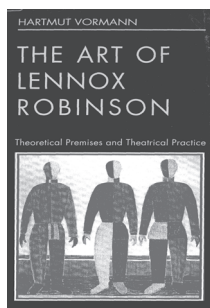


# *The Art of Lennox Robinson*

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**Hartmut Vormann. *The Art of Lennox Robinson: Theoretical Premises and Theatrical Practice*. (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2001). ISBN 3-88476-446-2. 300p. EUR 27.00 (paperback).**

The name of Lennox Robinson was, for half a century, almost synonymous with that of the Abbey Theatre. From the success of his first play, *The Clancy Name*, in 1908, which opened just four days after his twenty-second birthday, and his appointment as manager early in 1910, following Synge's premature death the previous year, Robinson's involvement with the Abbey was that of a dedicated all-rounder. Aware of the limitations of the Abbey it was he who, with Yeats as midwife, conceived the brainchild of the Dublin Drama League in 1918. In 1925, two years after being appointed to the Board of Directors, he was responsible for the establishment of the Peacock, the Abbey's experimental studio. The following year he set up the Abbey School of Acting, adding responsibility for the training of young actors to the other hats he wore. Following Robinson's death on 14 October 1958, Gerard Fay, son of Abbey actor Frank Fay and London editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, opened his obituary in the paper with the words, "Apart from Sean O'Casey the last of the Abbey Theatre giants has now departed." Fay ascribed Robinson's gigantic status primarily to his innate talents as a theatre manager, but the *Times* obituary the previous day had highlighted his talents as a playwright, specifically mentioning fifteen of the twenty-four plays Robinson had written in the period from 1908 to 1937. Appropriately enough, the Abbey will pay homage to Robinson in its centennial celebrations by staging one of the last of those plays, *Drama at Inish*, at the Peacock Theatre in Autumn 2004.

In the light of Lennox Robinson's extensive and eclectic contribution to the history of the Irish theatre the critical attention he has received is striking by its paucity. Two years after Robinson's death Charles B. Smith completed his, unpublished, doctoral dissertation on Robinson's drama at Trinity College, Dublin, and four years later Michael J. O'Neill published a critical biography, inaptly inserted into the Twayne's English Authors Series. In 1982, Christopher Murray published *Selected Plays of Lennox*

*Robinson*, prefaced with a scholarly introduction. But almost two further decades were to elapse before Lennox Robinson's dramatic and non-dramatic writing was finally to be the focus of a full-length critical study. Although there was a time lag of two years between the publication of this book and its receipt by the present reviewer, it is not too late to welcome Dr Hartmut Vormann's long-overdue academic scrutiny of this most deserving subject.

Published in the *Schriftenreihe Literaturwissenschaft* series (List of Writings on the Science of Literature), edited by Heinz Kosok and Heinz Rölleke at the University of Wuppertal, *The Art of Lennox Robinson* is to be found in the company of more than 60 volumes published over almost three decades. Readers of the *ABEI Journal* will be familiar with the companion volumes, edited or written by Heinz Kosok himself, *Studies in Anglo-Irish Literature* (1982) and *Plays and Playwrights from Ireland in International Perspective* (1995), the latter reviewed by the present writer in the *ABEI Newsletter* in 1996. In his Preface Dr Vormann explains that his book is, with minor corrections, the text of his doctoral thesis, supervised by Professor Kosok and approved in 2000. This fact, however, should in no way deter prospective readers, for the book is written in a delightfully lucid, fluent style, mercifully free of the labyrinthine theorising that so many doctoral students of literature feel obliged to use.

It is, indeed, one of the proposals of the book to allow Lennox Robinson speak for himself. Divided into two main sections, *The Art of Lennox Robinson* sets out to provide a synthesis of the playwright's aesthetic concept of the theatre, culled from the wide spectrum of his non-dramatic writings and other contemporary sources, and then to demonstrate how these ideas were put into practice in each of nineteen plays. The exclusion of five of the plays is justified by the fact that one of them is actually an adaptation of Sheridan's *The Critic*, while the other four are the least successful of his comedies which were extensively covered in Lloyd Douglas Worley's unpublished dissertation in 1979 (omitted, by a minor oversight, from Vormann's extensive bibliography of secondary sources).

Although Robinson himself eschewed the very idea of a theory of drama, his intensive involvement in the theatre as actor, director, writer and reader, to name but a few of his roles, obliged him to formulate principles which would otherwise be known as theory. Under the heading "Robinson's Concept of the Art of the Theatre", Vormann therefore musters Robinson's comments pertaining to the three fields in which he was most active: Acting, Production and Playwriting. The portrait that emerges is of an aesthetic view composed of some deeply held convictions assailed by contradictions and inconsistencies. It is, for example, somewhat contradictory that a man who insisted that "the playwright's craft is only a craft, and that it is only in combination with producer and player that his play becomes a work of art", and who argued that the producer should have the right to alter the script of a play as necessary and that actors should be empowered to gag or interpolate dialogue of their own, should at the same time see himself first and foremost as an accomplished playwright. Robinson's concept of the

theatre is likewise presented as vacillating between the poles of the traditional and the innovatory. Notwithstanding the value he attached to the Aristotelian unities and the solid structure of the well-made play he nonetheless advocated experimentation in the theatre, expressing sympathy for Symbolist aesthetics and Expressionist techniques. Dr Vormann demonstrates that, above all, Lennox Robinson was a pragmatist, a practical man of the theatre seeking solutions for problems relating to audience appreciation of the play. As the most practical of the Abbey directors he could never forget that he was responsible for guaranteeing what theatre slang describes as bums on seats.

Having teased out an aesthetics of the theatre from Lennox Robinson's non-dramatic writings, in the following section, "Robinson's Practice as a Playwright", Dr Vormann goes on to submit the major part of Robinson's plays to the yardstick of his own criteria. This approach frees the author from the judgmental stance which characterised O'Neill's critical biography in 1964, since his avowed aim is "to reopen Robinson's case and to shed light on the many different and at times contradictory aspects of his *oeuvre*". Nineteen plays are discussed under six main headings: Peasant Plays, Political Plays, The Decline of the Big House, Social Comedies, Psychological Plays and Autobiographical Plays. The discussion of the plays in each group is prefaced by a section summarising the common characteristics which justify the inclusion of the plays under one heading. Since the objective is to guarantee a fair hearing for Robinson contemporary criticism is quoted in order to reveal that the case for the prosecution was frequently flawed by irrational attacks. Each play is then considered individually with a view to assessing how far it measures up to Robinson's own aesthetic imperatives. The section is rounded off with a number of preliminary conclusions. In this way the writer succeeds in presenting an impressive quantity of information in a clear and comprehensible form. Much credit is due to Dr Vormann for his impartiality. Despite his belief that Lennox Robinson's conviction as a second-rate playwright was unjust he is still prepared to paint the portrait of his dramatic works "warts and all". Thus, the plays are seen to reflect the antagonism between tradition and innovation which was demonstrated as characterising Robinson's non-dramatic writing. Dr Vormann concludes that Robinson attempted to "square the circle, contriving at once to highlight issues which were fundamentally alien to the Aristotelian drama and to maintain the conventions which lay at the heart of that tradition".

If any publication is capable of obtaining for Lennox Robinson the retrial merited by his major contribution to the development of Irish drama in the first half of the twentieth century, *The Art of Lennox Robinson* is certainly that book. It is meticulously researched, rich in relevant detail, and lucidly and impartially argued. Indeed, so convinced is the writer of the necessity of this debate being reopened, that he goes so far as to offer to facilitate the work of interested academics by providing them with copies of those of Robinson's plays that are now out of print. In the light of such open-hearted generosity it is hoped that it will not be thought mere carping if it is pointed out that, although Dr. Vormann makes extensive reference to Charles B. Smith's unpublished

dissertation, there is another that slipped through his net. It was a master's dissertation of 151 pages, approved at the University of São Paulo in 1996, produced by Gisela Borges Garnier Manfio under the supervision of Professor Munira Hamud Mutran, entitled *Tradição e inovação: elementos da poética do teatro em Lennox Robinson* (Tradition and innovation: elements of the poetics of the theatre in Lennox Robinson). Although written in Portuguese it most certainly warrants inclusion in the bibliography of Dr Vormann's excellent book.