At the Hawk’s Well

Yeats and the Hawk’s Well Theatre

‘Under bare BenBulben’s head’, Sligo is steeped in literary history and drama.

It was here that W. B. Yeats, poet, playwright, philosopher and public man, spent the summers of his childhood listening to ‘lakewater lapping with low sounds by the shore’. His poems evoke the beauty and peacefulness of ‘the Hazelwood’ and ‘the lake isle of Innisfree’, places the young Yeats dreamed of escaping to while in London. Yeats was much in love with Sligo. His other great love was theatre and Yeats, along with John Millington Synge and Lady Gregory, is credited for establishing the first National Theatre of Ireland, the Abbey Theatre. How fitting it is then that the local theatre in Sligo was named ‘the Hawk’s Well’ in honour of W.B. Yeat’s great play.

‘He who drinks, they say, of that miraculous water lives forever.’

From At the Hawk’s Well
By William Butler Yeats

The Play ‘At the Hawk’s Well’ explores Yeat’s eternal search for immortality. An abiding memory from Lionel Gallagher, one of the original board members of the Hawk’s Well is from January 1982 when Walter McDonagh pointed out to him a lone hawk on the spire of the Cathedral overlooking the theatre. It disappeared two days after the official opening. Lionel believes it could only have been the spirit of William Butler Yeats giving his approval to the founding of Sligo’s local theatre, the Hawk’s Well.

In the words of Dr. Patrick Hillery, President of Ireland, who opened the Theatre in 1982; “An aura of strange magic and mystery surrounds the name ‘the Hawk’s Well.’ Its very sound suggests furtive glances into that lost world of the past which so gripped the imagination of Ireland’s greatest poet, whose own superb achievement is forever inseparably entwined with the Sligo that he loved. With song, story, lore and legend this part of Ireland enriched its consciousness and inspired his dreams. From that consciousness and the poet’s dreams came outstanding art which repaid the singular generosity of Sligo and its people a hundred thousandfold. With the opening of the Hawk’s Well, drama has found a permanent home in Sligo. It is appropriate that that home should derive its name from a play by one who did so much, both on and off the stage, to nurture the Irish theatre in which we all take such pride. How proud the many-talented Yeats would have been that a work of his gave its name to Sligo’s own theatre.”