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JDCMB is Jessica Duchen's Classical Music Blog. Music & writing, with ginger, in London, UK. Author & journalist JD writes for The Independent.

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A great playwright's daughter speaks

The Silver Tassie, Sean O'Casey's great anti-war drama of 1928, is about to open at the National Theatre and I was delighted to have the chance to talk to the playwright's daughter, Shivaun O'Casey, about life with her father. The piece is in the Observations section of today's Independent, and here is the director's cut, so to speak. (I don't often do theatre features, but adore it.)



Dear mother, this helpless thing is still your son. Harry Heegan, me, who, on the football field, could crash a twelve-stone flyer off his feet.

Sean O'Casey's anti-war drama *The Silver Tassie*, which is about to open in a new production by Howard Davies at the National Theatre, represents the great Irish playwright at the height of his iconoclastic powers. Showing the devastating impact of World War I on an Irish footballer and his friends, it features a surreal battleground scene, as shocking today as it must have been when in 1928 O'Casey first unleashed the text upon the unsuspecting WB Yeats, a director of Dublin's Abbey Theatre.

Although he had defended O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, which shot to riot-sparking notoriety there, Yeats rejected the new play out of hand. O'Casey, he declared, should not write about the trenches because he had not experienced them; and he

objected to his sundering of conventional dramatic unities. O'Casey's riposte? "Aristotle is all balls."

O'Casey can easily sound like a fighter and a firebrand; and his socialist standpoint was distinctly at odds with establishmentarian mainstream theatre. His daughter, Shivaun, herself a theatre director before her retirement, nevertheless casts a different perspective on his nature.

"He hated fighting," she declares, "but he couldn't let things lie when he saw injustices. He had to say what he really thought. In fact he was the kindest person I have ever known." His socialism sprang more from compassion than from communist convictions, she adds: "He was never a member of the party – he couldn't ever be a member of anything, because he couldn't toe any line. He was a free thinker. I think a lot of people don't quite understand that."

Born in Dublin in 1880, O'Casey started to write plays in his forties while working as a manual labourer. Shivaun relates that he occupied a small room in an overcrowded house on Dublin's North Circular Road where, on returning from work, he would write by candlelight far into the night.

Coming to London to accept the Hawthornden Prize for Literature for *Juno and the Paycock*, O'Casey discovered a more congenial atmosphere than Dublin provided – he later remarked that "in Ireland they wore the fig-leaves on their mouths". Here he met and married the actress Eileen Carey Reynolds in 1928. Shivaun, the youngest of their three children, feels that her father's lessons in warmth, caring and honesty have never left her: "He would quote Polonius's speech from *Hamlet*, 'To thine own self be true,'" she remembers.

The family settled in Devon, yet Ireland stayed strongly in O'Casey's consciousness. "It was inside him and he brought it with him," Shivaun suggests. "He continued to create Irish characters all his life." One such character in the play *Red Roses for Me*, she says, was based on a local from Totnes market who asked him repeatedly whether the banks were safe. (Totnes was their chosen home after George Bernard Shaw advised that Shivaun's two elder brothers should attend the progressive school at nearby Dartington: "That's the only school for the O'Casey children," he declared, according to Shivaun.)

Despite his prolific output, O'Casey made little money from his writing. "He wasn't what you might term a popular playwright," says Shivaun. "Yeats's dismissal of *The Silver Tassie* didn't help him, and neither did his politics. He was always fighting for equality, so he wasn't an easy writer to put on if you wanted to be safe."

There is certainly nothing safe about *The Silver Tassie*. Today, Shivaun adds, its message is as relevant as ever: "It's a stark reminder of what war really is, and of its terrible waste of young life."

The Silver Tassie, Lyttleton Theatre, currently previewing, opens 23 April. Box office: 020 742 3000