“Tinkers” in Verse: The Dublin Gate Theatre’s Production of Donagh MacDonagh’s *God’s Gentry* (1951)

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Abstract

In his ballad opera *God’s Gentry*, produced in 1951 at the Dublin Gate Theatre under the direction of Hilton Edwards, Donagh MacDonagh set out to satirize totalitarian regimes and the welfare state by making the “class” of the tinkers the rulers of Ireland for a year, led by Marks (“Marx”) Mongan and aided by the old Irish god Balor of the Evil Eye. Written in verse and interspersed with popular folk tunes to which MacDonagh wrote new lyrics, the play imagines the tinkers’ outlook on life as the antithesis of capitalism, law and order, and Christian family values. Nora, the village shopkeeper’s daughter, is seduced by the free and merry ways of Marks and his people, but when the nation is declared bankrupt and the pagan, socialist “tinker’s republic” collapses, her jilting of Marks and her return to settled life signal a more general reversal of the nation to bourgeois values. This essay considers the way in which Travelling people are represented in the text and on the stage both as metaphorical stand-ins for politicians governing Ireland and nations beyond its borders and as an actual Irish minority perceived as an unregulated and transgressive entity—a “nation within a nation”—by the settled population. The article also considers how the life of the Travellers was imagined aesthetically in what MacDonagh referred to as the “grand” settings and costumes designed for the Gate production by Micheál Mac Liammóir, who also played the part of Marks.

Keywords: Verse drama, ballad opera, Travellers, tinkers, satire, welfare state

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Donagh MacDonagh (1912-1968) was the son of Muriel Gifford and Thomas MacDonagh, who was executed for his part in the 1916 Easter Rebellion. Having studied at University College, Dublin (UCD), MacDonagh became a barrister in 1935 and was appointed a district judge in 1941, first in Mayo and later in Wexford. He was also a writer, and between 1946 and 1959 composed several verse dramas, of which the first two, *Happy as Larry* and *God’s Gentry*, had the most success on the stage. MacDonagh’s interest in the genre came from his admiration for the verse plays of Austin Clarke, who in 1917 had succeeded his father as lecturer in English at UCD, and who, apart from his poetry, “is chiefly remembered for the way in which, through

the formation of [...] the Lyric Theatre Company in 1944, he kept poetic drama in Ireland alive" (McHugh 52). The Lyric revived interest in dramatists like T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, and Christopher Fry, who had reintroduced poetic drama in Britain in the 1930s and '40s. Realizing that verse drama was not a universally popular genre, MacDonagh "thought that it might be possible, by using the technique of the Marx Brothers and the circus, to lure the unsuspecting public into the theatre and then land dollops of verse in their laps" (qtd. in Hogan 154-55). According to Robert Hogan, *Happy as Larry* became "one of the more successful modern attempts to weld together poetry and drama" because MacDonagh avoids burdensome poetic images and metaphors in favor of the short lines and simplicity of diction and meter of the ballad form (155). The play was rejected by the Abbey Theatre in 1946, since its managing director, Ernest Blythe, "[did] not think it would run a week," but when Clarke's Lyric Company performed the play in Dublin (on, of all places, the Abbey stage) it was so successful that it transferred to the larger Gaiety Theatre to accommodate the demand for seats (*Irish Times* 7 February 1952).[1] In 1951, the Abbey also rejected *God's Gentry*. When the play was successfully staged at the Belfast Arts Theatre in August-September of that year, it came to the attention of Hilton Edwards and Micheál Mac Liammóir, who chose to present it as the Gate Theatre's 1951 Christmas production. *God's Gentry* ran for eleven weeks at the Gate, making it one of the longest runs since the company's inception in 1928.

Described in the program for the Gate production as an "Irish Folk Musical Comedy," *God's Gentry* is a ballad opera along the lines of John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*. The play calls for a cast of about twenty actors, of whom at least four should be strong singers. The simple musical accompaniment is supplied by a violin and an accordion. As a broadcaster on Radio Éireann, MacDonagh had, from 1939 to 1943, presented a program about the ballad tradition, which left him with a large collection of traditional songs. For the play, he composed new lyrics to tunes like "Will You Come to the Bower?" and "The Sash My Father Wore." According to the *Sunday Independent* (2 September 1951: 7), the style of singing and the "swinging dance movements" of the Belfast Arts Theatre production had been more suited to "musical comedy than to the folk genre," but the *Irish Times* (28 December 1951) found that, under Edwards' direction, the Gate production had entirely remedied this "major weakness," while the Belfast set designs, pleasing as they were, had been "surpassed completely" by Mac Liammóir's settings and costumes.

God's Gentry depicts what happens when the tinkers take over the government of Ireland for a year, aided by the mythological figure Balor of the Evil Eye. The term "tinkers," the traditional name for Ireland's traveling people, is today regarded as pejorative. In post-independence Ireland, Travellers, perceived by the sedentary population as deviating from the cultural and ethnic norm, often became the medium through which questions of Irishness were explored, and the entity against which that quality was defined. Along these lines, MacDonagh makes the wandering, light-fingered tinkers in his play the antithesis of the property-owning, law-abiding village

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1 Citations from newspapers and magazines without page references are taken from the book of press cuttings in the Gate Theatre Archive at Northwestern University.

shopkeeper. Hilton Edwards may have appeared to be more inclusive when, in a press release preserved in the Gate Theatre Archive, he described *God's Gentry* as a "tinker bacchanalia [...] as authentically Irish as, and not entirely divorced from the atmosphere of, 'The Crock of Gold' and 'The Demi-Gods',"[2] but relegating the tinkers to an "authentic" realm of romantic Irish fantasy makes it possible to ignore the harsh realities Travellers face in Irish society every day. It was not until 2017 that the Irish Travellers were formally recognized as an ethnic minority within the Irish State; the official recognition was generally seen as an acknowledgement of the discrimination the Traveller community had faced, and still faces, in Ireland. A report by the Economic and Social Research Institute published that year "highlighted the 'extreme disadvantage' suffered by Travellers across a range of indicators, including health, housing, education, employment and mortality" (*Irish Times* 1 March 2017: 8).

Like James Stephens in his fiction, MacDonagh in his verse play brings the mundane world of rural Ireland into contact with the realm of Irish mythology. In a lecture entitled "Poetry and Drama" presented at Harvard University in November 1950, one year before *God's Gentry* opened at the Gate, T. S. Eliot addressed "the problems of poetic drama, and the conditions which it must fulfill if it is to justify itself" (31). Referencing the subject matter of his own early verse play, *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), he noted the following:

> Verse plays, it has been generally held, should either take their subject matter from some mythology, or else should be about some remote historical period, far enough away from the present for the characters not to need to be recognizable as human beings, and therefore for them to be licensed to talk in verse. Picturesque period costume renders verse much more acceptable. (34)

Eliot explains that he himself subsequently moved away from these restrictions; MacDonagh's *God's Gentry*, however, with its distinctive costumes, slightly otherworldly tinker characters, and the appearance of Balor of the Evil Eye, perfectly adheres to the prescription.

Much more so than in James Stephens' fantasies published in the second decade of the twentieth century, MacDonagh's mid-century tinkers, while colorful, are presented as a potential threat to the rising bourgeoisie in their disregard for property, the law, labor, and even the boundaries of the state. Jim Mac Laughlin suggests that in the 1950s, "the majority of Irish Travellers were rural dwellers" who lived in "small encampments throughout the countryside" and "travelled with comparative ease among the settled population" (47). The Mayo tinkers in *God's Gentry* reflect this situation, but the negative opinions about Travellers expressed in the play by the shopkeeper and the gardaí are indicative of a bias that would become increasingly pronounced from the 1960s onward, when traditional Traveller occupations began to disappear, and more Travellers were drawn to urban areas to avail themselves of unemployment assistance. Reviewers of the play's 1951 production, like the play's author, associated tinkers with transgressive behavior. The *Irish Independent* (30

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2 James Stephens, *The Crock of Gold* (1912) and *The Demi-Gods* (1914).

August 1951: 6) observed that the tinkers in *God's Gentry* "might have stepped out of the witness box after some elaborate law suit, so racy and well observed are they." A subsequent notice in the same paper similarly stated that MacDonagh's play "is all about tinkers—which would seem a fitting subject for a District Judge" (*Irish Independent* 18 December 1951: 6). Referring to the "human, erring Irish tinker," *Dublin Opinion* (February 1952) nevertheless thought such a character made "better material than the too 'literary' gypsy that cut such a figure in the romances of the Nineteenth Century."

In an essay also entitled "God's Gentry," published in 1964 in the Catholic magazine *The Word*, MacDonagh openly expressed his own biases against Travellers. "The tinkers are a nation within a nation," he writes. "Nobody knows how many of them there are. Though they live among, and largely on, the settled members of the community, there is virtually no communication between the two worlds." Yet despite this alleged separation, MacDonagh is happy enough to dismantle what he considers "the false sentimentality which sees in these free-souled nomads a negation of the invisible chains of custom and convention." While he acknowledges that the Travellers "deal in horses, rags, bottles, and horse-hair," he does not consider this labor, just as his description of "their annual and pointless peregrination through their well-worn circuits" entirely divorces travelling from the necessity to make a living. Travellers might want to be called "travelling dealers" rather than tinkers or itinerants, but MacDonagh insists that "we will have to call them [tinkers] no matter how they may protest." Tinkers, he goes on, stick together with "the solidarity of the non-working class," and if they have money, it must be because they believe "that they are entitled to take anything that is not nailed down." MacDonagh concludes the article by explaining how he came to write his ballad opera: "when I was seeking a theme for satirizing totalitarian governments and the welfare state, I hit on the idea of making the tinkers the rulers of Ireland with the aid of the old Irish god, Balor of the Evil Eye." Apart from everything else, then, he also presents Irish Travellers as pagans, although they traditionally adhere to the Catholic faith.

MacDonagh's satire in *God's Gentry* is rather thin, but it essentially depicts communism and the welfare state as self-defeating systems that provide free handouts to the work-shy. Elsewhere in post-war Europe, labor movements had given an impetus to the development of various forms of social security, but in predominantly rural Ireland, policies were heavily influenced by the Catholic Church, which feared such services would "lower the sense of personal responsibility and seriously weaken the moral fiber of the people" (Barrington 235). For that reason, the Mother and Child Service proposed in 1951 by Minister for Health Noel Browne, which would provide free medical care for mothers and children with the aim of reducing Ireland's high rate of child mortality, was opposed by the Catholic hierarchy and rejected by his fellow politicians. Browne's resignation led to the fall of the Irish government later that year. A weakened Social Welfare Act was passed by the new administration in 1952. Anti-communist sentiment was rife in Ireland at mid-century. When Orson Welles (who had started his acting career at the Gate) arrived at the theater in December 1951 as Edwards' guest to see Maura Laverty's play *Tolka Row*, which immediately preceded the Gate's production of *God's Gentry*, hundreds of demonstrators gathered outside

the entrance. Believing Welles to be a communist, they carried banners with slogans like, "Not wanted, Welles; Stalin's star," so that the actor felt compelled to state in an interview, "I am not a Communist. I have no Communist sympathies, and my anti-Communist record is [...] well known" (*Belfast Newsletter* 19 December 1951: 5).

God's Gentry takes place in the little Mayo village of Knockaderry on St John's Eve, which falls on June 24, around the summer solstice, and is also known as "summer Christmas." It is celebrated with picnics and bonfires, which are a continuation of pre-Christian customs. The play sets the tinkers against John Melody, the local shopkeeper described in the cast of characters as "a hard-faced, hard-headed Mayo gombeen man or usurious trader" (1).[3] As Mac Liammóir himself later described his set design (in a letter to Desmond Murphy of the Portumna Players dated 2 January 1959), Melody's shop was placed on the actors' left, the town backed by Croagh Patrick (a mountain traditionally associated with St Patrick) took up the whole of the cyclorama, and on the actors' right there was the side of an old tower with a big archway through which the tinkers came swarming onto the stage. The *Sunday Express* (13 January 1952) reported that Mac Liammóir had early on realized that the influence of Jack Yeats present in his initial designs was "not altogether in sympathy with the author's idea," and that he had discovered just the effect he wanted in drawings made by George McFall, referred to by the paper as an "unknown stage-hand," who therefore deserves some credit for the design's success.[4] Perhaps lacking other frames of reference, the *Irish Times* (28 December 1951) nevertheless described Mac Liammóir's design as "an enchanting, primitive Jack Yeats tumbling into an Atlantic fjord, backed by mountains." It was Edwards' idea to extend the tinker world beyond the frame of the Gate's small stage. The *Evening Herald* (27 December 1951: 2) described the "surprise" that greeted the audience as they entered the theater: "Two extra platform stages have been built, permitting the action of the play to flow about the first three rows of seats. These 'outside' settings are wonderfully evocative of the tinker world—canopies of hessian plain and coloured; tinware slung on ropes; porter barrels; wagon wheels. The tinker characters enter from a cavern where the orchestra used to be."

When the tinkers arrive on stage, they chant: "Tonight, brave tinkers, let us show / That we're the masters of Mayo. / We'll burst the bars and shutters. / We'll batter down the door. / We'll clear the gold and silver. / We'll ransack and explore" (10). They also declare their allegiance to Balor of the Evil Eye, a "poor old heathen, beaten god" last seen just before the arrival of St Patrick in 432: "Though men who live in houses say / Tonight's the feast of headless John / We know that Balor rules the fires / From Ballina to Babylon" (11). John Melody's contrasting piety has a vicious edge:

> More and more tinkers, the stinkers.
> Are you bred like good Christians

3 The text of *God's Gentry* has not been published, but MacDonagh's son, Niall, has made this play and other writings by his father available online.

4 McFall served as the stage manager of the Gaiety Theatre for almost five decades, until his retirement in 1996.

In bed? Or is it you come
By the heat of the sun, like maggots?
If I were the Lord (and may He be adored),
I'd see that you breed but one year in three;
And even at that, I suppose, like rats
You'd have litters of whey headed, tow headed
Hay headed, straw headed, red headed brats. (12)

John's daughter Nora is being wooed by the handsome tinker lad, Marks Mongan, whose name and politics are evocative of Karl Marx. His infatuation with Nora gives him some of the best poetic lines in the play: looking up at her window, he describes his beloved's appearance as softly radiant, like "a moon through pearly night clouds / Pure frost on early windows, glittering dew on cobwebs, / A star seen from a well shaft", and wonders "what language could beguile her?" (15). Although Nora knows her father "hates all men who are landless and homeless" (15), she is eventually won over by Marks' version of "Will you Come to the Bower?," in which he presents an idealized tinker life in harmony with the natural world, where she will "shine in the midst of the fairest of dancers" (16). While Nora's parents are praying in church, Marks puts up a ladder to her bedroom window, down which she climbs to run off with him. The other tinkers then use the ladder to enter the premises to steal from the shop whatever is not nailed down. Since John Melody was too mean to pay for any insurance, preferring instead to rely on prayer to keep the tinkers "out of my little paradise" (21), he feels thoroughly cheated when, on his return from his devotions, he finds his shop robbed and his daughter gone: "I'll demand / My money back for all those candles wasted" (22).

Mac Liammóir, who was fifty-one years old when the play opened, reluctantly took on the part of Marks, described in the script as a lad of about twenty. *Passing Variety* (February 1952) thought he "looked very youthful indeed" and that he "played the lead in a manner which allowed him to be at once the philandering young tinker and the cynical commentator on the story's ramifications." While the *Irish Independent* (27 December 1951: 6) did not find him at his best, the *Irish Times* (28 December 1951) noted he played the part "with a wit and style that covered inadequate equipment for the song-sequences." The *Evening Herald* (27 December 1951: 2) also thought the verse was "finely spoken" and added that "there is for good measure a spot of dancing by the star." The part of Nora was played by the young Waterford actress Eilagh Noonan, whose "pink and white charm," according to the *Evening Mail* (27 December 1951) formed an effective contrast to "the tinkers in their tattered shawls."

In Act 2 of *God's Gentry*, Marks and Nora arrive in the tinker camp. Mac Liammóir's rendering of the bonfire on the hillside and the old-fashioned wooden caravan struck the reviewer for the *Evening Mail* (27 December 1951) as "a poem in colour and design." Nora wants to go home when she finds out that the tinkers have robbed her father, but Marks argues that they are merely redistributing the nation's wealth:

> [...] what is wrong
> In equalizing weak and strong?
> The State has taxed the wealthy man
> And who can dare to tax that plan?
> The wealthy man has robbed for sure
> Or else he'd certainly be poor.
> The state, well knowing his bad deed,
> Shares out his wealth to those in need.
> We modestly collaborate
> With civil servants and the state. (27)

Nora becomes involved in an altercation with a young tinker woman, Betsy Connors, but she wins the scuffle; the other tinkers hint at the fact that Betsy had already jumped across a broom with Marks—which is how settled people imagined Travellers got married—, but Marks tells Nora not to worry about that detail: "No court would recognize it" (31). When John Melody turns up in the camp with the guards, it is Betsy who reveals where the tinkers have hidden the goods stolen from the shop. About to be arrested, the tinkers remember it is Balor's day, and appeal to the old god to return "from the footnotes of mythology" and save them from "the tinker's doom" (35).

When Balor appears, he seems to be "a small, apologetic looking little man in a long black coat" standing on a large rock (35). Edwards wrote to Denis Johnston that he had not cast himself in the part of Balor because it required "slightness of stature and a very definite Irish voice," both of which he lacked, and "however Godlike we English are to them now, I feel that the ancient gods should at least be Irish" (qtd. in Fitz-Simon 178). The character was played instead by Cecil Barror, an actor who, like MacDonagh, had trained as a barrister. Melody suspects Balor of being "a red agent" sent by Stalin (36), but the tinkers proceed to elect the old god president, whereupon he steps from behind the rock and—the actor being on stilts—turns out to be ten feet tall. He is given a black hat to match the long coat, as well as a pair of spectacles and a briefcase, an outfit which, according to Christopher Fitz-Simon, created "a very distinct impression of Eamon de Valéra [sic]" (178). As president of the "great, democratic and idle Republic" of the tinkers (38), Balor decrees that the laws are abolished, all goods—especially drink—are supplied free "if you are a tinker" (38), and that the border has been eliminated. Preserved in the Gate Theatre Archive is a rather risqué sketch, perhaps by Mac Liammóir, perhaps by one of the actors, of an impressive and virile-looking Balor: one-eyed, his grinning face grotesquely mask-like, he is depicted as a broad-shouldered, narrow-waisted giant, shirtless, but with a studded leather belt strapped diagonally across his chest, a thin line of hair running from his stomach down to the unbuttoned front of his trousers. According to the notes accompanying the drawing, which are in Mac Liammóir's hand, the figure should be executed in modeled plywood to a height of twelve feet. Unsurprisingly, the design—if it was ever meant to be seriously contemplated at all—found no place in the production; the sketch itself is not filed with Mac Liammóir's other designs in the Archive but tucked away in one of the actor's scripts.

Act 3 of *God's Gentry* takes place a year later, when it is revealed how Balor's presidency has played out. The tinkers are "brightly and garishly dressed" (40) in finery, the exception being the traitor Betsy Connors, who is "banished and banned from the tinker kingdom of wealth" (45) and still wears the same clothes as in Act 2. The tinkers drink porter from gilded mugs, served by the guards. Marks does not disapprove of the drinking but urges moderation: "Waste that is willful brings want that is woeful" (42); the others ignore his warnings to "go easy," because they believe Balor can work miracles. Meanwhile, John Melody takes a leaf out of the tinkers' book: he sneaks in and steals their last barrel of beer. When Marks calls on Balor for help to produce more food and porter, the little man has lost his stilts and declares that the miracle bank is bankrupt. Like every politician, he had promised more than he could deliver, and explains to the tinkers that "drink must have an end if there's none to brew it; / There's twelve months' work now to be done, and you're the ones to do it" (54). Marks urges his fellow tinkers to "step forward on the road to work / [...] not for ourselves alone, but work / For Ireland's good," but they reject the idea of a "workers' republic" because "A working tinker is absurd, / A walking contradiction" (56). Before disappearing once more into the footnotes of mythology, Balor decrees that henceforth all property not nailed down shall belong to the tinkers—which formalizes what had already been the case before he came to power—and passes an Act of Oblivion to wipe away all memory of recent events. The Guards depart for the village with John Melody, who, given Balor's decree, will have to spend the night in the police cell for failing to secure his property. Now that the tinkers are tinkers again, and Marks is once more "an itinerant lout" (52), Nora wants to return to the shop; Marks agrees because "no woman who grew / In a cottage garden could take to the wilds" (59), although he predicts that, once she is back in her "little white bed," she will remember "The great bed of earth, and my love, like a wave" (60). When he finds out that he has also lost Betsy to Harry Ward, he is philosophical: "the air is still heavy with wings and the river / Still busy with fish and in every hedge / There are girls growing ripe and from this day I'll pluck them / For that is a tinker's privilege" (60). In conclusion, the entire cast sings, to the tune of "Molly Bawn," "Oh who wouldn't be a tinker when he's free" (60).

The reviewer for the *Irish Independent* (27 December 1951: 6) thought that the reincarnation of Balor as a twentieth-century politician was "a nice pantomimic touch," but that, overall, the play seemed "curiously uneven, seesawing between sophistication and immaturity." Edwards, too, privately confessed to Johnston: "I think there is some very poor stuff in it after the lovely first act, and no sense of character whatsoever" (qtd. in Fitz-Simon 178). But he was happy the show was doing well. What made the production so successful was its approximation to a form of total theater that was unheard of in Ireland in 1951. The playwright Thomas Kilroy recalled that he only saw this kind of stage choreography for the first time in Paris in 1967: "Coming from Dublin theatre and seeing this kind of work in the sixties was just mind-blowing" (Brennan and Dubost 128). As for *God's Gentry*, *Dublin Opinion* (February 1952) found it hard to assess the "value of the play itself apart from the fascinations of the production," which included "burlesque, high comedy, low comedy, rough poetry, not so rough poetry, and touches of beauty, with music and dancing thrown in." The

Sunday Independent (30 December 1951: 4) also thought the merit of the production lay in the combination of its parts: "Here at any rate, in spite of some *longueurs* and the restrictions of a theatre too small for it, is a jolly pictorial lyrical-musical play in which the singing tinkers, the melodeon and fiddle players, the planners, designers and producer, no less than the author, are all nearly equal contributors [...] to the success of a show which pleases the audience highly without quite evoking unreserved enthusiasm."

The costumes Mac Liammóir designed for the play received a great deal of attention. The *Evening Mail* (27 December 1951) noted that the tinkers' clothes in the first two Acts of the Gate production were "more realistic and drab" than those in the original Belfast performance, but that this allowed for a "blossoming out into contrasted grandeur" in Act 3, when the tinkers have become the wealthy rulers of the nation. Several newspapers reported that, to ensure authenticity in the costumes, Mac Liammóir had spent a few afternoons gathering inspiration in the tinker settlement behind St Patrick's Cathedral. Whatever the truth of this assertion, there is, even in the more "realistic" first two Acts, an element of stylization in the headscarves, shawls, and patches that distinguish the tinkers' attire, especially given the designer's adherence to a distinctive color scheme. In a gouache he painted for *God's Gentry*, Mac Liammóir depicted two lissome figures, a male and a female tinker dancing in symmetry, dressed in shades of orange-brown and purple. In a slightly tongue-in-cheek piece in the *Irish Press* (15 December 1951: 3) the pseudonymous "Edain" noted that Mac Liammóir had "refused" to put the tinker women in red petticoats because that article of clothing denoted "a hardworking Connemara woman," whereas tinkers—by implication, then, not hardworking—"wear something that, from a distance, merges into the landscape" like autumn leaves. It is unlikely that red petticoats ever crossed Mac Liammóir's mind as plausible Traveller attire, but in his 1959 letter to Desmond Murphy he did note that the orange shade of the costumes he designed "gave a uniform effect as of autumn leaves." "Edain" imagined Mac Liammóir, who was a fluent Irish speaker, concocting the costumes' colors from natural substances like "saffron and *scraithchloch*" (a lichen which produces a yellow dye): "Cauldrons of the stuff boil in the kitchen of No. 4 Harcourt Place[5] with Micheál himself, like a witch in Macbeth, supervising operations and murmuring incantations like '*t-anam 'n deabhal*'."[6] In actuality, it was the Gate's dressmaker, Christine Keeley, who dyed yards and yards of hessian to achieve the desired effect.

Mac Liammóir's archived notes to Keeley describe in detail the aesthetic he had in mind for the costumes in Act 3, when the tinkers have become the gentry. In his designs for six women's evening gowns, he combined elements from the natural world with objects traditionally made and sold by Travellers. Ironically, in this way the very products of the labor *God's Gentry* suggests the Travellers do not perform are here reduced to decorative ornaments stripped of their useful function. All dresses were to be made in hessian, carefully cut and dyed dull mustard leaf yellow to suggest what Mac Liammóir called "a corrupt gala." The other colors permitted were heliotrope,

5 Properly 4 Harcourt Terrace, Edwards' and Mac Liammóir's home address.
6 Irish for "your soul to the devil."

also used in the earlier Acts for head kerchiefs, and touches of black and "a shrill arsenic green."

> Girdles, trimmings, and bracelets in rope, twine, and raffia. Gloves of a smart, French cut, but in holes: the shirt hems left unhemmed and shredded. Head ornaments of nutmeg graters, brushes, egg-whisks, pot-cleaners, wild flowers. [...] Cans and mugs gilded. The tiaras and drooping plumes: there is pampas grass to be found somewhere, we could dye it. Make-up the same light-gold tan, but lips and eyes have gone through a lot since Acts 1 and 2. Perhaps gilded lids and fuchsia lip-stick: Sally suggests gilt pine-cones for necklaces.[7]

The costume design essentializes the Traveller style as an aesthetic of poverty: even though the tinkers are wealthy and drink from gilded mugs, their fancy clothes remain ragged and torn. Some of this effect, referred to by Hilton Edwards in a press release as "a tatterdamalion grandeur," is captured in a production photograph preserved in the Gate Theatre Archive, featuring almost the entire cast underneath the canopy overhanging the platform stage to the left of the main stage. It shows Marks situated in the middle of the band of tinkers, some standing, some reclining, the women wearing their hessian gala dresses and head pieces, the men in dinner jackets with wide hessian lapels. The fiddler and accordion player are among them, clothed in the same fashion. Balor is seated on the far right in his black coat and hat; equally peripheral, John Melody stands next to him, dressed in a dark suit, hat, and tie. Their formal stiffness forms a contrast with the fluid and relaxed attitude of the tinkers.

Edwards and Mac Liammóir revived their production of *God's Gentry* in 1960, at the larger Gaiety Theatre, which allowed them to include more elaborate singing and dancing. The BBC had broadcast a radio version of the play in 1953 (with Siobhán McKenna as Nora), RTÉ radio aired the drama in 1960, and in 1974 also adapted it for television. The *Sligo Champion* (15 March 1974: 4) noted about the screen presentation that it could "best be described as a light-hearted musical romp with an abundance of traditional Irish music, in which the people we now know as travellers are unashamedly called tinkers," but otherwise expressed no concerns about the representation of the minority. The play was very popular in amateur dramatic circles. Ian R. Walsh has argued that MacDonagh's first play, *Happy as Larry*, is an important work that deserves to be revived because its deliberately theatricalized form allies it "with the wider experimentations of twentieth-century playwrights and theatre makers in Europe such as Brecht, Meyerhold, Dürrenmatt and others" who moved away from "the confining dramaturgy of realism" (119). Much the same could be said about *God's Gentry*. However, it is hard to see how MacDonagh's often reductive and offensive representation of Travellers as work-shy, thieving, promiscuous, and generally transgressive rogues could be staged today. *God's Gentry* ticks every box of mid-century anti-Traveller prejudice, according to which, in Jim Mac Laughlin's words, "Travellers were seen as an 'unmeltable' social bloc that had no place in modern Ireland. Their very ability to survive was considered a threat to hegemonic

7 The actress Sally Travers, who played Betsy Connors.

notions of respectability, work and property" (66). Indeed, towards the end of *God's Gentry*, Balor makes a distinction between "Tinkers and people, humans and tinkers" (57), as if Travellers are fictional or mythological creatures like himself rather than real people and citizens of contemporary Ireland.

In 1957, MacDonagh's verse play *Step-in-the-Hollow* was successfully produced at the Gate, although it was not received with the same enthusiasm as its predecessor. A straightforward farce, it deals with the complications that ensue when a lecherous old district judge is almost caught in the bedroom of a not very bright young woman named Teazie and is then asked by her conniving mother to put an innocent young man on trial for the offense he had himself committed. Edwards played the judge with "over-ripe bawdy gusto" (*Irish Times* 12 March 1957: 2), but he was unhappy with the quality of the verse, which he thought was very uneven. Many of the play's "funny" lines—for example, when the judge dismisses Teazie's dimwittedness by asking, "Since when have girls been chosen for their brains? She has the body of an Aphrodite", to which another character replies, "And brains would go to her head!" (219)—are embarrassing to a twenty-first century ear. MacDonagh's play *Lady Spider*, previously broadcast as a radio play by both the BBC and Radio Éireann, was presented on stage in 1959 by Orion Productions in association with the Dublin Theatre Festival at the tiny Gas Company Theatre in Dun Laoghaire. A retelling of the myth of Deirdre of the Sorrows, it presents the tragic heroine as "an insatiable female spider devouring her lovers," in what amounts to "a critical analysis of human love stripped of all its attendant dreams" (Kilroy 717). The reviewer for the *Irish Examiner* (21 September 1959: 4) noted that the play was presented in "loosely-grouped tableaux" and that its "real movement" lay in "its heady verse." This static quality makes the work of less interest than MacDonagh's more overtly theatrical plays, which not only successfully took verse drama into the mid-twentieth century, but also used "a freer and less conventional technique" than was habitual for Irish drama at the time, as Edwards and Mac Liammóir made a point of stressing in the program for their production of *God's Gentry*. However, because MacDonagh's verse plays of the 1950s are problematic in their political incorrectness, they are unlikely to be resurrected again from the archives of Irish theater history.

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