

Goldblatt, Harold

by Nicholas Allen

Goldblatt, Harold (1901–82), theatre producer and actor, was born in Belfast. Little is known of his early life before he came to prominence in the 1920s with the Jewish Institute Dramatic Society. He was its founder, producer, and main actor; his first success was to win the President's cup at the 1929 Ulster drama festival. The lead adjudicator was the Abbey Theatre actor Frank Fay (qv), who awarded the prize for the production of Israel Zangwill's 'The melting pot' (1909). Goldblatt produced the company's subsequent programme of plays by Anton Chekov, George Bernard Shaw (qv), and Henrik Ibsen in Belfast throughout the 1930s. With James Mageean, he co-produced 'Barnum was right' (1938) by Joseph Tomelty (qv) for the Northern Ireland Players to great commercial success at the Belfast Empire Variety Theatre in June 1939. The Jewish Institute merged with the Northern Ireland Players and the Ulster Theatre in 1940 to form the Group Theatre. He was instrumental in the foundation of this combined company and negotiated the terms of the lease for their premises in the Ulster Minor Hall in Belfast's Bedford St. The city corporation did not trust the theatre company's finances and demanded three months rent at £6 a week to deter them. He raised the money and proved himself a shrewd businessman, as the Group Theatre took a profit of £40 from a first season that commenced on 11 March 1940. A member of the Group's board of directors, he was also its producer and an actor. Their first major success was 'Boyd's shop' (1936), by St John Ervine (qv), on 16 September 1940, which gave him the idea that plays with Ulster as their subject should be the company's main interest. A second run of fifteen weeks was disrupted only by the heavy air raid of 15/16 April 1941, which left an unexploded bomb at the rear of the theatre. He continued to play a central role in the Group's affairs till the company dissolved in controversy after the rejection of the Sam Thompson (qv) play 'Over the bridge' (1960). Unionist elements within the theatre's board objected to Thompson's dramatisation of sectarian conflict and to his suggestion of potential solidarity between Belfast's working classes. Goldblatt left with fellow actors of the Group Theatre to tour Northern Ireland in the Arts-Council-funded Ulster Theatre Company with an ambition to take drama, both international and local, to provincial towns.

He worked frequently for BBC radio in Northern Ireland and became a regular film and television actor. He played Brady in *Captain Lightfoot* (1955) with Rock Hudson, and Barney Donigan in John Ford's (qv) *The rising of the moon* (1957), a film released in America as *Three leaves of a shamrock* (1957). Playing a minor role in the *Titanic* film *A night to remember* (1957), he also played the Abbey Theatre manager in *Mirror in my house* (1965), a dramatisation of the sequence of early Dublin autobiography by Sean O'Casey (qv). More surprisingly, he played Professor Dale in the 'Frontier in space' episode of 'Dr Who' (February 1973) on BBC TV. A respected spokesperson for his faith, he was at one time honorary secretary to the

Belfast Hebrew Society. He received an honorary degree from QUB (1976) for his services to theatre.

He died on 22 March 1982 in London while acting in a Barbra Streisand film. His wife Lillie predeceased him and left two children. He is buried in Carnmoney cemetery, Co. Antrim; his family deposited the Goldblatt archive of theatre-related material in the Linen Hall library, Belfast.

---

Sam Hanna Bell, *The theatre in Ulster* (1972); *Belfast News Letter*, 23, 24 Mar. 1982; *Ir. Times*, 24 Mar. 1982; Christopher Fitz-simon, *The Irish theatre* (1983); *Linen Hall Review*, i, no. 1 (spring 1984); J. Anthony Gaughan (ed.), *Memoirs of Senator Joseph Connolly* (1996); Kevin Rockett, *The Irish filmography* (1996); Robert Welch, *The Abbey Theatre 1899–1999* (1999); GRO (not found)