

Mac Anna, Tomás

by Patrick Maume

Mac Anna, Tomás (1925–2011), theatrical producer and playwright, was born Thomas Francis McCann in Dundalk, Co. Louth, on 5 March 1925, one of four children of Patrick McCann, stationmaster at Dundalk, and his wife Kathleen (née Byrne). He was educated at St Malachy's national school and Dundalk CBS, which he recalled as 'miniature Gaeltachta', laying the basis for his lifelong bilingualism. His keen interest in soccer reflected his Dundalk origins: he regarded the game as inextricably linked to the town. He attributed his love of theatre to seeing Anew McMaster (qv) in Shakespeare's 'Julius Caesar' at Dundalk Town Hall, to the encouragement of a teacher, Brother Hurley, and to his discovery aged 15 of a volume of plays by Sean O'Casey (qv). (He later staged the first Irish productions of several of O'Casey's expressionist plays in the Abbey and the Belfast Lyric theatres, and argued that O'Casey's late dramas should be seen as striving towards the new forms of theatre being developed elsewhere in Europe.)

After his father's death in 1939, Mac Anna left school to work as an assistant librarian in Dundalk, and read voraciously, developing pride in Dundalk's literary heritage. He was also a keen amateur painter, which developed into an interest in set design, and became involved in amateur drama locally, writing and staging his first play in 1942, though his size (heavily built and 6 ft 3 in (1.9 m) tall) made it difficult to secure acting roles. For some years after moving to Dublin, he revisited Dundalk regularly to assist with amateur dramatic productions.

He joined the Customs and Excise service at age 18. Initially stationed in Dublin, he approached the Abbey in October 1944 – emphasising his command of Irish – but was told there were no vacancies. Shortly afterwards, he was transferred to Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal, where his experience of the border region's smuggling culture (a phenomenon he already knew from Dundalk) inspired his best-known stage play, 'Winter wedding' (1956; originally a 1955 radio drama, 'Bride of pandemonium'), which was denounced in Donegal as a libel on the county's inhabitants. Mac Anna also directed and acted in local Irish- and English-language amateur stage productions, wrote a column in the *Donegal Democrat*, and submitted radio plays to Radio Éireann. After the director of productions, John MacDonagh (qv), realised he had mistaken him for the established playwright John McCann (qv), 'T. F. McCann' became Tomás Mac Anna (although Abbey contemporaries continued to call him 'Frank McCann').

In June 1947, after persistently maintaining contact, Mac Anna was recruited by the Abbey as a producer of Irish-language plays. His first production was 'Diarmuid agus Gráinne' by Micheál MacLiammóir (qv), but most of his early Abbey productions were translations of English-language dramas. He oversaw the collaborative

development of the Abbey's Irish-language Christmas pantomimes, usually a semi-comic treatment of a well-known Irish story interspersed with topical references and comic elements. Although popular with the general public, they were denounced by some critics as typifying the Abbey's artistic degradation. Mac Anna used the pantomimes to experiment with staging techniques such as the incorporation of filmed material into stage productions.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, eleven of Mac Anna's radio dramas were broadcast by Radio Éireann and the BBC. Critics thought he showed a gift for fantasy but that the plays were under-developed. A guest producer at Radio Éireann from 1951, he was particularly associated with the Irish-language variety scripts *Ruaig ar ruicne* (Ban the frown) by Tarlach Ó hUid (qv). In 1951 he scripted and directed a half-hour film, *Jack of all maids*, an extended variety sketch showcasing the talents of Jack MacGowran (qv).

Mac Anna adjudicated at numerous amateur festivals across the country, where he insisted on high standards. After he gave the first production of 'Sive' by John B. Keane (qv) second place at a festival, the supposed feud between Keane and Mac Anna became a running joke for a time. At the New Ross Festival in 1963, Mac Anna remarked that if he was remembered it would be for underestimating 'Sive' (though he maintained that Keane failed to live up to his genius by giving himself insufficient time to develop his plays).

After the Abbey fire of 18 July 1951, Mac Anna participated in the Abbey's move to the Queen's Theatre, where it remained until the opening of the new Abbey building in 1966. His love of spectacle was well suited to the larger Queen's auditorium and the populist drama required to meet its expensive costs. He was given responsibility for scenery design in the mid 1950s, and tried to match the more innovative set designs of the Gate, believing that the Abbey's kitchen-sink realism had become tired and new approaches should be explored. Mac Anna's relations with the Abbey's managing director, Ernest Blythe (qv), were sometimes tense; he resigned at least twice, only to have his resignations rejected by Blythe, who told him to work from within to change the theatre. In general, however, Blythe gave Mac Anna considerable freedom to experiment with new continental stage techniques, so long as his Irish-language productions were grammatically correct and contained no English. After Blythe's death, Mac Anna defended him against accusations that he had stultified the Abbey, maintaining that Blythe had overseen the company's professionalisation and held it together between the 1951 fire and the 1966 return to the new Abbey building (made possible by Blythe's skill in extracting funds from reluctant governments). He also defended Blythe's insistence that all Abbey actors be fluent in Irish, arguing it was legitimate for the national theatre to produce plays in Irish to professional standards. Discontented members of the company saw him as Blythe's stooge, but he shared many of their concerns about artistic freedom and innovation. A self-conscious bohemian, he wore waistcoats and a ponytail

and often appeared without a tie. Memorialists recalled among his more pleasant characteristics that he never took criticism personally and never bore a grudge.

Mac Anna was loaned by the Abbey to other Dublin theatres to direct individual productions; in particular, he played a significant role in the revitalisation of Irish-language drama through Gael Linn's Damer Theatre (1955–70), working closely with writers such as Eoghan Ó Tuairisc (qv) and Máiréad Ní Ghráda (qv). In 1964 he directed 'An triail' by Ní Ghráda at the Damer, having helped her reshape it for the stage. Mac Anna's love of spectacle found expression in the staging of historical pageants to commemorate various anniversaries in the 1950s and 1960s. These culminated on 12–15 April 1966 in Croke Park when Mac Anna staged nightly performances of 'Aiséirí', a large-scale pageant tracing the development of Irish republicanism from 1798 to 1916 as part of the official commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter rising. Mac Anna had planned the spectacle over a year in advance, working closely with the Department of Defence; he intended it as the highpoint of the commemorations, and contemporary reviews were enthusiastic. In 1991 he staged another pageant (without state backing) for the Reclaim the Spirit of 1916 Committee on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the rising.

In 1970, as the Northern Ireland troubles developed, Mac Anna worked with Ó Tuairisc and the Ulster dramatist John D. Stewart to create a satirical review, 'A state of chassis', ridiculing all sides in the northern conflict. This provoked a protest by the Derry civil rights activist Eamonn McCann, who climbed on stage at the premiere (16 September 1970) and denounced the show as typifying southern complacency and ignorance of the northern situation. Mac Anna, though, held strong nationalist views: in the early 1970s he was a leading member of the Irish Civil Rights Association, and in 1974 addressed an ICRA protest rally against the force-feeding of IRA hunger strikers in British prisons. In 1979 he commemorated the birth of Patrick Pearse (qv) by producing a double LP of poems and other extracts from Pearse's writings (some recited by Siobhán McKenna (qv)), and in the early 1980s was an active supporter of the 'blanket protest' by republican prisoners seeking political status.

Mac Anna was characteristically ambivalent about the new Abbey building, seeing it as tragically bereft of the intimate setting and emotional residue of the old theatre, but also as a *tabula rasa* that gave new writers and actors the opportunity to respond to a changing society. He believed that competition from television should be met by a more specifically theatrical drama, such as that of Bertolt Brecht. (The Abbey's closing months at the Queen's saw successful productions by Mac Anna of Brecht's 'Galileo' and García Lorca's 'Yerma'.)

As artistic adviser (1966–8), Mac Anna promoted the Abbey School of Acting, oversaw a number of successful seminars on playwriting, took the company on provincial tours, expanded the repertoire to include continental dramas (bringing a Russian director to stage Chekhov's 'The cherry orchard'), and oversaw a number of innovative productions, including 'The loves of Cass McGuire' by Brian Friel (1929–

2015) (which had previously failed in New York), a 1968 'Playboy of the western world' emphasising black humour rather than whimsical fantasy, and Tom Murphy's Brechtian 'Famine' (Mac Anna expressed regret that it had not been possible to fill the theatre with the scent of rotting potatoes).

In 1968 he took up a one-year lecturing position in Northfield, Minnesota, deepening his acquaintance with contemporary US theatre. On his return, he became director of the experimental Peacock theatre (within the Abbey building), which he used as the basis for several experimental productions, smuggled past the conservative Abbey board. These included 'Ulysses in Nighttown' (1971), an adaptation of the Circe episode (set in a brothel) of *Ulysses* by James Joyce (qv), and John Whiting's 'The devils' (1976), about sexual hysteria in a seventeenth-century French convent. Although Mac Anna expressed concern that television was exposing children to excessive violence, he opposed censorship, and remarked that theatrical sex, violence and sensationalism went back to the Greeks and Shakespeare. He also directed the premieres of Friel's 'The freedom of the city' (1973) and 'Volunteers' (1975), and the Irish premiere of Günther Grass's sardonic portrayal of Brecht's response to the suppression of an East German workers' revolt, 'The plebeians rehearse the uprising'.

Mac Anna's 1970 production of an adaptation by Frank McMahon (1919–84) of *Borstal boy* by Brendan Behan (qv) was staged on Broadway and received the Tony award for best straight drama of the year. On the retirement of Blythe, Mac Anna joined the Abbey board in 1972, and late in 1973 returned as artistic director to replace Lelia Doolan, holding the post until 1978. Highpoints included a successful adaptation by P. J. O'Connor of *Tarry Flynn*, the novel by Patrick Kavanagh (qv), and the Irish premiere of Brecht's 'Arturo Ui'.

Mac Anna continued to mount Abbey productions into the 1990s (such as Alan Titley's 'Tagann Godot' (1990)) and to work with overseas theatre. During his career, he directed productions in Iceland, Greece, Newfoundland, Germany and the USSR, as well as Britain and the USA. He also worked extensively with academia; from 1988 he developed a close relationship with Boston College, which gave him a distinguished alumnus award in 2006. He remained an honorary member of the Abbey board till his death; he still regularly attended first nights and was known to walk out conspicuously from performances he considered below standard. In 2005 he campaigned against a proposal to move the Abbey to a new site in the Dublin docklands, and later published a memoir, *Fallaing Aonghusa* (2006). On receiving a lifetime achievement presentation at the *Irish Times* Theatre Awards (2010), he declared: 'No apologies, no regrets. I had a ball' (*Ir. Times*, 21 May 2010).

In 1955 he married the actress Caroline Ní Shiaráin of Carrick-on-Shannon, Co. Leitrim; they lived mostly in Bray, Co. Wicklow, and had two daughters and three sons, including the writer Ferdia Mac Anna, whose novel *The last of the high kings* (1991) features an affectionately sardonic portrayal of a bemused bohemian father.

After several weeks' illness, Tomás Mac Anna died on 17 May 2011 in St Michael's Hospital, Dún Laoghaire, Co. Dublin, and was buried in Springfield cemetery, Bray. Tributes hailed him as having restored intellect to the Irish stage and as a theatrical Gorbachev, the insider who dismantled the ancient regime of which he was part. It might just as easily be argued that he was an intelligent traditionalist who sought to return to the sources of the Abbey's achievement and rediscover obscured approaches from its history, such as the Fay brothers' emphasis on stagecraft and the interest of Edward Martyn (qv) in European theatre. Through his productions and formation of a generation of actors he was one of the great shapers of twentieth-century Irish theatre.

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*Ir. Times*, 7 June, 4 Nov., 29 Dec. 1947; 5 July 1948; 3, 10 Aug., 29 Dec. 1951; 17 Sept. 1955; 25 Dec. 1962; 1 Mar. 1963; 19 Apr., 29 Dec. 1965; 14 Feb., 25 Mar., 7, 9 June, 18, 19 July 1966; 2 Jan., 17, 18, 19 Aug. 1967; 2 Feb., 26 Mar., 13 June, 25, 30 July, 15, 27, 31 Aug., 4 Nov. 1968; 8 Nov. 1969; 9 Feb., 11, 17 Mar., 21 Apr. 1970; 1, 12 Jan., 31 Aug., 6 Nov. 1971; 13, 14 Jan., 17 June, 18 Dec. 1972; 8 Feb., 17 Mar., 20 Apr., 23 May, 30 July, 8 Sept., 17 Nov., 17 Dec. 1973; 7 Jan., 20 Mar., 31 May 1974; 11 Mar., 16 Apr. 1975; 31 Jan., 20 May, 16 July, 23 Sept., 4 Nov. 1976; 4 June, 13 July, 15 Sept., 29 Oct. 1977; 2 Apr., 12 Aug. 1978; 10 Feb., 28, 31 Dec. 1979; 19 Jan. 1980; 29 Jan. 1983; 18, 19, 21, 23 May 2011; *Ir. Times Pictorial*, 28 Mar., 16 May 1953; 1 Dec. 1956; *Sunday Independent*, 22 June 1969; 11 Sept. 2005; 22 May 2011; Micheál Ó hAodha, *Siobhán: a memoir of an actress* (1994); Niall Toibin, *'Smile and be a villain!'* (1995); Robert Welch, *The Abbey Theatre 1899–1999: form and pressure* (1999); Vincent Dowling, *Astride the moon: a theatrical life* (2000); Christopher Morash, *A history of Irish theatre, 1601–2000* (2002); Christopher Fitz-Simon, *Players and painted stage: aspects of the twentieth-century theatre in Ireland* (2004); *Ir. Independent*, 18, 21 May 2011; Roisín Higgins, *Transforming 1916: meaning, memory and the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter rising* (2012); An Bunachar Náisiúnta Beathaisnéisí Gaeilge, [www.ainm.ie](http://www.ainm.ie) (accessed May 2017)