays.

Wishing to continue our association I turned to his radio plays, which had been commissioned by Radio Eireann and the BBC at various times, and adapted them for stage presentation at the Pike Theatre. The most successful of these was *The Big House* which was well received at the Pike and at Stratford E15 where I directed it in 1963.

Meanwhile Brendan had started on *Richard's Cork Leg*. Some time in 1964 I was contacted by the New York Theatre Guild to know if I would be interested in directing it. However the project fell through as apparently he failed to deliver more than the first act. Not long before returning to Dublin where he finally succumbed to alcoholism and diabetes Brendan had spent some time in California

and it was there that he wrote most of the rest of *Richard's Cork Leg* in several drafts. However the manuscripts got mixed up with other papers and neither Oscar Lewenstein, to whom also Brendan had given Act One, nor the New York Theatre Guild realised that any more existed.

In 1968 I was appointed Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre. Before leaving London where I had been living since 1960 Oscar gave me Act One and asked me to see if I could get the piece completed by any sympathetic Irish playwright. I could find no one suitable so the project was shelved again.

In 1971 Tomis MacAnna who was then running the Peacock Theatre (the Abbey's second auditorium) asked me if I would direct Act One of *Richard's Cork Leg* as a studio production with an O'Casey one-acter. I agreed, but before going into rehearsal called on Brendan's widow, Beatrice, to see if she could find any other fragments of unproduced dialogue, songs, etc., to round off the projected one-act production. She dug out a pile of manuscripts which I found to be various drafts of single full-length play incorporating the original Act One of *Richard's Cork Leg* but stopping short just before the denouement which he had indicated only by a laconic note saying that Cronin should die.

There was little time for a full scale production before the summer break so I did a preliminary editing, and we had a rehearsed reading to an enthusiastic invited audience just before going on our holidays.

I think I can properly claim that the cutting and editing that I carried out on the very wordy and rambling drafts of *Richard's Cork Leg* which Brendan had painfully typed out during his last years had produced the same result as would have been arrived at had the author lived to see it staged. Harold Hobson wrote when reviewing my Royal Court production:

The spirit of Behan ... is one of the most joyous, one of the most precious qualities encountered in the theatre in the last twenty years ... The happiness and the terror and the steady approach of death give an emotional unity to the fragments that Alan Simpson has gathered together from the writing that Behan left behind him when he died.

In fact 'the writing' is Brendan's last play as I believe he would have wished it to be presented. He had said all he thought he wanted to say. He thought he was going to die. *Richard's Cork Leg* is his theatrical last will and testament. Beatrice, his widow agrees.

He had learnt from Joan Littlewood's production of *The Hostage* that plot, development and a logical story line are not necessary for success in the modern theatre. He had not, however, advanced at all from *The Quare Fellow* as regards repetition and a careless disregard of the powers of concentration of an audience, which demands a certain degree of order and cohesion in developing the themes covered in individual sections of dialogue. Without his assistance I had therefore to select from several drafts the most vivid dialogue and rearrange the sequences in the order that gave them the most dramatic impact.

In doing this I had (reluctantly in some cases) to cut sections which though amusing in themselves would have overloaded the play with too similar anecdotes, one after another.* I had also to remove topical references which would in any case only have been meaningful to a Dublin audience of 1964 but which are now quite forgotten. Cronin, for instance, in addition to the activities referred to in the published text also occupied himself with selling on commission an ultra right-wing nationalist periodical called *Resurrection*; the point being that to earn a few extra coppers of drinking money the character would turn to any source available.

Brendan's enthusiasm for an idea sometimes ran away with him. In one draft Bonnie Prince Charlie produces three tape recordings of voices from the dead. One I gave substance to in the corpse that sings 'By the Old Apple Tree' (page 261). Another, a Jewish New Yorker who speaks in a mixture of

Yiddish and Irish, I returned to its grave unused. The third voice from the dead, one of Bonnie Prince Charlie's Irish clients, I gave to the spirit of Cronin in the ending I contrived. Brendan's dialogue stopped short at the end of Bawd II's riddle (page 308) 'a good nun under him'.

Except for a little cutting and a few changes of sequence the last scene is much as Brendan left it. He had discovered from *The Hostage* that a stage party with songs can work very well if jolly enough and the audience has been well warmed up.

And so it proved in Dublin and London, as well as in the experimental production I gave the piece in Urbana, Illinois. 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' and the various American allusions (springing from the author's New York experiences) were especially appreciated by the enthusiastic Midwestern audiences.



This collection of plays represents Behan's total performed and published dramatic output in English. A very early piece written in prison was lost or destroyed, and some snippets such as *The Landlady* and some short sequences in Irish have never received professional performance. Parts of them may have been incorporated (by the author) in some of the plays included in this volume.

In 1966 Tomás MacAnna (then Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre) commissioned Frank MacMahon to adapt *Borstal Boy* for the stage. MacAnna directed the premiere at the Abbey in 1967. During my own term as Artistic Director I brought his production to Paris as part of the Abbey's contribution to the 1969 *Théâtre des Nations* festival. It was very well received. Later he directed it on Broadway where it won the New York Drama Critics' Award for the best imported play of 1969–1970. He also directed it in Liverpool. I have myself directed a translation into Irish by Sean O'Carra in Galway, but it was not conceived by the author as a play and it has not been included in this volume. At the time of writing, there has been no production in London.



Brendan Behan was born in Dublin on 9 February, 1923 while his father was a Republican prisoner in Kilmainham jail. His mother had been married before to another Republican who had survived the 1916 Rebellion only to succumb to the influenza epidemic of 1918, leaving her with two children. She was a sister of Peadar Kearney, also a dedicated Republican and author of *A Soldier's Song* (the Irish national anthem) and many patriotic, lyrical and humorous ballads. After the father's release from jail the family set up home in North Dublin City in a crumbling tenement in Russell Street owned by Brendan's paternal grandmother. There were four more children.

Brendan's parents were a remarkable couple. Stephen, though a housepainter like his father before him, had for a while studied for the priesthood and was highly literate and articulate for a man of his background. Kathleen was and, as I write, is still a fine singer and had a marvellous fund of ballads and songs which she taught her children and performed on every possible occasion. As recently as 1972 (already in her eighties) I heard her outsinging and upstaging her son Dominic – a seasoned balladeer and recording artist – in front of a large audience at a family wedding party.

At about the age of eight the young Brendan joined the Fianna, a Republican youth organisation, the main recruiting body for the I.R.A.

By 1939 the character and politics of the sixteen-year-old Behan were firmly established.* From his mother he had acquired a Catholic religious practice, a romantic Republicanism, a fine voice and theatrical personality. From his father a catholic taste in literature (ranging from Shaw's Prefaces and

Yeats to Dickens and Dostoyevsky) and a sturdy left-wing trade-unionism tempered with a witty cynicism and a cheerful agnosticism. His grandmother on his father's side also had a strong influence on the young Behan. Well-to-do by the standards of that part of Dublin (which is near the *Monto* of Joyce's *Ulysses* – only cleaned up in the twenties by the Catholic puritans of the Legion of Mary), she introduced her favourite grandson to alcohol, a taste for easy living and some of the colourful characters who appear in his later plays.

This was the Brendan Behan who was eager to see action in the I.R.A. on the eve of World War II. While fully accepting its fanatical ideals he was not one to submit easily to the discipline necessary in an underground movement and soon embarked on the one-man bombing mission to Liverpool he describes so vividly and amusingly in *Borstal Boy*. His mother had only just forestalled his earlier attempt to join the small Irish Republican contingent recruited to fight against Franco in the Spanish Civil War.

Even at this age he had contributed stories and verses to various Republican organs and had had a poem published in the *Irish Press*. Brendan's formal education had started in a local convent school, continued (until 14) with the Christian Brothers and was furthered by the enlightened Borstal corrective establishment in England where he spent the years 1939–1941. Jail and political internment in Ireland from 1942–1946 gave him more opportunity for study. He became proficient in Irish which he learnt from a fellow prisoner in Mountjoy Jail who was a native speaker from Kerry. He did some writing and showed signs even then of aspiring to a life of devotion to letters.

In 1942 he had been sentenced to fourteen years (later commuted) for an incident after a Republican commemoration ceremony at Glasnevin Cemetery. This incident seems crucial to some of the attitudes revealed in *The Hostage* and *Richard's Cork Leg* and will be referred to again. His term in Mountjoy was to supply him with the background for *The Quare Fellow*.

On his release in 1946 he resumed work at his father's trade of housepainting to which he had been apprenticed at 14. At the same time he joined the Dublin literary and artistic underground where I met him and which included the poet and novelist Patrick Kavanagh, the literary critic and writer Anthony Cronin, the expatriate American novelist J. P. Donleavy and the portrait painter Sean O'Sullivan R.H.A. By 1950 he had had two short stories published in literary periodicals: *A Woman of No Standing* in John Ryan's *Envoy* in Dublin, and *After the Wake* in Sinbad Vail's *Points* in Paris, where he had spent some time alcoholically performing, and doing the occasional job of painting and signwriting. He had also had some Irish poetry published in a collection edited by Sean O Tuama.

1952 saw the first public performance of Behan the dramatist. Micheál Ó hAodha of Radio Eireann having already used Brendan as a singer and link-scriptwriter in a radio programme called *The Balladmaker's Saturday Night*, commissioned from him what Ó hAodha hoped would be a comedy series but which in fact turned out to be the two playlets, *Moving Out* and *The Garden Party*, which are published in this collection. Except for the farcical denouement of the latter piece, both are drawn from life. They illustrate how the author put his every experience to literary or dramatic use. They are only very slightly heightened versions of his own family's adventures when they were moved from their tenement rooms to a new suburban municipal housing estate.

Radio was a medium especially suited to Behan's lazy approach to dramaturgy. He could hop from scene to scene without the necessity of supplying his producer with stage directions. He could also avoid the mental effort of devising a plot that could be contained in one or two settings with a reasonably manageable number of characters.

Both little plays acted well on radio. They would have been improved by careful pruning (a skill which Brendan never learnt) but would then have been too short for their radio slot without further meaty additions to their plots. The modern vogue for lunch-hour theatre, for which they would have

been most suitable, had not evolved at the time of their stage premieres at the Pike in 1958 and when teamed with *The Big House* they made an insubstantial, if entertaining evening.

1953 saw the publication of a fictional serial in the *Irish Times* called *The Scarperer* which Behan wrote under the pseudonym of 'Emmet Street' in thirty instalments. Early in 1954 he was taken on as a regular and very individual gossip/feature writer by the *Irish Press* and was able at last to discard the overalls of a professional housepainter for good. September of that year was also the occasion of the world premiere of *The Quare Fellow* at the Pike as already described.

The impact of *The Quare Fellow* in 1954 was greatly sharpened by the fact that judicial hanging was still practised by the governments of both Ireland and Britain.

Despite the editing I have described and a little further tightening carried out for the Theatre Workshop productions in London, the text is as near to the author's manuscript as is the case with many plays published after their stage premiere. The nature of the cutting and transpositions can be clearly understood by an examination of the reproduction of page six of Behan's own original typescript of the play which he had titled *The Twisting of Another Rope*. Characterization and vivid dialogue indicate the author's acute powers of observation and his ability to put them on paper.

The basic construction of the piece is highly original in that the audience never see or hear the condemned man who is in a sense the central figure. This construction was totally Behan's and indicates his ability to think these things out when he had the time and the energy. He worked on this play over a number of years. Its only major fault as I saw it was that Dunlavin and Neighbour are absent from Act Three except as 'voices off'. They are the two who (after Regan) most engage our attention.



A page from Behan's original typescript of *The Quare Fellow*.

The handwriting is Alan Simpson's and Carolyn Swift's.

In my own two productions I contrived that they *appeared* at cell windows for the important dialogue in Act Three Scene Two. In the looser, less realistic techniques of today it might be possible to heighten this vital sequence by having them visible in some other way.

The arrival of *The Quare Fellow* at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East in 1956 was a turning point in

Behan's career.

The day-to-day artistic life of Dublin remains as isolated from the rest of the English-speaking world as it was in the eighteenth century. To achieve more than local recognition it was necessary for such as Peg Woffington and Richard Brinsley Sheridan and many other Dubliners of later periods to travel to London. And so it was with Behan.

He arrived at an opportune moment for Joan Littlewood also. She, Gerry Raffles (her partner, manager and companion) and some loyal players had spent years trying to establish her particular kind of theatre in the face of indifference and sometimes disapproval from the British cultural establishment. Only a few perceptive critics were prepared to make the inconvenient journey to Theatre Workshop's fairly recently acquired home in Angel Lane. Whatever the merits of her group-production technique, and they were many, they required *new* plays of quality to command widespread critical attention. *The Quare Fellow* suited this requirement admirably.

Littlewood and her company were in total sympathy with the play's implied condemnation of capital punishment, the morality of which was being hotly debated in Britain at that time. Enthusiasm and dedication to hard work for little reward together with a working class persona was what she demanded of her players. This comedy-drama with its large cast of proletarian characters and no starry roles was a perfect vehicle for the group. In fact it would have been extremely difficult for any other company or management in England to have cast the play at all in 1956. The lack of authentic accents might have been apparent to an Irish ear but was unnoticeable in London.

The subsequent six-month West End run was unprecedented at that time for an uncompromisingly Irish play. The British public had had enough of Ireland from 1800 to 1925 and even O'Casey was more respected than performed in London. Brendan's appearance in an alcoholic haze on BBC-TV created additional interest and the production would have run even longer if the cast had been smaller.

In 1955 Behan had married Beatrice Salkeld, a daughter of the Irish painter Cecil Salkeld, and she encouraged his literary ambitions. She was however unable to control his drinking – heavy even by the not inconsiderable standards of his Dublin cronies. It even increased under the nervous tensions of international fame.

After the London success of *The Quare Fellow* David Thomson of the BBC commissioned and produced the radio play *The Big House* for their Third Programme. It was broadcast in the spring of 1957.

The Big House reveals a facet of Behan's work and personality which only evolved and emerged strongly after he had completed *The Quare Fellow*, which is pretty straight reportage of his Mountjoy experiences. Brendan delighted in paradox and also saw himself, like George Bernard Shaw, as a go-between between the Irish and the English and between the rich, with whom he loved to mix and the 'undeserving poor', from whom he had sprung. In my 1963 production of *The Big House* on the stage of Stratford East, the well-off Anglo-Irish landlords (the Baldcocks) brought incredible joy to our English audience. It is interesting to note the progress of Behan's fascination with the use of contrasting ethnic and social types in his plays. Though frequently little more than vignettes, they are always skilfully drawn. My experience with *Richard's Cork Leg* leads me to believe that had Brendan's drinking and illness not so handicapped his powers during this last years he could have become as much an interpreter of the British to the Americans and vice versa as he is for the Irish, the English, the rich and the poor in the plays in this volume, as well as in his *Borstal Boy*.

Back in Dublin, also in the spring of 1957, Gael Linn commissioned *An Giall*. Behan had given up his *Irish Press* column when the substantial royalties from the West End production of *The Quare Fellow* had started to come in. Gael Linn gave him £75 down and £75 to be paid on delivery of the

script. His ten per cent from the packed houses of the tiny Pike auditorium bade in 1954 had amounted to less than £50 for the four-week run.

An Giall (The Hostage) opened in An Damer, Dublin on 16 June 1958. There has been some controversy as to the differences between the Irish text as performed in An Damer and the text of *The Hostage* as performed in Wyndham's Theatre, London, which is the text printed in this collection. Although I have directed the piece (in Irish, in Galway), I am no Irish scholar so I asked the publisher to commission a good literal translation for me to examine, since considerations of space would not allow for its inclusion in this edition. The translation has been made from the text available in the offices of An Conradh na Gaeilge by Pádraig Ó Siochrú, an Irish scholar and professional translator. Mr Ó Siochrú is also thoroughly familiar with the play, having seen the premiere several times in An Damer as well as having later made a television adaptation of it in Irish for Radio Telefís Éireann.

The Irish text is very short, especially in Act Three. The addition of songs (by Behan, with a few lines of obviously London origin inserted here and there), of major stage directions for dances and business (e.g. p.204) which are undoubtedly stage manager's notes from the Wyndham's production and the addition of the characters Mulleady and Gilchrist have brought the piece up to a length acceptable in the commercial theatre. These two characters show signs both of the improvisation of English actors and the farcical talents of Mr Behan himself. The other extra characters seem to have evolved from Ropeen, Colette, The Rat, Sod, Scholar and Bobo, who in the Irish text are mentioned as residents in the establishment (which is called 'The Hole'), but do not actually appear on stage. Their lines are mostly either taken from Pádraig (Pat) or Cait (Meg) or are very obviously actors' improvisations. Otherwise Pat, Meg, Monsewer, Leslie, Teresa, the I.R.A. Officer and the Volunteer are identical characters in both texts. The pianist of course was added in production in London.

The story-line is the same in both texts, even to the comical sequence where Leslie and the Volunteer both want to go to the lavatory. However the ending has been changed by the addition of the song and by a different set of business. In the Irish text Leslie meets his death not as described in the stage directions (p. 231), but in a cupboard into which he has been stuffed by Pádraig, and bound and gagged to hide him from the police. He has suffocated.

The Irish text in literal translation reads, not surprisingly not unlike J. M. Synge. Teresa's (Teresa's) curtain speech goes as follows:

It's not the Six Counties that's bothering you, you are trying to get bade two things you can't get bade, your youth and your lost leg.

Leslie, there was none of your people there to mourn you, love. I will be your little mother, your little sister, your lover and I will never forget you. [*Crying.*] Never, never, never.

When handing me his translation Mr Ó Siochrú remarked, quoting from an Italian proverb he had also translated literally: 'The translator is a traitor. A text cannot be translated without raping the original.' Apart from the additions mentioned above, the English text has been edited much in the same way as Behan's other texts were edited, or should have been edited. *An Giall* received like treatment from director Frank Dennody and the original cast for the more realistic Dublin production of the premiere in Irish. Nevertheless I see little justification in the accusation that was hurled at Behan in my presence at a public meeting (circa 1959) by the poet the late Donagh MacDonagh that Behan's plays were 'written for him'.

The production by Theatre Workshop of *The Hostage* was an important landmark in the development of live theatre. The text of *The Hostage* was perhaps the best they were to receive and was ideally suited to the Littlewood approach. That that approach, now largely absorbed into theatrical practice, would have its enemies was inevitable. Sean O'Casey wrote to me on 17 July 1961:

Concerning your idea of the possible production of one of my latest plays in the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, I have to say that I don't look upon the idea with any favour.

I have never liked the ways of Miss Littlewood, and, I daresay, the one and only mind that has not regarded her as a genius at Direction. I am of the opinion that she took far too much upon herself in the ways of handling the work of playwrights; and certainly wouldn't allow it with mine. From the first, I distrusted her manners with a play, and this mistrust was proved right when the young American Playwright came over to see a play of his done by her, and immediately repudiated it, exclaiming that it was no longer the play he had written. He demanded its withdrawal, but, if I remember right, his demands were ignored. It is well known, too, that Miss L. tampered the method, or tampered with them, of the plays by Behan and Delaney. She may have improved them, but the point with me is that, even so, they ceased to be the work of the playwrights, and became the work of J. Littlewood. This, to me, is bad for playwrighting, for if one is to become efficient in that art, what he does, or tries to do, must be his own, and not the work of anyone else, be his work good or bad. It is all right for a playwright to get a tip from a producer, to think over it, and to decide himself whether or not the tip be a good one; but for the producer to do it himself without as much as by your leave, is wrong, and beyond my taking it.

Flat 1, 40 Trantank Road, St. Marychurch, Torquay, Devon,
Tel: Torquay 8796.

17 July, 1961.

Alan Simpson, Esq.,
24 Draycott Place,
London, S.W. 3.

Dear Mr. Simpson,

Thanks for your kind letter.

Concerning your idea of the possible production of one of my latest plays in the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, I have to say that I don't look upon the idea with any favour.

I have never liked the ways of Miss Littlewood, and, I daresay, the one and only mind that has not regarded her as a genius at Direction. I am of the opinion that she took far too much upon herself in the ways of handling the work of playwrights; and certainly wouldn't allow it with mine. From the first, I distrusted her manners with a play, and this mistrust was proved right when the young American Playwright came over to see a play of his done by her, and immediately repudiated it, exclaiming that it was no longer the play he had written. He demanded its withdrawal, but, if I remember right, his demands were ignored. It is well known, too, that Miss L. tampered the method, or tampered with them, of the plays by Behan and Delaney. She may have improved them, but the point with me is that, even so, they ceased to be the work of the playwrights, and became the work of J. Littlewood. This, to me, is bad for playwrighting, for if one is to become efficient in that art, what he does, or tries to do, must be his own, and not the work of anyone else, be his work good or bad. It is all right for a playwright to get a tip from a producer, to think over it, and to decide himself whether or not the tip be a good one; but for the producer to do it himself without as much as by your leave, is wrong, and beyond my taking it.

I'm not surprised at your coming to London, but getting settled there is as hard as it is in Dublin. I hope your play at the Festival will be a success. All the best to you.

Yours very sincerely,

R/os

Sean O'Casey

A letter from Sean O'Casey to Alan Simpson. Reproduced by permission of Alan Simpson.

O'Casey had been touchy about such matters from the beginning of his career. For years he tried to keep it dark that his first play had been entitled *On the Run* and was changed (with his permission) to *The Shadow of a Gunman* by the Abbey. Behan had no such inhibitions and made no secret of the fact that he let me retitl *The Twisting of Another Rope* as *The Quare Fellow* in order to save money on space in newspaper advertisements. However public attacks like MacDonagh's must have disturbed him and he got more and more inhibited about his involvement with Theatre Workshop as time went on. Brendan Gill of *The New Yorker* told me that he once wanted to write an in-depth profile of Behan. The project had to be dropped because Gill could not get the author to discuss that involvement.

There were two other reasons for his reticence. One was his relationship with Gerry Raffles. Raffles was one of the few people that Brendan was to come across who was a match for him in matters of business. Brendan's attitude to money reveals itself in his delight in the character of Chuckles in *The*

Big House (p. 374): ‘The Communists want to free all the workers of the world. I’m content to make start and free one member of it at a time ... myself.’ Behan loved Raffles as a brother and the feeling was reciprocated. In fact they were rather alike. But that did not prevent Gerry from driving a hard bargain and getting a much better deal for Theatre Workshop than is customary in these matters. Perhaps to Brendan this represented a bigger blow than any imagined slur on his creative powers. Also, had it leaked out, it could have been taken by his enemies as evidence that his plays *had* been ‘written for him’.

The other aspect of his relationship with Theatre Workshop that would have troubled Brendan was his attitude to the I.R.A. He never mentioned to me the incident at Glasnevin for which he was sentenced to fourteen years, though it seems to have been fairly common knowledge in some circles that he tried to kill an Irish Special Branch detective without much provocation. The character of Pat in *The Hostage* is largely based on Brendan’s father Stephen, just as Cronin in *Richard’s Cork Leg* is the author himself. However, in *An Giall* at one point Pat seems to become Brendan. The Irish text in literal translation reads:

PÁDRAIG. Listen here to me, there was always the two classes of gunmen in our own crowd and in the (Black and) Tans. The fierce earnest religious man and the fellow with the sense of humour. And always and ever, the humorous fellow was the worst of the two, more venomous*, maybe.

OFFICER [*not interested*]. Do you really think so?

PÁDRAIG. Yes I do, because a sense of humour is not in the nature of a real gunman; and you will find that the odd one who has the humour and who carries a gun for any cause on earth, is a man with something gone astray in him.

OFFICER. Like yourself.

PÁDRAIG. ... There’s something gone astray in him.

The printed text of *The Hostage* (pp. 177/8) is slightly less explicit.

The largely English cast of *The Hostage*’s first production could hardly be expected to understand or even truly sympathize with the rather subtle relationship Behan had with his former comrades of the I.R.A. (1939–1946 vintage), although they may have thought they did. One can see how it would be difficult for the author to explain it fully, especially as he was drinking heavily at the time. The character of the I.R.A. Officer is capable of widely differing interpretations by the actor, whose performance is in any event greatly determined by the audience to whom he is playing. That Brendan may occasionally have been upset by the result is understandable.

I saw James Booth’s performance as the officer in the revived Theatre Workshop *Hostage* of 1972 during the height of the continuing Provisional I.R.A. campaign in Northern Ireland and Britain. Behan might have hated that performance, though given the circumstances it would be hard to have expected Booth to have presented the character in a more favourable light.

The Hostage was the last of Behan’s plays to be staged in his lifetime.

★ ★ ★

To enable the reader to fill in the gaps in this inevitably sketchy introduction there is provided a select bibliography of works dealing with Brendan Behan, his writings, life and untimely death in 1964. If he had found a way to survive and slow down I believe he would have written many more excellent plays. I dare say there are those who would not agree.

NOTE ON THE IRISH REPUBLICAN MOVEMENT

The movement originated with the republican philosophies of the eighteenth century. It was kept alive in the nineteenth by various secret societies and revolutionary groups. Shortly before World War I the Irish Volunteers were set up in opposition to the Ulster Volunteers who were organized in the north-east and illegally armed by those English and Irish Unionists who wished to subvert the Irish Home Rule Bill, which was finally being enacted in the London Parliament. On the outbreak of war the leader of the Irish Party in the House of Commons persuaded a large number of the Irish Volunteers to join the British armed services to fight the Kaiser – on the understanding that the aborted Home Rule Act would become effective at the end of hostilities.

The schoolteacher and poet Patrick Pearse and a number of the remaining Volunteers, together with some other small revolutionary groups, did not trust the British Government and prepared for their symbolic blood sacrifice of 1916. The British administration put down that insurrection with great severity bombarding the centre of Dublin with artillery and executing the leaders one by one over several weeks to the horror of most Irish people who had, up to this point, been mainly apathetic to republican ideas.

By 1919 the Republicans had had a sweeping electoral victory throughout Ireland (except in some fiercely Protestant areas in the north-east) and were setting up their own Parliament (Dail) and local courts and administration in defiance of the British authorities. At this point the paramilitary Royal Irish Constabulary stepped up their, repressive measures. Ultimately the British Government resorted to the recruitment of a mercenary force, the 'Black and Tans' – so called because of their mixed uniforms of war-surplus khaki and greenish black R.I.C. tunics. The Republicans were now organized under the names of Sinn Fein (Ourselves Alone) and the Irish Republican Army.

The Treaty of 1921 led to a dramatic split in the republican ranks mainly over the exclusion of part of Ulster from its terms and the question of twenty-six county 'Dominion status' under the British crown. About half (with their President, Eamonn De Valera) opposed the newly established twenty-six county Irish Free State, retaining the names Sinn Fein and Irish Republican Army. A civil war broke out (during which Stephen Behan was made prisoner by Free State troops) which ended in an inconclusive truce in the mid-twenties. At the end of the twenties De Valera decided to enter the Dail and there was a further split in the republican movement.

This splitting process has been repeated several times, the most recent being between the Officials (who, having renounced armed violence are dedicated to the objective of a thirty-two county Marx-inspired republic) and the Provisionals whose stated objectives (more overtly nationalist) currently include the withdrawal of British armed forces and administration from the six counties of Northern Ireland. It should be noted that with each split the degree of broad-based popular support for the movement was diminished among the Irish population in general.

I offer the non-Irish reader this potted history of Irish Republicanism because I think it is necessary to the complete understanding of Behan's plays, especially *The Hostage*. It should be remembered however that that piece was written in 1957, over ten years before the present wave of armed conflict which was sparked off by the failure of the British administration to deal effectively with the violent Protestant reaction to the Civil Rights campaign of the late sixties. The I.R.A. of the fifties was an ineffectual organization and neither Behan nor anyone else could have foreseen, in 1957, the

escalation of ruthless and widespread violence which was going to take place from 1969 onwards. It is not irrelevant to mention however that one of Brendan's oldest and closest friends, Cathal Goulding has remained associated with the Official side of the movement.

A.

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