

---

## Nelson Paine, Experimental Theatre, and Puppetry in Ireland, 1942–1952

Martin G. Molony  
Dublin City University

---

Copyright (c) 2023 by Martin G. Molony. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged for access.

---

**Abstract.** In 1942, a young Dublin architect, Nelson Paine, formed the Dublin Marionette Group on foot of an international re-appraisal of the potential of the puppet theatre as a form of expression. This Group became the nucleus of experimental theatre in the Irish capital and influenced several well-known Irish creative artists over the decade of its existence and beyond. It attracted the involvement of actors, artists and dramatists of the period and performed in professional settings, including eight seasons at the Peacock Theatre and for each of the first four years of the Wexford Opera Festival. This article examines the context of the Group's formation, its long-forgotten experimental approach, and its considerable contribution to the development of the arts in Ireland.

**Key Words.** Puppet Theatre, Experimental Theatre, Modern Puppetry, *Dublin Marionette Group*.

**Resumen.** En 1942, un joven arquitecto de Dublín, Nelson Paine, formó el Dublin Marionette Group a raíz de una revalorización internacional del potencial que ofrecía el teatro de marionetas como forma de expresión. Este grupo se convirtió en el núcleo del teatro experimental en la capital irlandesa e influyó a varios artistas creativos irlandeses conocidos durante la década de su existencia y posteriormente. Atrajo la participación de actores, artistas y dramaturgos de la época y se presentó en entornos profesionales, incluidas ocho temporadas en el Teatro Peacock y durante los cuatro primeros años del Festival de Ópera de Wexford. Este artículo examina el contexto de la formación del Grupo, su enfoque experimental olvidado hace mucho tiempo y su considerable contribución al desarrollo de las artes en Irlanda.

**Palabras Clave.** Teatro de marionetas, teatro experimental, guiñol moderno, *Dublin Marionette Group*.

## Introduction

Despite Ireland's rich dramatic history, an international re-evaluation of one form of theatrical expression in the early twentieth century almost went un-noticed in Dublin. Across Europe and the United States, the puppet theatre was reconsidered as an art form in its own right, rather than a miniature expression of the human stage. Well-known figures from the world of theatre, opera, writing and performance espoused the puppet theatre as an independent art form and ideal medium for experimental expression. The English actor, director and theorist, Edward Gordon Craig, made the most significant re-appraisal of the concept of the puppet theatre; his "influence can almost be said to have fathered the puppet theatre as a medium of mainstream theatre" (Francis 1998: 12). In a series of books and essays about the theatre published throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Craig contended that the medium was primarily about performance, rather than being a derivative, or extension, of the literature that provided its scripts.<sup>1</sup> This focus on performance highlighted the role and function of the actor within the theatre. In a bid to consider the actor as a conduit to the audience, Craig proposed that the marionette was the ideal actor. As noted by Taxidou (2009: 795), "The puppet is not only seen as the perfect substitute for the living actor (and particularly the actress), but as the ultimate work of art." This recognition of the puppet theatre as an art form radically altered the practice of puppetry. As noted by McCormick and Pratasik (1998: 208), "art puppetry introduced a different set of social, cultural, ideological and aesthetic values. The puppeteer began to be perceived as an artist rather than a showman, and the puppet for what it was and not exclusively for what it might represent."

German poet and playwright, Paul Brann, frustrated by what he could not accomplish on the human stage, brought together a group of creative artists in 1906 to create the *Marionettentheater Münchner Künstler* (Marionette Theatre of Munich Artists). Puppet theatre historian, Henry Jurkowski described it as "one of the most famous of all puppet theatres... which well represents the Modernist idea of 'art as artefact' and which greatly influenced the development of the European theatre" (Jurkowski and Francis 1998: 76). The German-Swiss painter and writer, Gunter Böhmer, underlined "the possibilities of theatre specifically for puppets. These lie in the full exploitation of illusion and surrealist opportunities which are not available in the actors' theatre" (Böhmer 1969: 7). Muscovite Sergei Obraztsov, is credited with having established puppetry as an art form in Russia. As Jurkowski and Francis (1998: 110) observed, he "attempted themes inaccessible to the flesh and blood actor." Paul McPharlin noted that Obraztsov "soon realized that puppets were not imitators of people, but instruments for showing up their foibles" (McPharlin 1941: 7). Similar developments happened across Europe and the United States, where actors, poets and musicians created original content and provided their theatrical expertise for the puppet theatre. These included the establishment of the *Salzburger Marionettenetheater* in 1913 (Kraus 1966: 32) and the *Teatro dei Piccoli* in Rome in 1914 (McCormick 2010: 159).

At this time Ireland was in the throes of its struggle for independence from Britain, but by the outbreak of the Second World War Ireland had asserted its independence, politically, economically and culturally. The war created an insular atmosphere that provided an environment for domestic drama and entertainment to thrive – without the distraction or competition of foreign companies or the loss of Irish performers to Britain. Building on an existing appetite for drama where, "Dublin between 1920 and 1950 was an acutely theatre-conscious city", (Fallon 1998: 137) the city became a "home to a boom in professional theatre during the war years" (Wills 2008: 306). While the Abbey Theatre continued to fulfil its role as the national theatre of the Irish Free State, it facilitated and encouraged alternative

---

<sup>1</sup> An overview of Craig's writings on the theatre, including his work on the puppet theatre can be found in J Michael Walton's *Craig on Theatre* (Walton 1983).

productions in its experimental theatre, the Peacock.<sup>2</sup> The Gate Theatre provided a modernist repertoire of productions that proved particularly successful in the period: “During the war years, the Gate company took seasons in the much larger Gaiety Theatre, where several of its most successful productions were staged” (Fallon 1998: 144).

The restrictions of the war period – or *The Emergency* – in Ireland provided for a golden age for variety theatre with local stars given opportunities at home that they would not have previously enjoyed. The Theatre Royal, the Queen’s and the Olympia Theatre provided a varied selection of song and dance, comedy, conjuring, acrobatics, juggling, opera and pantomime. Rebuilt in 1935, the Theatre Royal attracted vaudeville and film stars from Britain and the United States who performed to full houses, creating a reputation of as one of the four variety theatres in Britain and Ireland (Doyle 2018: 45). While the war caused the Royal to only present local talent, it continued to be “the heart and soul of the bleak grey Dublin of the 1930s and 1940s” (Doyle 2018: 47). Ireland’s amateur dramatics scene blossomed during the war. The growth of amateur companies prompted the formation of a national Amateur Dramatic Association in 1932. These companies were often incubators for those who would later become successful professional players and writers and provided an important source of income for professional playwrights. In addition, the growing number of amateur companies across the country provided a network of performance venues for touring companies (Morash 2004: 193–96). As it was not dependent on financial success, amateur drama often allowed for greater experimentation. Those from outside mainstream theatre could innovate and experiment without the pressure of commercial priorities. Among those who engaged in such experimentation was one Nelson Paine. A Dublin-based architectural student, Paine noticed the resurgence of the puppet theatre abroad and observed how those in the creative and dramatic circles were using the puppet theatre far beyond its role as a form of popular entertainment. Paine would inspire a group of creative young people to harness “the immense dramatic and artistic possibilities of the puppet” (Holloway et al. 1880a). Paine introduced Modern Puppetry to Ireland and successfully presented the puppet theatre as an equal, alongside other dramatic and creative forms of expression. As outlined later in the article, Paine inspired others to develop creative and artistic careers on foot of their involvement with the Dublin Marionette Group and the Puppet Opera Company. No Irish puppet theatre had had an impact as great as Paine’s since Randal Stretch’s puppet theatre in Capel Street caught the attention of Jonathan Swift in 1729 (Molony 2022: 107).<sup>3</sup> In 1942, Paine established the Dublin Marionette Group that became the nucleus of experimental theatre in the Irish capital. It attracted the involvement of actors, artists and dramatists of the period and performed in professional settings, including eight seasons at the Peacock Theatre and for each of the first four years of the Wexford Opera Festival. Focusing on press coverage of Paine’s group, this article examines the context of the group’s formation, its long-forgotten experimental approach, and its considerable contribution to the development of the arts in Ireland.

### **Dublin’s Own Marionette Theatre**

Before the war, Dublin’s variety venues played host to visiting ventriloquists and puppet companies from Europe and the United States. In April 1942, *The Irish Times* reports on a new Dublin puppet theatre playing at the Peacock Theatre. The article references the world-famous Vittorio Podrecca’s *Teatro dei Piccoli* puppet theatre, before advising readers that there were “several places (no names, no libel actions) where one could spend a less profitable hour or so

---

<sup>2</sup> The Abbey developed the Peacock Theatre as a venue for experimental theatre, finally realised in April 1937, when the students of the Abbey School of Acting presented two of their own productions as the *Abbey Experimental Theatre*. (Mooney 1937)

<sup>3</sup> Nelson Paine moved to Spain in 1965 and died in Cádiz in 2001.

than at the Peacock” (O’Connor 1942). Nelson Paine’s Dublin Marionette Group’s debut at the Peacock Theatre was an impressive way for an amateur theatrical company to introduce themselves to the public. The statement of intent published in the programme for those first six performances demonstrated that this was part of an international reappraisal of the puppet theatre and that they intended pursuing the creative potential of the medium that was evident in other countries over the previous twenty years:

Dublin has remained strangely indifferent to the great renaissance of the art of the Puppet which has taken place during the past twenty years in other countries. THE DUBLIN MARIONETTE GROUP has been formed with the purpose of examining some aspects of the immense dramatic and artistic possibilities of the Puppet. (Holloway et al. 1880a)

The programme dispelled any notion that puppetry was only a form of popular entertainment for children and included an adaptation of Ivan Sastropetrovitch’s *Vampire*, and A. P. Herbert’s *Two Gentlemen of Soho*, with an interlude of *Senor Vermicelli* on piano. An *Irish Press* review was encouraging of the fledging company, reporting that “The marionettes were all attractively dressed and, on the whole, this is a courageous and enterprising experiment that should be welcomed.” (*Irish Press* 1942a) The international puppetry circle noted the Dublin initiative when the puppetry section of the *World’s Fair* entertainment trade newspaper reproduced an *Irish Press* review shortly after (Morice 1942). This embryonic theatre group had a single driving force behind its creation. The programme for the evening lists Nelson Paine as Producer, having made the puppets and as one of the manipulators (Holloway et al. 1880a). The accounts ledger for the Peacock Theatre indicates that the rental of the theatre – for £10, paid in advance – was in Nelson Paine’s own name, rather than that of the group (Abbey Theatre Archives 1942). Born in Glasgow in 1923, (Charles) Nelson Paine was the son of English artist Charles Paine and Maria Nelson, a native of Hollywood, Co Down. His parents separated in 1930 and Nelson and his mother moved to Dun Laoghaire that summer. Having completed his Leaving Certificate at Sandford Park School, he studied Modern Languages at UCD for a year before taking up an apprenticeship as an Architect in 1941 (Department of Justice 1948).

Paine’s interest in the theatre and performance from that time is evident from his involvement with the Glenageary Players when he performed in a production of Lionel Brown’s *Square Pegs*, produced by his cousin, Havelock Nelson, in the Peacock Theatre in February 1941 (*Irish Times* 1941a). He appeared again with this amateur drama group in “two entertaining dramatic pieces” in November of that year (*Irish Times* 1941c). Paine’s interest in performance included music. He was “very highly commended” for his flute performance in the Feis Ceoil in May 1941 (*Irish Times* 1941b) and noted again in December 1942, when he “contributed a flute solo” to a concert presented by the Students’ Musical Union of the Royal Irish Academy of Music (*Irish Press* 1942b). Nelson Paine described himself as an artist in the college student register of the National Irish Visual Arts Library in October 1941 suggesting a possible interest in the creative visual world of his father, Charles (NIVA Library 1941).

The Dublin Marionette Group again featured in the *World’s Fair Punch & Puppetry Pars* column in April 1943. The article describes great enthusiasm for a new “Free State puppet company”, with more than twenty members, which was “permanently housed in the residence of the President of the ensemble, Mr Nelson Paine”. Performances comprised “short plays and turns”, using twenty-inch marionettes (Morice 1943). An *Irish Times* article, of December 1943, announced a second series of performances for the group at the Peacock Theatre with a Nativity play (*Irish Times* 1943). An article in *The Irish Press* described the initiative as “a new departure in the Irish theatre” and encouraged the experimental nature of the production: “Experiment, the life blood of life, is also the life blood of the theatre” (Ward 1943a). A subsequent *Irish Press* front-page review of the production was positive about “a most

interesting experiment”, highlighting the distinct nature of the puppet theatre (Ward 1943b). There was similar encouragement in subsequent coverage of the potential of the puppet theatre, based on the efforts of the Dublin Marionette Group, suggesting that it “revealed a genuine and sincere approach to theatre progression” (Ward 1943c). A letter from the DMG Secretary, Liam Proud, to the *Roddy the Rover* column in *The Irish Press* in March 1944, tells us that the group has grown to 32 members, who can have up to 12 puppets on stage at any one time. Proud indicated that the group intended to broaden the scope of their productions, and were shortly to use glove puppets in a production in French for the Dublin French Society the following week. He also wrote of plans for a play in the Irish language, while arrangements were in place to present some 25 marionette characters in Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus* at the Engineers’ Hall later that month (*Irish Press* 1944a).

*The Irish Press* gives a brief mention to the arrangements for the production a few days later: “Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus*, long a classical theme for puppets, will be produced in Dublin on Tuesday by the Dublin Marionette Group” (Ward 1944a). An *Irish Times* advertisement – the group’s first paid notice – announces: “Dublin Marionette Group present Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus* at the Engineers’ Hall Dawson Street for three nights (28, 29, 30) at 7:45pm with booking at Gills” (*Irish Times* 1944a). The same newspaper gave a relatively positive review of the *Dr Faustus* production, suggesting that the puppetry had some way to go to match the quality of other aspects of the performance: “The movement of the puppets is still a little stilted, but no possible complaint could be made about the quality of the speakers’ voices. With very few exceptions, indeed, all these young people have had no practical stage experience; yet they can speak a line with all the assurance of professional actors” (*Irish Times* 1944b). Public interest in this innovative theatre was such that Quidnunc’s *Irishman’s Diary*, in *The Irish Times*, brought readers behind the scenes to give a sense of the organisation and coordination between those who were manipulating the figures and those providing the voices:

Underneath the stage, bent double, with his eye on the mirror which shows him the action on the stage, sits a reader, supported by pillows. From time to time he is joined by other readers, who creep in between the uprights.

Six feet above the floor is the operators’ platform. From here, three girls in slacks work the puppets. When their puppet speaks angrily – from beneath the stage – the girls frown in sympathy. When the audience murmurs at an apt gesture, the girls look at one another and laugh. It is nice team-work. (Quidnunc 1944)

News of the group’s success was covered in an article in *The World’s Fair* that referred to *Dr Faustus* as “its most elaborate production to date”. Bearing in mind that Gerald Morice was writing in a British newspaper for the entertainment trade, his appreciation for the group’s achievements is significant: “Great credit is due to this group for their courage in tackling the task, which by all accounts I have received, went off very well” (Morice 1944b).

Although the Dublin Marionette Group productions played almost exclusively for an adult audience and focused on the potential of puppetry as an independent artistic art, they did occasionally perform for children. One instance was in April 1944, when, under the auspices of *Amharclann na nOg* (The Children’s Theatre Guild), the group performed in Clontarf (*Irish Times* 1944c). The event allowed the group to perform in Irish for the first time, presenting “a traditional puppetry piece translated into Irish” (*Irish Press* 1944b). The group repeated the Irish language performance in Rathmines in October 1944 (*Irish Press* 1944c).

Returning to the Peacock Theatre – and to adult audiences – the Dublin Marionette Group presented Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* as one of three pieces at the venue in November 1944. An article in *The Irish Press* advised readers that “Something that should be seen particularly next week is the Dublin Marionette Group at the Peacock Theatre” (*Irish Press*

1944d).<sup>4</sup> A subsequent *Irish Press* review was very positive and made the connection with Gordon Craig's theories of the theatre. "Something rather exciting happened at the Peacock Theatre last night; almost casually, a new dramatic medium was suddenly put before the public without blast of trumpets or other media of advertising." The reviewer went on to observe "...last night's presentations gave a clear idea of the potentialities of the puppet medium and the progress in its technique which this group has made", finally advising "No one interested in theatrical development should miss this show, which continues to-night and to-morrow" (Ward 1944b).

A review in *The Irish Independent*, while supportive of the company, criticised them for "attempting plays not very suitable for their art" (*Irish Independent* 1944). Referring to Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, as "a definitely bad selection", the reviewer explained why: "One wants poets rather than puppet manipulators to speak this gloomy little masterpiece by Synge and why do it with puppets!" The review criticises the other performance of the evening for other reasons: "*Revelations at Low Tide* I thought too ambitious. This satire by Brian Boydell is so difficult to follow that one has no attention to spare for the puppets" (*Irish Independent* 1944). Brian Boydell responded to this criticism in his memoir, published in 2018: "Most of the critics failed to find any meaning or sense in my play. I didn't intend that there should be any logic or sense in what was just a dreamlike surrealist evocation of a disturbing mood-picture" (Boydell 2018: 78). Alongside Dublin's theatre critics, the entertainment trade newspaper, *World's Fair*, expressed excitement about the way in which the group innovated in their use of puppetry for these performances, describing it as:

"... a masterpiece in puppetry – done on the new style adopted by the Russian manipulator, Obrazov. The puppet head is very large and is held up by one hand, whilst the operator's other hand is inserted in a sleeve and projects from the wrist as a puppet's hand. This give terrific scope for puppet movement. There is nothing the puppet cannot do, from sawing wood to painting a picture." (Morice 1944a)

Whether the theatre reviews were positive or negative for the puppet company, it is significant that the performances were reviewed in the usual way – as dramatic productions for the professional stage. Such ongoing critique demonstrated that Dublin was treating the puppet theatre as a serious form of creative expression beyond that which had been previously considered as popular entertainment. In this, Nelson Paine succeeded in getting Irish theatre audiences to recognise the puppet theatre as a serious form of creative expression – mirroring the earlier international reappraisal of the medium.

### **New Role and New Medium**

In 1945 Nelson Paine and his puppeteers collaborated with the Irish Red Cross in another use of their performance skills. As noted in an article in *The Irish Press*, "The Dublin Marionette Group, pioneers of the Puppet Theatre in Dublin, are attracting big audiences to the Mansion House for their show in connection with the Irish Red Cross Week" (Ward 1945). *The World's Fair* later states that the group "provided propaganda playlets in the Anti-Tuberculosis Exhibition held in the Irish Free State capital from May 26 to June 16" (Morice 1945) and that the event attracted an attendance of over 28,000, for whom the Dublin Marionette Group used "glove puppets in the Russian style". The group gave three performances of one of four different plays each day. Each play featured a villain, "the Demon Bacillus Tuberculosis who endeavoured to spread infection by every possible means." An interesting development

---

<sup>4</sup> A newspaper advertisement indicates a four night run, Wednesday to Saturday inclusive, starting at 7:30pm (*Evening Herald* 1944)

mentioned in *The World's Fair* article was that the Irish Film Society made a film of one of the plays, which was later used for further promotion to prevent the spread of TB.

The end of the Second World War seems to have distracted those involved in the Dublin Marionette Group for a time, with no further public performances until October 1947, when newspaper advertisements announced the return of the Dublin Marionette Group to the Peacock Theatre. The programme was a selection of plays and ballads to run for six nights, at 7:45pm each day for an admission of two shillings (*Irish Times* 1947). Further details of these performances in an *Irish Press* article indicates the breadth of material performed, including a translation of a fifteenth-century French farce, excerpts from Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, the American *Frankie and Johnnie* and the Irish *The Women are Worse than the Men*. The *Irish Press* article includes news of innovation by the puppet company: "The group claims to have been developing a new type of puppet, which, they believe, has never been used anywhere else. This is really big news for followers of the puppet stage because this puppet they have developed is more expressive than any of the types which they have previously used" (Molloy 1947).

Such references to a more expressive form of puppetry may relate to the use of rods to manipulate the puppet arms or to the use of Catalan-style puppets, which were larger than typical glove puppets, but uniquely manipulated with all five fingers (Tozer 1932: 25). Although the group had used hand puppets in some previous productions, these had limited expression. This innovation provided a greater stage presence for the figure and gave more flexibility in movement. Those who adopted the puppet theatre as a new form of creative expression in this period did not allow themselves to be restricted by the custom and practice of particular kinds of puppetry and took more easily to new methods of expression. The *Evening Herald* also encouraged audiences to support the group's return to the Peacock. It acknowledged their innovative approach in a review headlined "Pioneers in Puppetry" in which it declared that "if only for the reason that they are pioneers in a form of dramatic expression almost entirely new to use, the Dublin Marionette Group is worthy of patronage at the Peacock this week..." (*Evening Herald* 1947a).

An article in *World's Fair* reported the group playing to full houses for their 1947 run in the Peacock and gave an indication of the complexity of the production and signs of further innovation from the puppet company. The article noted, "the puppet stage was a three-level construction of which the producer in each instance took full advantage". It also recorded "another clever piece of stagecraft was displayed in the introduction of a puppet compere to address the audience from an open panel on the O. P. side of the proscenium and to announce each item with appropriate comments" (Morice 1947). The 1947 performances at the Peacock were the first since international travel resumed at the end of the war, allowing the return of international variety acts to Dublin venues. The Dublin Marionette Group no longer had exclusivity with audiences interested in puppet theatre, but appeared to hold their own. Harry Lynton's marionettes played at the Queen's Theatre (*Evening Herald* 1947b) in the week following the DMG's run at the Peacock and Delvaine's Marionettes performed at the Olympia a week after that (*Irish Independent* 1947).

The successful run at the Peacock emboldened the DMG. A report, in the *Nationalist and Leinster Times*, of its annual general meeting in November 1947 mentions ambitious plans for future programmes and cautions readers that their work "bears about the same relationship to Punch-and-Judy as does Shakespeare to Jack-and-the-Beanstalk" (*Nationalist and Leinster Times* 1947). The Dublin Marionette Group continued to perform at The Peacock Theatre for several days each year from 1947 to 1951, performing a wide range of productions, including opera and Irish ballad pieces. They played to a full house at the Peacock as Dublin audiences continued to support them, despite competition from a range of international theatre and variety acts available at Dublin venues since the end of the war. The group used their run at the Peacock in 1948 to concentrate on presenting a single full-length play, *Treasure Island*, but drew

criticism for a lack of flexibility of movement in the manipulation of the puppets (*Irish Independent* 1948). Another review questioned whether “the particular type of glove puppet used by the Dublin Group, restricted as it is in movement and expression, can sustain audience interest for the duration of a full-length play” (*Irish Times* 1948).

In January 1949, the group met with more favour from the critics. Their production of *Sweeney Todd the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (supported by two shorter pieces), was described by *The Irish Times* as being “as good an evening’s entertainment as Dublin is offering at the moment” (*Irish Times* 1949). *The Irish Press* were equally enthusiastic: “This group is really settling down and evolving a tradition which, considering their limitation in not having a theatre of their own, is a big achievement” (*Irish Press* 1949). Nelson Paine expressed an ambition to have a permanent puppet theatre in Dublin and to establish puppet groups in rural areas (*Irish Independent* 1949).

The 1950 performances at the Peacock included a glove-puppet version of George Bernard Shaw’s *Shakes versus Shav* - a puppet play written in the previous year that was to be Shaw’s last dramatic work. Commissioned by the Lanchester Marionettes, the play features Shaw and Shakespeare as puppets, with the latter seeking his revenge on Shaw for appropriating his work. Shaw’s preface to the play revealed his particular understanding of puppetry as a creative art form – rather than as a simulation of the human stage – and he cautioned its practitioners on the development of the art form: “I can imagine the puppets simulating living performers so perfectly that the spectators will be completely illuded. The result would be the death of puppetry: for it would lose its charm with its magic. So let reformers beware.” (Shaw 1949: 5). Reviews of the 1950 productions were supportive of the amateur group’s work but assessed the performances as they would a professional offering. Shaw’s puppet play was warmly received by *The Irish Press*: “Shaw’s Play Rousing Knock-Out... It was a most enjoyable little frolic” (*Irish Press* 1950) while *The Irish Times* suggested, “this production is the best that I have seen the Group stage and deserves the full house that it will obviously command” (*Irish Times* 1950). *The Irish Independent* cautioned on the limitations of the puppet theatre, while a review described the performance of Ravel’s *L’Enfant et les Sortilèges* as “an ambitious venture, but the result was an undoubted triumph for the Group as a whole” (*Irish Independent* 1950). A former member of their troupe, composer Brian Boydell, was in the audience for one of their 1950 Peacock performances. He later recorded his impression in his diary, when he referred to the Ravel piece as “...definitely the best thing they have done” (Boydell 2018: 169). The 1950 performances were the last to be orchestrated by the group’s founder, Nelson Paine. Paine moved to England in the early part of 1949, returning to Dublin in December 1949 for the final preparations of the DMG’s run at The Peacock, before leaving for Kenya to work as a town planner in Nairobi, where he subsequently established the Nairobi Puppet Theatre. In Paine’s absence, David Rowlands led the Dublin Marionette Group to some success (Quidnunc 1950). In November 1951, the group performed a puppet opera, *Dream of a Naughty Boy* - an anglicised version of Ravel’s *L’Enfant et les Sortilèges* - at the first Wexford Opera Festival in November 1951 (*Irish Times* 1951), where they also performed *Shakes vs Shav* and three short sketches (*Irish Independent* 1951). The group returned for the second year of the festival to repeat the Ravel production and Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf* (*Irish Independent* 1952).

## Conclusion and appraisal

In the ten years of its existence, the Dublin Marionette Group used a variety of forms of puppetry for a wide range of productions. Commentary and dramatic criticism of their performances indicate experimentation and innovation in both their choice of production and the puppetry used to accomplish it. Theatrical reviews of their performances varied from high praise to damning criticism. However, it is significant that the theatre critics of the day reviewed

these amateur puppeteers by the standards of professional human performances. The group had succeeded in having the puppet theatre regarded as a creative form of expression to be valued alongside other dramatic forms and not just for popular entertainment. Professional publications such as *World's Fair* and annual editions of *Puppetry Yearbook* followed the work of the group alongside news of the most successful professional puppet theatres of the period.

Having established the Nairobi Puppet Theatre in Kenya, Nelson Paine returned to Dublin in 1954 to set up the *Puppet Opera Company*, which brought operatic performances to parts of Ireland where people were unlikely to have otherwise experienced opera (*Irish Independent* 1954). The company presented five operas and a production of *Alice in Wonderland*, including performances at the 1954 and 1955 Wexford Opera Festival (Candida 1955). After twenty months and 18,000 miles of “trundling around Ireland in their three-wheeled van” (Quidnunc 1956), Nelson Paine left in 1956 to return to Kenya and to the Nairobi Puppet Theatre, where he established its own venue, staging several productions each year.

Nelson Paine attracted a range of Irish artistic and dramatic talent to bring Modern Puppetry to Ireland. A perusal of a list of those associated with this amateur group from 1942 to 1952 underlines the extent of the talent available for their productions. This skilled group of individuals adopted the puppet theatre as a new form of creative expression – paralleling what had happened across Europe and the United States over the previous two decades. It also suggests that the Dublin Marionette Group may have been somewhat of a breeding ground for future artistic success.

The programmes of the 1942 (Holloway et al. 1880a) and 1944 (Holloway et al. 1880b) Dublin Marionette Group performances at the Peacock and a similar programme for the Puppet Opera Company’s performance of *La Boheme* in 1954 (Plunkett 1920) provide an interesting list of those involved. Amongst them are several young men and women who would go on to become well-known artists, dramatists and musicians. Brian Boydell provided incidental music and read speaking parts, before writing and producing “Revelation at Low Tide” for the group in 1944 (Boydell 2018: 78). He was to go on to become “one of the most important figures in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Irish music” (Adams 2000). As a teenage assistant to Paine’s Puppet Opera Company in 1955, John McCormick started a life-long passion for drama and the puppet theatre. He became founding director of Ireland’s first university Drama Department in Trinity College and authored five books and numerous articles on the history and development of puppetry. Many other young people who worked with Nelson Paine’s puppet productions developed careers in the theatre or in artistic and creative fields. Several became well-known artists, including Liam Proud (1920 - 1995), George Burton Wallace (1920 - 2009) and Barbara Warren (1925 – 2017).

Nelson Paine’s eagerness to innovate and experiment with puppets achieved a reappraisal of the puppet theatre as an art form in early twentieth century Ireland. Having watched the adoption of the puppet theatre as a valued form of theatrical expression across Europe and the United States, Paine inspired others to join him in a theatrical adventure to discover its potential first-hand. He successfully repositioned the puppet theatre from being a form of popular entertainment aimed at children to being a valued form of theatrical expression that was capable of unique creativity.

## Works Cited

- Abbey Theatre Archives (1942). *Peacock Theatre Ledger 1931-1951*, p71.
- Adams, Martin. 2000. 'Composer Brian Boydell Dies in Dublin Aged 83'. *Irish Times*, November 9, 3.
- Böhmer, Gunter. 1969. *Puppets Through the Ages: An Illustrated History*. London: McDonald.
- Boydell, Brian. 2018. *Rebellious Ferment: A Dublin Musical Memoir and Diary*. Cork: Atrium / Cork University Press.
- Candida. 1955. 'An Irishwoman's Diary: Travel Adventures'. *Irish Times*, September 30.
- Department of Justice (1948). *Department of Justice Naturalisation File for Charles Nelson Paine*, JUS/2013/50/991.
- Doyle, C. 2018. 'The Theatre Royal: Dublin'. Pp. 45–49 in *The Palgrave handbook of contemporary Irish theatre and performance*, edited by E. Jordan and E. Weitz. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Evening Herald (1944). '1944 Peacock Theatre Advertisement'. *Evening Herald*, November 15, 2.
- Evening Herald (1947a). 'Pioneers in Puppetry'. *Evening Herald*, October 29, 2.
- Evening Herald (1947b). 'Harry Lynton Presents His Marionettes in Carefree'. *Evening Herald*, November 8, 4.
- Fallon, Brian. 1998. *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930-1960*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan.
- Francis, Penny. 1998. 'The Rise of the Puppeteer'. in *Annual lecture of The British Centre Union Internationale de la Marionette given on the Puppet Theatre Barge in London on 3 May 1997*. London: BrUNIMA.
- Holloway, Joseph et al. 1880a. '1942 Theatre Programme for the Dublin Marionette Group Performances at the Peacock Theatre, 13-18 April 1942.'
- Holloway, Joseph et al. 1880b. '1944 Theatre Programme for the Dublin Marionette Group Performances at the Peacock Theatre, 15-17 Nov 1944.'
- Irish Independent* (1944). 'Puppet Show at Peacock' November 16, 3.
- Irish Independent* (1947). 'Olympia Tonight'. November 18, 4.
- Irish Independent* (1948). 'Stevenson Classic in Puppetry'. March 9, 6.
- Irish Independent* (1949). 'Founder's Ambition'. January 5, 5.
- Irish Independent* (1950). 'Peacock Presentation: Limitations of Puppetry'. March 21, 7.
- Irish Independent* (1951). 'Wexford's Festival of the Arts Gives National Lead'. October 22, 7.
- Irish Independent* (1952). 'Wexford Begins Eight Day Festival'. October 27, 7.
- Irish Independent* (1954). 'Provinces Will See Puppet Opera'. April 29, 4.
- Irish Press* (1942a). 'Marionette Play'. April 16, 3.
- Irish Press* (1942b). 'R.I.A.M. Concert'. December 22.
- Irish Press* (1944a). 'Roddy the Rover'. March 9, 2.
- Irish Press* (1944b). 'Children's Guild Brings Theatre to School'. May 1, 1.
- Irish Press* (1944c). 'Plays for Children'. October 9, 3.
- Irish Press* (1944d). 'In the Theatres'. November 11, 3.
- Irish Press* (1949). 'Marionette Group's New Advance'. January 21, 5
- Irish Press* (1950). 'Shaw's Play Rousing Knock-Out'. March 21, 5.
- Irish Times* (1941a). 'Peacock Theatre: Square Pegs'. February 6, 7.
- Irish Times* (1941b). 'Feis Ceoil Winners'. May 16, 5.
- Irish Times* (1941c). 'Glenageary Players'. November 18, 4.
- Irish Times* (1943). 'Marionette Group Play'. December 17, 2.
- Irish Times* (1944a). 'Dublin Marionette Group Present Marlowe's Dr Faustus'. March 28, 3.
- Irish Times* (1944b). 'Marionette Group Stage Show'. March 29, 3.
- Irish Times* (1944c). 'Marionette Display'. April 28, 2.
- Irish Times* (1947). '1947 Peacock Theatre Advertisement'. October 25, 7.

- Irish Times* (1948). 'Treasure Island - Dublin Marionette Group'. March 9, 4.
- Irish Times* (1949). 'Dublin Marionette Group'. January 4, 3.
- Irish Times* (1950). 'Ravel With Puppets'. March 22, 5.
- Irish Times* (1951). 'Wexford's Ambitious Festival'. October 20, 5.
- Jurkowski, Henryk, and Penny Francis. 1998. *A History of European Puppetry: The Twentieth Century*. Lempeter, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Kraus, Gottfried. 1966. *The Salzburg Marionette Theatre*. Salzburg: Residenz Verlag.
- McCormick, John. 2010. *The Italian Puppet Theater: A History*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company.
- McCormick, John. 2012. 'Ireland: Modern Puppetry'. *World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts*.
- McCormick, John, and Bennie Pratasik. 1998. *Popular Puppet Theatre in Europe, 1800-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McPharlin, Paul. 1941. *Puppetry 1941: An International Yearbook of Puppets and Marionettes*. Detroit: Puppetry Imprints.
- Molloy, Tony. 1947. 'Theatre'. *Irish Press*, October 27, 8.
- Molony, Martin. 2022. "'Oh, This Is More of Stretch's Show": Randal Stretch and Puppet Theatre in Eighteenth-Century Ireland.' *Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an Dá Chultúr* 37(1):91–107.
- Mooney, Ria. 1937. 'Foreword to the Theatre Programme of the Abbey Experimental Theatre Performances at the Peacock Theatre, 5th April 1937.'
- Morash, Christopher. 2004. *A History of Irish Theatre 1601-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Morice, Gerald. 1942. 'Marionette Plays in Dublin'. *World's Fair*, May 2, 5.
- Morice, Gerald. 1943. 'New Dublin Marionette Group'. *World's Fair*, April 24, 4.
- Morice, Gerald. 1944a. 'Dublin Puppet Group Programme'. *World's Fair*, December 2, 5.
- Morice, Gerald. 1944b. 'Faust with Dublin Puppets'. *World's Fair*, April 22, 5.
- Morice, Gerald. 1945. 'Puppets Aid Anti-Tuberculosis Campaign'. *World's Fair*, August 11.
- Morice, Gerald. 1947. 'Dublin Puppetry'. *World's Fair*, December 20, 5.
- Nationalist and Leinster Times* (1947). 'Puppets in the Limelight'. November 22, 11.
- Niculescu, Margareta. 1967. *The Puppet Theatre of the Modern World: An International Presentation in Word and Picture*. Plays, Incorporated.
- NIVA Library (1941). *College Student Register of the National Irish Visual Arts Library*.
- O'Connor, Lir. 1942. 'An Irishman's Diary: Podrecca's Puppets; Puppetry in Dublin'. *Irish Times*, April 15, 2.
- Plunkett, James. 1920. '1954 Theatre Programme for the Dublin Marionette Group Performances of La Boheme in September 1954'.
- Quidnunc. 1944. 'Puppet Puzzle'. *Irish Times*, March 31, 3.
- Quidnunc. 1950. 'An Irishman's Diary: Puppet Cuchullain'. *Irish Times*, December 14, 5.
- Quidnunc. 1956. 'An Irishman's Diary: Swan Song'. *Irish Times*, May 10, 8.
- Shaw, Bernard. 1949. *SHAKES versus SHAV: A Puppet Play by Bernard Shaw*. Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire: Waldo S Lanchester, Lanchester Marionettes.
- Taxidou, Olga. 2009. 'A New "Art of the Theatre": Gordon Craig's "The Mask" (1908-29) and "The Marionette" (1918-19)'. *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Volume I: Britain and Ireland 1880-1955* 785–806.
- Tozer, H. V. 1932. 'The Puppet Theatre in Barcelona'. Pp. 19–26 in *Puppetry 1932: A Yearbook of Puppets & Marionettes*. Detroit: Puppetry Imprints.
- Walton, J. Michael. 1983. *Craig on Theatre*. Methuen Drama.
- Ward, Terence. 1943c. 'Pantomime : Puppets : Protest'. *Irish Press*, December 18, 5.
- Ward, Terence. 1943b. 'Nativity Play in Miniature'. *Irish Press*, December 21, 1.
- Ward, Terence. 1943a. 'Christmas Shows'. *Irish Press*, December 24, 3.
- Ward, Terence. 1944a. 'Country Curtain'. *Irish Press*, March 25, 2.

- Ward, Terence. 1944b. 'Marionette Group at Peacock'. *Irish Press*, November 16, 3.
- Ward, Terence. 1945. 'Theatre'. *Irish Press*, June 11, 3.
- Wills, Clair. 2008. *That Neutral Island: A History of Ireland during the Second World War*. London: Faber.

Received: 30 October 2022

Final version accepted: 31 January 2023

**Martin G. Molony** is a lecturer at Dublin City University, from which he has a BA degree in Communication Studies and an MA in Journalism. Based at the School of Communications, he is Programme Director of DCU's MSc in Public Relations & Strategic Communications. A genealogist, puppeteer and former journalist, his teaching has included modules in interpersonal communications, public relations, political communication and puppetry. His research interest is in Irish social history, with a focus on the history of the puppet theatre in Ireland, on which he is currently completing his PhD.

[martin.molony@dcu.ie](mailto:martin.molony@dcu.ie)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4217-3957>