

READING IRELAND

THE LITTLE MAGAZINE



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Introduction



Adrienne Leavy

Photo courtesy of Bobbie Hanvey.
With thanks to the Lyric Theatre,
Belfast, for permission to photograph
the theatre.

With the passing of Tom Murphy on May 15, 2018 the Irish theatrical world lost one of the most important Irish playwrights in modern times. Murphy first gained recognition with the London production of *A Whistle in the Dark* in 1961 and he continued his brutally honest interrogation of Irish history and culture for the rest of his career, authoring many of the seminal dramas in the Irish theatrical canon with plays such as *Famine*, *The Gigli Concert*, *Conversations on a Homecoming*, *Bailegangaire* and *The House*. In 2017 President Michael D. Higgins presented Murphy with a gold torc and the title of Saoi of Aosdána, the highest honor of the arts in Ireland, in recognition of his extraordinary body of work. In his recent study on the theatre of Tom Murphy Nicholas

Greene sums up why Murphy is so important: “a playwright who disavows any political intention has nevertheless created a powerful vision of a small postcolonial country struggling to come to terms with modernity.”¹ We open this issue of *Reading Ireland* with Greene’s wide-ranging review of Murphy’s work in which he considers the playwright’s legacy. As Greene notes, “there can be no doubt that Murphy’s work made possible much that came after him,” and he points to a number of contemporary playwrights such as Enda Walsh, Martin McDonagh, Billy Roche, Mark O’Rowe and Marina Carr where the Murphy aesthetic is identifiable. Yet as Greene astutely notes, “the work of a truly original playwright may be said to authorize and validate successors as much as it impacts on them in terms of this or that discernable influence.” With his dramatic explorations of the traumas of Irish history and the fatal flaws of a post-independence Ireland, Murphy seriously expanded the imaginative possibilities for Irish theatre and his legacy will undoubtedly continue to resonate throughout the twenty-first century.

I am privileged to have had the opportunity to interview Thomas Kilroy, one of our finest contemporary dramatists, for this issue. Kilroy’s work is characterized by a profound literary sensibility married to a decidedly experimental approach. In our wide-ranging conversation Kilroy discusses a number of his most important plays, his experiences working with the Field Day Theatre company, and his recent foray into the field of memoir writing. In her introduction to her study of ten Kilroy plays, *The Theatre of Thomas Kilroy: No Absolutes* (reviewed here), José Lanteris writes that a consistent motif in Kilroy’s work is “the rejection of absolutism and certainty in favour of provisionality and doubt.”² As she further observes, “more than any other playwright of his generation, Kilroy tends to marry Irish subject matter to forms of expression inspired by (predominantly) modern European and contemporary British dramatic models, a practice that uniquely positions him as a conduit between different theatre traditions.”³ Lanteris’s essay discusses Kilroy’s adaptation of Anton Chekhov’s play *The Seagull*, and the aesthetic choices he made that enabled him to skillfully transport Chekhov’s play to a “Big House” in the west of Ireland.

Frank McGuinness first achieved major recognition with his 1985 play, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Toward the Somme*, and since that time he has been a major force in Irish theatre, writing such plays as *Carthaginians*, *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* and *Dolly West's Kitchen*. Graham Price, who has written about these plays elsewhere,⁴ engages here with another McGuinness play, *Mutabilitie*, which imagines a chance meeting in Ireland between Shakespeare and the visionary Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser. Drawing on the work of earlier writers such as Oscar Wilde and Samuel Beckett, and specifically on Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Price reads McGuinness's play as a "theatrical rewriting and aestheticized of history via the prism of various modern and postmodern artists' texts."

Poet and playwright Tom Mac Intyre is the subject of an essay by John Mc Evoy which considers the experimental and anti-naturalistic nature of Mac Intyre's work, specifically in the context of his 1983 adaptation of Patrick Kavanagh's long modernist poem *The Great Hunger*. McEvoy describes the playwright's approach to theatre as one that combines "narrative with the metaphorical and the symbolic" to produce a theatrical experience that "appeals directly to the unconscious and the visceral rather than the cerebral." He also argues that in addition to being influenced by Pina Bausch and Jerzy Grotowski, Mac Intyre's theatrical style is similar in many respects to the work of the Polish practitioner Tadeusz Kantor, a key figure in European avant-garde theatre.

Next, director Charlotte Headrick discusses the West coast production history and critical reception to Jaki McCarrick's searing colonial drama, *Belfast Girls*. Set aboard the *Inchinnan*, a ship bound for Australia, the play focuses on a group of disenfranchised young women fleeing the Great Famine in the hope of realizing a better life on the new continent. Citing David McCullough's observation that history is drama, Headrick writes that "in the case of *Belfast Girls*, Jaki McCarrick has reclaimed a lost piece of women's history and turned it into a piece of drama that tells that piece of history." We follow Headrick's essay with a wide-ranging interview with McCarrick which confirms my impression that she is one of the most thoughtful and exciting young playwrights working in theatre today.

Born in Belfast, the late Stewart Parker wrote with a distinctive sense of his Northern Protestant heritage. He is best known for such acclaimed plays as *Spokesong*, *Northern Star*, *Heavenly Bodies* and *Pentecost*. Parker's biographer, Marilyn Richtarik, writes about his semi-autobiographical novel *Hopdance* (The Lilliput Press Ltd), which was published for the first time in 2017, twenty-nine years after Parker's untimely death from cancer. Like Parker, the central character in the novel had his leg amputated when he was a nineteen year old university student. In the novel, (which Richtarik edited), Parker draws a series of portraits of the protagonist's life before, during and after this harrowing event. We are delighted also to spotlight Rough Magic Theatre Company and its Artistic Director, Lynne Parker. Parker is the niece of Stewart Parker and in my interview with her she acknowledges that he has had a profound artistic influence on her work and the work of Rough Magic. In addition to discussing the groundbreaking theatrical productions of Rough Magic, she talks about SEEDS, Rough Magic's unique mentoring program for young theatre professionals. The mission of SEEDS is to Seek Out, Encourage, Enable, Develop and Stage new drama and it serves as an important example as to what can be accomplished with the right guidance and support from established theatre professionals.

Three excellent recently published studies of Irish dramatists are reviewed in this issue: *The Theatre of Thomas Kilroy: No Absolutes* by José Lanfers, *Marina Carr: Pastures of the Unknown* by Melissa Sihra, and *Oscar Wilde and Contemporary Irish Drama: Learning to be Oscar's Contemporary* by Graham Price. In his detailed review of Lanfers's study of Kilroy's theatre Brian McCabe demonstrates the depth of scholarship underpinning this monograph, a book he concludes is essential reading for anyone studying Kilroy's theatre. He also notes approvingly the range of archival material that Lanfers draws on and includes in her book, which adds an extra level of critical information to the text. Melissa Sihra, who is widely acknowledged as an expert on the theatre of Marina Carr, has crafted a study that locates her work within a female genealogy that revises the patriarchal origins of modern Irish drama. The creative vision of Lady Augusta Gregory underpins the analysis of Carr's dramatic vision throughout the volume, and Sihra uses the aesthetic connections between Gregory and Carr to re-situate the woman artist as central to Irish theatre. In his comprehensive study Price traces the influence of Oscar Wilde, both as an artist and an aestheticized thinker, on five of Ireland's most important contemporary dramatists: Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Thomas Kilroy, Frank McGuinness and Marina Carr, and in so doing he makes a compelling case for the continuing relevance of Wilde to contemporary Irish drama.

Included in this issue is a spotlight on the Lyric Theatre, Belfast. In a turbulent half century, Belfast's Lyric Theatre has survived bombings, irate resignations and a costly rebuild and refurbishment. Michael Quinn looks at how the venue has flourished despite the setbacks and has successfully developed strong community ties. In his essay on the Abbey Theatre, Patrick Lonergan provides an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the Abbey's programming history since the 1950s, noting that although the theatre had "played a transformative role in our society – fighting inequality, combatting abuses of power, and creating a space to imagine the possibility of peace in Northern Ireland," patterns of exclusion occur repeatedly and that "advances made by one generation frequently had to be fought for again by their successors."

5

This is the second drama themed issue of *Reading Ireland* and undoubtedly we will publish another issue as there are many other excellent Irish dramatists that merit attention. Due to space considerations we were not able to include essays on playwrights such as Anne Devlin, Martin McDonagh, Connor McPherson, Billy Roche and Enda Walsh, but their work will be covered at a later date.⁵ Our first drama issue included an essay on the career of Brian Friel and an interview with Marina Carr and we have included a hyperlink to both pieces in the table of contents.

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Bobbie Hanvey to this issue of *Reading Ireland*. We have been privileged to include his work in previous issues and this one is no exception. Along with several photographs of the Lyric Theatre, Belfast, Hanvey's intimate portraits of Thomas Kilroy, Tom Mac Intyre and Jaki McCarrick illuminate the magazine. Thanks also to the Abbey Theatre, Druid theatre company John Mc Evoy, the Lyric Theatre, the National Theatre, and the personal collection of Tom Murphy for sharing production stills with *Reading Ireland*.

Finally, the theatrical works of the writers discussed in this issue are published by the following presses: Tom Murphy is published by Methuen Drama; Thomas Kilroy is published by The Gallery Press; Frank McGuinness is published by Faber and Faber; Tom Mac Intyre is published by the Lilliput Press (*The Great Hunger* and *The Gallant John-Joe*) and New Island Books (*What Happened Bridgie Cleary*); Jaki McCarrick is published by Samuel French; Stewart Parker is published by Methuen Drama; Brian Friel is published by The Gallery Press and Marina Carr is published by Faber and Faber.

Notes

- 1 Nichols Grene, *The Theatre of Tom Murphy: Playwright Adventurer*. London: Methuen Drama, 2017, p.210.
- 2 José Lanters, *The Theatre of Thomas Kilroy: No Absolutes* Cork: Cork University Press: 2018, 1.
- 3 Lanters, 7.
- 4 See chapter 5, Graham Price, *Oscar Wilde and Contemporary Irish Drama: Learning to be Oscar's Contemporary*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018.
- 5 Playwright Dermot Bolger will be the subject of an essay and interview in the fall/winter 2019 issue of *Reading Ireland* which will focus on Dublin Writers.

Essay: “The Legacy of Tom Murphy”

by Nicholas Grene



Tom Murphy

Photo: Paul McGrthy. Tom Murphy personal collection.

Tom Murphy died on 15 May 2018; in place of a funeral there was a celebration of his life and work. Led by the President, Michael D. Higgins, himself an old friend of the playwright, 600 people crowded into Dublin’s Mansion House to pay tribute. The eulogy was given by Fintan O’Toole, who had flown home from the United States to be there:

His true voice was a breath that could somehow blow on the dark embers of burned-out humanity and make the flames of boundless imagination, of profound compassion and of defiant comedy leap out of them in searing dramatic language. He had an amazing ear for the troubles, confusions, hurts and hopes hidden in the sounds we make. Generations of actors found they could both sink into and find themselves buoyed up and carried along by Murphy’s rich, bold, daring and musical words, woven into intricate duets and trios and soaring verbal arias that to borrow from Seamus Heaney, “catch the heart off guard and blow it open”.¹

All the newspapers printed pages of salutes. Garry Hynes, long term associate who had directed so many of Murphy’s plays for Druid Theatre company, declared: ‘There is not a person who works in the Irish theatre, indeed internationally, who hasn’t encountered him and been changed and been changed for the better’.² The President said ‘We have had no greater use of language for the stage than in the body of work produced by Tom Murphy since his earliest work in the 1960s. His themes were not only those which had influenced the very essence of Irishness – immigration, famine and loss – they were universal in their reach’.³ Now a year after his death, beyond the salutes on the occasion of his passing, is it possible to assess the legacy of Tom Murphy, the scale of his achievement and his impact on Irish theatre?

A Whistle in the Dark, his very first full-length play, gave him his breakthrough in 1961 at the age of twenty-six. Rejected by the Abbey, it was staged in London by the avant-garde Theatre Workshop, which had been founded by Joan Littlewood, and transferred to the West End where it ran for three months. It was a controversial success, eliciting some astonishingly racist abuse for its representation of the emigrant Carney family living in Coventry. ‘Mr Murphy has undoubtedly invented the Most Anthropoidal Family of the year. The only thing that separates his characters from a collection of wild gorillas is their ability to speak with an Irish accent’.⁴ The British Home Secretary was called upon to deport all Irishmen, as *Whistle* showed ‘just what bog vipers we are nursing in our bosom – savage kerns like the five Carney brothers’.⁵ Even those who admired the play emphasized its violence. Kenneth Tynan called it ‘arguably the most uninhibited display of brutality that the London theatre has ever witnessed’.⁶ The violence is hardly so remarkable by now. Instead what gives the play its power is Murphy’s dramatization of the group psychology of the Carneys. An underclass in their native Mayo, where they are derided as ‘tinkers’, operating as pimps and extortionists in Britain, they compensate for the sense of deprivation and discrimination by a culture of macho pseudoheroics. What is striking in retrospect is just how well constructed a play it is. The action moves inexorably to its tragic conclusion as Michael, the one brother who has tried to

settle down and assimilate in England, whose house and marriage has been systematically trashed by his siblings, ends up in a fight engineered by his boastful coward father Dada and kills Des, the youngest brother whom he had sought to rescue and protect.

It is still quite an extraordinary play, but even more extraordinarily Murphy never wrote another play like it. The success of *Whistle* had enabled Murphy to give up his position as a secondary school metalwork teacher in Mountbellew, close to his home town of Tuam in Galway, and move to London as a full-time writer. It should have been relatively easy for him to capitalize on that success with a follow-up on somewhat the same lines. But he chose to do it the hard way: the three next plays he wrote were experimentally uncommercial and none of them were to find London productions. For the rest of his career he avoided what he called the 'formula' method of playwriting, figuring the angles, thinking of the market and building a canny vehicle for the stage, in favour of the 'adventure' method which demands that the dramatist follow wherever the initial conception takes him or her.⁷

So, for example, the immediate successor to *Whistle*, was *The Fooleen*, ultimately to be entitled *A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer's Assistant*. It is a play uncannily like *Philadelphia Here I Come!*, which must have been written by Brian Friel at almost the same time when neither playwright would have been aware of the other's work. Both are about grocer's assistants, driven towards emigration by low-paid jobs in the suffocating small town environment of 1950s Ireland. But *Crucial Week* is like the unlovely twin of *Philadelphia*. By his ingenious

device of having the central character Gar O'Donnell split between two personae Public and Private, Friel brings light and air, lyricism and comedy into the stagnant, dead space of Ballybeg. Much of *Crucial Week* is also very funny and was to prove a popular success when produced by the Abbey in 1969 with a young Donal McCann in the lead. But Murphy's small town is a nightmarish dystopia, and the stunted John Joe lives through his crucial week as an expressionist phantasmagoria which can bring no full release from the 'will I, won't I' dilemma of going or staying: 'Forced to stay or forced to go. Never the freedom to decide and make the choice for ourselves. And then we're half-men here, or half-men away, and how can we hope ever to do anything' (*Plays*, 4, 162).⁸

Crucial Week was at least set in Ireland, identifiably about Irish social issues. For his third play Murphy moved into fairy-tale territory with James and Rosie, a pimp and a prostitute, running through a forest, encountering their ideal alter egos, Edmund and Anastasia. *The Morning after*

Optimism, as its title implies, is about the hungover state of disillusionment explored at its most existential level. For the two couples Murphy invented different languages: the beautiful, archaic Edmund and Anastasia speak in a medley of romantic story-book clichés, while the screwed-up James and Rosie have their own strange argot of embittered cynicism. The play's 'happy ending' comes when James kills Edmund – his own half-brother, as it turns out – and Rosie murders Anastasia. Though it was admired when finally produced at the the Abbey in 1971, with the great Northern Irish actor Colin Blakely playing James, it was never going to be a mainstream success. A New York production was excoriated by the critics who clearly wanted Murphy to go back to the mainstream naturalistic style of *Whistle*.



A Whistle in the Dark

Photo: Fergus Bourke courtesy of the Abbey Theatre.



Niall Buggy, Rory Nolan and Gavin Drea in *A Whistle in the Dark*, by Tom Murphy. Druid-Murphy 2012.

Photo: Catherine Ashmore courtesy of Druid.

regarded as one of his outstanding achievements, in part because of his belief that the trauma of the Famine underlay many of the deformations of Irish culture in the modern period. As he wrote in the Introduction to the volume of his plays in which *Famine* appeared: ‘The dream of food can become a reality – as it did in the Irish experience – and people’s bodies are nourished back to health. What can similarly restore mentalities that have been distorted, spirits that have become mean and broken?’ (*Plays*, 1, xi). Much of Murphy’s work is devoted to addressing that question.

The critically acclaimed 1968 Abbey production of *Famine*, directed by Tomás Mac Anna, heralded Murphy’s re-entry into Irish theatre, two years before he returned to live in Dublin. The time in London, in spite of his failure to get his plays produced there, was not wasted. Apart from seeing a great deal of international theatre that made its mark on him, commissioned television scripts allowed him to develop material that were later worked up as stage plays. *Young Man in Trouble* (Thames Television, 1969) served as the basis for the one-act *On the Inside*, the 1974 belated counterpart to *On the Outside* (1960), Murphy’s first dramatic effort, co-written with Noel O’Donoghue. *Snakes and Reptiles* (BBC, 1968) mutated through *The White House* (1972), eventually to become *Conversations on a Homecoming* (1985). But in the 1970s Murphy, re-settled in Ireland, was to find a theatrical home in the Abbey (where he was for several years on the Board). The theatre staged his backlist and new plays as they were written, even when those plays were controversial as with *The Sanctuary Lamp* (1975).

The play was controversial because of the fierceness of some of its anticlerical satire. In the original text there was a scene (which Murphy later cut) with a spoof sermon full of tasteless, would-be ingratiating jokes delivered by a guitar-toting post-Vatican II priest. Still worse was the violently abusive attack on the Church by the circus juggler Francisco, the only Irish character in the play, in reaction against his Catholic education. There were strong protests by devout believers, only silenced by a statement from the then President, Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh, who ranked it as one of the great plays of the Abbey.⁹ It was in fact ahead of its time in its exploration of spirituality in a post-Catholic, post-Christian period. The polemically anticlerical Francisco is joined by his circus companion the strong man Harry, who is a lapsed Jew, and the waif Maisie, mentally challenged teenager in flight from her abusive grandparents. These three desperate souls come together in an empty church, and look to the sanctuary lamp (which means nothing at all to two of them) for some sort of solace. It is strange, wayward and yet remarkably beautiful.

After *Sanctuary Lamp*, Murphy hit a bad patch. For some time he stopped writing altogether, and his next play for the Abbey, *The Blue Macushla* (1980), a *film noir* transposed as a stage play to a Dublin gangland setting, was a complete flop. And then came three masterpieces in three years, each one wholly original, each completely unlike the other.

The first was *The Gigli Concert* (1983). There was an autobiographical dimension to the story of the Irish Man – he is given no other name -- desperate to sing like the Italian Benaimino Gigli. Murphy, who had a fine tenor voice, confessed to an overwhelming envy of singers. O'Toole started his eulogy with the statement: 'We are fortunate that Tom Murphy was not a better singer', because if he had been he would not have written his plays. 'Singing', says the Irish Man: 'The only possible way to tell people. . . Who you are?' (*Plays*, 3, 179). The character, a ruthless property developer in the grip of a depressive breakdown, comes to JPW King, an English quack psychotherapist or 'dynamatologist', to provide him with the magical means to achieve his impossible objective. King is in as bad a state as Irish Man, and most of the play consists of a series of intense encounters between the two men, broken only by occasional appearances of Mona, JPW's lover whose presence he hardly notices, obsessed as he is with his unrequited love for the unavailable Helen, who can only be contacted by

telephone. The name Helen is one clue to the fact that this is a re-making of the Faust legend. At first it would appear that Irish Man is the Faust figure, JPW Mephistopheles, while Mona, JPW's lover, is Marguerite. But that configuration changes as the play goes on: Mona, it appears, is as much seducer as seduced, and JPW realises too late – after she has been diagnosed with cancer – that she had offered him real love in place of his imagined passion for Helen. The Irish Man comes through his breakdown, is happily cured, and it is JPW who becomes the Faust figure, bound to take on the quest for magic.

And over all this, the music soars: at the opening the voice of Gigli is heard singing Meyerbeer's 'O Paradiso', operatic expression of the discovery of a new land, as the set reveals JPW's sordid bedsit-cum-clinic. Music is crucial to many

of Murphy's plays – classical instrumental music, Victorian drawing-room ballads, contemporary pop songs – but never as integrally woven into the fabric of the drama as in *Gigli*. At one point the relationship with the Faust story is made explicit with an aria from Boito's *Mefistofele*; Irish Man's story of his doomed love affair with Ida – actually that of Gigli himself as told in his *Memoirs* – is paced exactly to keep time with Toselli's *Serenade* that is heard behind it. Everywhere through the play, the music underscores and counterpoints the action, and never more so than with the concluding sextet from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. It is this, Edgardo's last aria after Lucia has already died in her madness before he kills himself, which JPW 'sings' as Gigli in the play's final scene – Murphy specifies that it should be the solo recording without the other voices. As such it is expressive of JPW's too late discovered love for Mona, but it is also testimony to the power of theatre itself. We in the audience know that this is an actor miming to Gigli, yet we willingly accept the pretence that it is JPW who has magically achieved the power to sing. And though he begins by quoting Marlowe's Faust – 'This night I'll conjure . . . or I'll die' (*Plays*, 3, 238), and takes enough alcohol and drugs to kill any man, he actually survives, and is enabled to leave the



Cast of *Famine* by Tom Murphy, DruidMurphy 2012.

Photo: Catherine Ashmore courtesy of Druid.



Pat Leavy and Maeliosa Stafford in *Conversations on a Homecoming* by Tom Murphy 1985. Photo courtesy of Druid.

messy den in which he has lived for many years, leaving the record-player on perpetual repeat, telling Gigli to 'sing on forever' (*Plays*, 3, 240).

Conversations on a Homecoming, produced in 1985 by Druid, where Murphy was 'writer in association', could not have been more different. It was the cut-down version of what had been *The White House*, produced by the Abbey in 1972, where it had been one part of a before and after diptych. 'Speeches of Farewell' showed a group of friends gathering to put the finishing touches to a newly re-decorated pub 'The White House', inspired by its owner JJ Kilkelly who played up to his resemblance to John F. Kennedy – the date was 1963. 'Conversations on a Homecoming', in the original production staged before 'Speeches', showed the same group ten years later greeting the return from America of Michael, the aspirant actor to whom they had been bidding farewell in the earlier time. Played as a standalone play, *Conversations*

managed to achieve all that *The White House* was intended to express: the death of hope, the stagnation of the small town, the contrast between the romantic Michael who has lost his way and yearns to return to an imagined past and his 'twin', the cynic Tom, who is determined to kill any vestiges of belief.

Tom voices the play's pungent satire on contemporary Ireland's dependence on America and Americanism. 'We are such a ridiculous race', says Tom, 'that even our choice of assumed images is quite arbitrary' (*Plays*, 2, 54). He denounces, in particular, the popularity of country and western music in Ireland – one of the play's comic highlights has Liam, the crass up-and-coming auctioneer, singing 'There's a Bridle Hanging on the Wall'. Tom identifies as 'the real enemy', 'the country-and-western system itself':

Unyielding, uncompromising, in its drive for total sentimentality. A sentimentality I say that would have us all an unholy herd of Sierra Sues, sad-eyed inquisitors, sentimental Nazis, fascists, sectarianists, black-and-blue-shirted nationalists, with spurs a-jinglin', all ridin' down the trail to Oranmore. (*Plays*, 2, 67).

Such hard-hitting harangues apart, the play's special power derives from Murphy's orchestration of the voices, the precision of the vocal gestures that express the group's dynamics. The action builds upon the rhythm of the night's drinking: the probing opening conversations, the arguments and insults, the maudlin alcohol-fuelled sing-songs. Standing out as the dramatic climax in the midst of the male-dominated bull session is the solo singing by Peggy of the hymn 'All in the April Evening' -- Peggy, the put-upon, ignored and abused long-term fiancée of Tom. The song creates its own still space in the clamorous pub atmosphere; 'the sound', the stage direction indicates, represents 'her loneliness, the gentle desperation of her situation, and the memory of a decade ago' (*Plays*, 2, 81). It is a lot to invest in the one pious poem with its overlush music, but theatrically it speaks for the lyrical loss that all that the pub talk cannot express.

In both *Gigli* and *Conversations* the presence of women characters is crucial but marginalized. In *Bailegangaire*, also produced by Druid in 1985, Murphy cleared the stage for them alone. The action is dominated by Mommo, the senile old woman who sits up in bed telling her endlessly repeated, never finished story of the fatal laughing-contest and how, as a result, the

village previously called Bochtán (the poor man) ‘came by its appellation’, Bailegangaire, the town without laughter. She is attended by her two all but middle-aged granddaughters, Mary the resident carer, and the married sister Dolly who looked after Mommo previously for many years. Both of them have heard the story so often that they know it off by heart and can repeat sections of it word for word. Mary is ‘near breaking point’ (*Plays*, 2, 91) with the strain of waiting on her grandmother who is aggressively hostile to her, treating her as a suspect hired help. After trying unsuccessfully to stop the storytelling, at a certain point in the action Mary determines that this time she will encourage Mommo to bring the story to conclusion, and that then becomes the impetus of the drama.

The play is set very specifically in 1984, the year in which it was written. Contemporary Ireland is marked by the Japanese-owned computer plant threatened with closure just down the road, and the picketing workers whose cars stream by. This was a period when the modernization of the economy, which had taken on pace in the 1970s after Ireland joined the European Common Market, faltered and went into reverse with many Irish people having to emigrate to look for work again. One such is Stephen, Dolly’s husband, away in England, though his absence has as much to do with the lovelessness of their marriage as the lack of work. Dolly and Mary are modern Irish women in their unhappiness: Dolly who takes revenge for the coldness of her husband in serial infidelity when he is away and is brutally beaten by him on his annual visits home, and who is currently terrified by what he will do when he discovers she is pregnant; Mary, who came back from a successful nursing career in England in search of a meaningful home, and finds herself merely a household drudge for her demented grandmother.

Yet these modern lives are viewed within ‘the kitchen of a thatched house’, the archaism of the setting matched by the ornate shanachie style of Mommo’s formal story: ‘It was a bad year for the crops, a good one for mushrooms and the contrary and adverse connections between these two is always the case’ (*Plays*, 2, 94). Coded into Mommo’s story is

a folklorized history of Ireland. The topic given as the subject for laughter in the competition between Costello, the big Bochtán man with the big laugh, and the small visiting Stranger who challenges him, is ‘misfortunes’, a litany that begins with ‘potatoes, the damnedable crop was in it that year’ (*Plays*, 2, 163). The poverty and deprivation of the rural Irish going right back to the potato famine is turned to grotesque, defiant hilarity. And it becomes apparent by degrees that this story, in which the protagonists are always named merely as the Stranger and the Stranger’s Wife, is in fact Mommo’s own. She it was who urged on her husband Seámus when he was disposed to withdraw from the laughing-contest as a mere whim, urged him on out of anger and bitterness at the frustrations of her own life. It is her guilt and remorse at the consequences: the death of Seámus, beaten up by the men in the pub when he defeated their champion Costello, and the accidental death of her young grandson Tom while the grandparents were detained at the laughing-contest. The repeated telling of the story is revealed as a purgatorial punishment for Mommo, her inability to own it or to bring it to a close the measure of her unappeased conscience.



Garrett Lombard, Marty Rea, Rory Nolan, Marie Mullen and Aaron Monaghan in *Conversations on a Homecoming* by Tom Murphy. Druid Murphy 2012.
Photo: Catherine Ashmore courtesy of Druid.

Mommo is a latter-day Cathleen ni Houlihan, but not Yeats and Gregory's old crone who is transformed by the blood of the national martyrs into a young girl with a walk of a queen, more Joyce's old sow that eats its farrow. For her contribution to the horrifically laughable misfortunes, she lists a roll-call of her dead sons: 'Them (*that*) weren't drowned or died they said she drove away' (*Plays*, 2, 98). The fierce crazy old woman is Murphy's version of an Ireland that cannot either forget or conclude its own psychopathological history. But that is what makes the eventual merging of the archaic and modern stories in the play so significant and so moving. Mommo is finally brought to acknowledge the death of her husband – 'poor Seámus' (*Plays*, 2, 169) – and of her grandson; she at last recognizes Mary, as she has failed to do throughout. Mary agrees to the scheme by which she will take on Dolly's baby as her own. The play ends with a tableau of the three women in bed together, the final lines spoken by Mary in a version of Mommo's language that joins the generations in a reconciliatory coda.

It's a strange old place, alright, in whatever wisdom He has to have made it this way.
But in whatever wisdom there is, in the year 1984, it was decided to give that – family . . . of strangers another chance, and a brand new baby to gladden their home.
(*Plays*, 2, 170)

Bailegangaire is among the plays that justify Fintan O'Toole's description of Murphy's work as 'a kind of inner history of Ireland'.¹⁰ It is the *longue durée* view of that history, first laid down in *Famine*, in which the ills of modern Irish culture were manifestations of a nationwide post-traumatic stress disorder. One dimension to that disorder is the compulsive pursuit of property dramatized in the rapacious O'Toole family in *The Wake* (1998). It is a similar theme in *The Last Days of a Reluctant Tyrant* (2009) which, though an adaptation of Mikail Saltykov-Shchedrin's nineteenth-century Russian novel *The Golovyyovs*, was so re-written by Murphy as to become an anatomy of Irish land hunger. Again and again, though, he returned to the experience of emigration, going and returning, and the dislocated mentalities that went with it. Almost a companion piece to *A Whistle in the Dark* is *The House* (2000), where the Irish workers who spend all the year abroad in England return home for their two weeks's summer holidays. The carnival excesses of drinking, in which they flaunt and splurge their earnings, give way to a dawning sense of disillusion and futility as they realise how little they are any longer at home in their home town. The central character, Christy Cavanagh, is a special case among them, obsessed as he is with the house of the title, the home of the de Burcas where, as a sort of adopted son, he had received the only kindness and comfort he ever knew in childhood. To try to ensure the continuation of this projected ideal he is driven eventually to murder, destroying the very family he has so cherished. Christy is unlike the other returning migrants, also, in that he makes his money in England as a procurer. He is one of many sex workers in Murphy's plays, from Harry in *Whistle*, through Rosie and James in *Optimism*, to Vera the call-girl returned from America in *The Wake*. It is symptomatic of both the puritanical repressiveness of Irish culture and the degraded lack of self-worth of these migrant figures that they thus exploit their own bodies and those of others, alienated from any securely located identity.

13



Marie Mullen in *Conversations on a Homecoming* by Tom Murphy 1985.
Photo courtesy of Druid.

In all of this Murphy is a specifically Irish playwright who observes and dramatizes his own culture. But the intensity and depth with which the drama is played out goes beyond any national specificity. The three despairing figures of *The Sanctuary Lamp* meet in the space of a church emptied of its traditional religious significance; it is they who have to find their own way of endowing it with meaning. It is an Irish Man who meets with the English JPW in *Gigli*, but in the crucible of their encounter confined to the dynamatologist's sordid

lodging it is the voice of the Italian tenor that must provide the alchemical magic. *Alice Trilogy* (2005) charts three stages in the unhappy life of its central character which is not attributable to any particular local circumstances; in the first part of the play, 'In the Apiary', Alice enumerates all her advantages and cannot herself account for her near suicidal despair. Murphy himself suffered intermittently from depression, and he lives with his characters

through dead end states of all but terminal distress: *Too Late for Logic* (1989), one of his most autobiographical plays, is built around the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, with an Orpheus who is driven to suicide by his inability to reach the female figures who collectively stand in for his Eurydice. The black hole into which so many of his characters are drawn is an experience of ontological dread, not merely of emotional and psychological collapse. The solace which his plays offer comes from a tentative movement towards healing or simply an affirmation of the shaping power of the theatrical experience itself.

Murphy worked in and through theatre. Though he devoted considerable time to research and the writing of each of his plays went through multiple drafts over periods of two years or more, the script that went into rehearsal was still very much susceptible to change and revision. With every revival of a play, whether he was directing or not, there were

additional alterations, as he sought a perfect tuning of rhythm, expression and intonation in the overall theatrical structure. And he kept on returning to earlier material. So, for example, with *Brigit* (2014) he re-cast as a stage play what had been a television drama screened by RTÉ in 1988. It is a 'prequel' to *Bailegangaire* in which we see Seámus and Mommo with their young grandchildren, and when played with *Bailegangaire* in the Druid production there was a new poignancy in watching the two plays together, the blighted lives of Mary and Dolly, the story of Mommo haunted by the earlier versions of themselves. *Brigit* and *Bailegangaire*, published in a collected edition with *A Thief of a Christmas*, the full dramatization of the story of the laughing-contest produced by the Abbey in 1985, constituted a new, rich and resonant trilogy as *The Mommo Plays*.

What of Murphy's legacy beyond his own work, his impact on the next generation of Irish playwrights? Many have testified to his importance for them. Martin McDonagh hailed Murphy as 'our greatest living playwright'.¹¹ Conor McPherson has been cited as one of the younger writers on whom Murphy has had a 'profound influence': 'He is a writer of the irrational, the chaotic and the dysfunctional', McPherson is quoted as saying. 'He doesn't care about making his plays palatable. He just makes them as dark and as crazy as he wants.'¹² Enda Walsh has frequently spoken of his hero-worship of Murphy: 'For my generation his stunning plays were an inspiration. He was the reason why I wanted to be a playwright'.¹³ Katy Hayes, the drama critic of the *Irish Independent*, has argued that 'Murphy's primary inheritor . . . is Marina Carr. . . Carr has the same raging aversion to any sort of cuddly aesthetic as Murphy demonstrates; the same instinctive distrust of the urbane; the same cold sense of the farrow biting back.'¹⁴



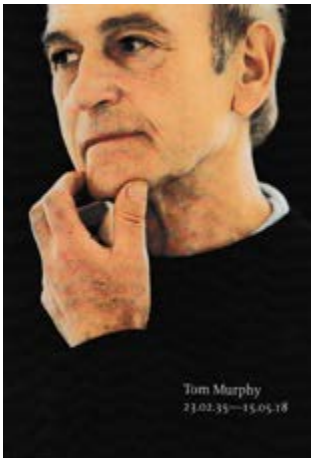
Marie Mullen in *Bailegangaire* by Tom Murphy 2014.

Photo: Manuel Harlan courtesy of Druid.

There can be no doubt that Murphy's work made possible much that came after him. He broke ground on what was stageable in the Irish theatre in the violence of much of his work from *Whistle on*, and as such may have given a precedent for the drama of McDonagh. There is certainly a sort of family resemblance between *Bailegangaire* and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, different as the plays are. A Murphy-like emotional charge builds around men in very confined spaces in the work of Walsh, and they often have his characters' frenetic verbal incontinence. Murphy pioneered a broken language of inarticulate frustration that can be heard also in the plays of McPherson, Billy Roche (another great admirer), or Mark O'Rowe. Hayes is certainly right to pinpoint the 'raging aversion to any sort of cuddly aesthetic' in Murphy, and this is indeed shared with Carr and other contemporary playwrights. His honesty as an artist, his unwillingness to compromise, the relentlessness of his integrity in pursuit of precision, are likely to have inspired any number of Irish theatre makers. But the work of a truly original playwright may be said to authorize and validate successors as much as it impacts on them in terms of this or that discernible influence.

In April 2019, a group of actors came together in The Lir, Ireland's National Academy for Dramatic Art, for a weeklong workshop styled *Conversations on a Playwright*. Supported by the Arts Council/ An Chomhairle Ealaíon, it was designed as a biennial event 'Honouring the legacy of legendary Irish playwright Tom Murphy', a master class bringing together six senior actors who had worked closely with Murphy as writer and director and a group of twelve younger actors who had not yet had experience of acting in his plays.¹⁵ The aim was to give these emerging performers the opportunity to explore in detail the character of Murphy's texts. This collective exploration represented a sort of generational transmission of the skills, knowledge and expertise gained in acting the plays to those who may be cast for these parts in the future. And this may be the real legacy of Murphy. For what is needed at this stage for the preservation of that legacy are new productions, bringing renewed energy and talent, wider audiences, greater understanding for this extraordinary body of work.

15



Tom Murphy

Photo: Paul McCarthy courtesy of
Jane Brennan.

Notes

- 1 I am very grateful to Fintan O'Toole for making a copy of his eulogy available to me.
- 2 Deirdre Falvey, "It feels like nature is even in sympathy and in protest against his passing": The late playwright's friends, colleagues and admirers remember the man and his work'. *Irish Times*, 18 May 2018.
- 3 'Tributes Paid to "Unique and Provocative" Irish Playwright Tom Murphy', *Irish Examiner*, 16 May 2018.
- 4 Milton Shulman, 'Not exactly a great night for the Irish', *Evening Standard*, [September 1961].
- 5 Felix Barker, 'It's the noisiest show in town', *Evening News*, [September 1961].
- 6 Kenneth Tynan, 'Wolves at the Door', *Observer*, 17 September 1961.
- 7 It is on this basis that I titled my book, *The Theatre of Tom Murphy: Playwright Adventurer* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).
- 8 All quotations from Murphy's works are taken from the six volume edition *Plays 1-6* (London: Methuen Drama, 1992-2010).
- 9 See Grene, p. 12,
- 10 Fintan O'Toole, Tom Murphy: the *Politics of Magic*, rev. ed. (Dublin: New Island; London: Nick Hern Books, 1994), p. 19.
- 11 Chris Wiegand, "Fearless" Irish Playwright Tom Murphy Dies Aged 83', *The Guardian*, 16 May 2018.
- 12 John O'Mahony, 'Playwright Tom Murphy: "There is a rage within me"', *The Guardian*, 7 March 2010.
- 13 Falvey, *Irish Times*.
- 14 Katy Hayes, 'Tom Murphy: A champion of the unsung men who were armed with nothing but Irish bravado', *Irish Independent*, 20 May 2018.
- 15 <https://www.thelir.ie/news/conversations-on-a-playwright>.



Bio: Nicholas Grene

Nicholas Grene is Emeritus Professor of English Literature at Trinity College Dublin and a Member of the Royal Irish Academy. His books include *The Politics of Irish Drama* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), *Yeats's Poetic Codes* (Oxford University Press, 2008), *Home on the Stage* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), *Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre*, (co-edited with Chris Morash), (Oxford University Press, 2016), and *The Theatre of Tom Murphy: Playwright Adventurer* (Bloomsbury, 2017). He is currently working on a book about farming in modern Irish literature.

Interview: “The Art and Artifice of Thomas Kilroy.” Thomas Kilroy in conversation with Adrienne Leavy¹



Thomas Kilroy
Photograph courtesy of the Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

A.L. Can you describe how you started out writing for the theatre?

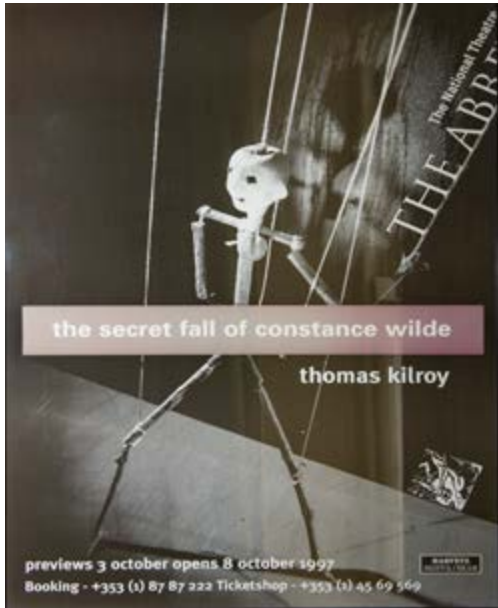
T.K. When I was a university student in Dublin in the nineteen fifties I was also involved with an amateur drama group. The Old Charter Players, back in my home town of Callan in County Kilkenny. The director of the group was a remarkable, knowledgeable English woman living in the town, called Mary Hogan. I learned a great deal from her about the practical business of making theatre. I also learned from her that I had a hidden gift for dialogue through the rehearsal of play scripts for Mary Hogan, some of them of poor quality.

A.L. A commitment to non-naturalistic theatre is evident in your work, which is in marked contrast to the history of much of Irish theatre. Are there particular European or American playwrights that influenced your aesthetic?

T.K. I don't think the influence was primarily one of other playwrights, so much as a personal drive to penetrate the surfaces of life, to try to reach a level below the ordinary, the mundane. Maybe I was unconsciously replacing a lost religion with a retreat into art? I don't know. I can mention one playwright, though, who had a profound effect on me at this early point of my life: Shakespeare. The study of the latter Shakespearean comedies opened my eyes to the transformative nature of the stage. This was backed up by the experience that I had of some first-rate productions that I saw in London, Stratford and Paris. I was discovering the role of the director.

A.L. As a follow up to the above question, to what extent did Yeats's drama and the ideas he expressed in his theatrical magazines, particularly in *Sambain*, impact your development as a playwright?

T.K. I think I was drawn to a theatre of vision from the very start. Of course, Yeats was a liberating presence in all of this. After the death of Synge in 1909 Yeats came to realize that a new drama was taking over his theatre. The new playwrights were of Catholic Ireland, quite distinct from Yeats and his Anglo-Irish contemporaries. The prevailing mode of the new drama was naturalistic, often producing a local version of



Photograph courtesy of the Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

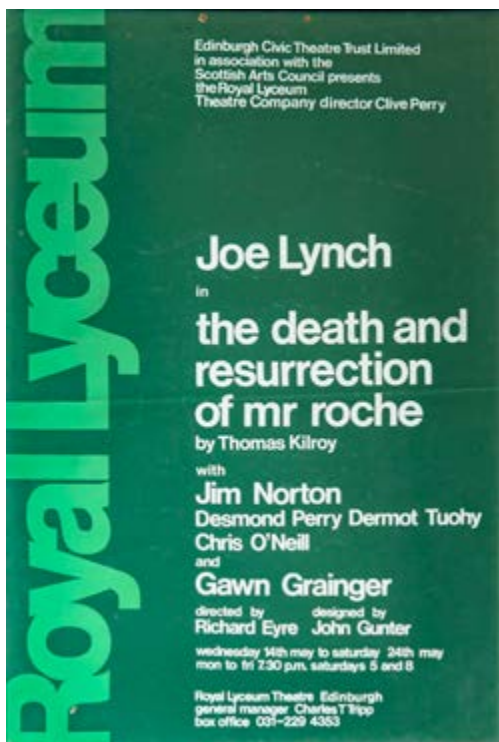
the Ibsenite “problem play.” To Yeats, these plays lacked a creative distancing from their subject matter. The writers appeared to be “dominated” by their subjects, by sociology, in effect. In contrast the Anglo-Irish playwrights were free and could play with the material with an abandon. I remember when I first read this analysis I thought: “How right that is!” I had felt this domination myself. I think I knew at the beginning that I would have to liberate myself from much of my culture. As a writer I had to rise above naturalism.

A.L. Adrian Frazier once characterized your work as being “historical, scenic, and full of artifice, often deeply critical of nationalism.” Would you concur with his assessment?

T.K. I feel lucky in that most of the commentaries that I’ve read of my work make some kind of sense to me. This isn’t always the case with a writer and critics. Adrian Frazier was one of the first to write a comprehensive survey of my work. I greatly value what he did.

A.L. José Laners has written that you regard the written script as only “one pliable element in a collaborative effort,”² and that you encourage contributions from the directors you select as early as the writing stage. Can you comment on how this process facilitates the realization of your ideas on stage?

T.K. It’s true that I see the making of theatre as a highly collaborative art form. The creativity of the group is enormously important for me. It gives me great pleasure to watch others achieve a personal expression by working on one of my plays. I usually spend the first week of a rehearsal with the group. Then I leave for a while to allow them to find their own space without breathing down their necks.



Photograph courtesy of the Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

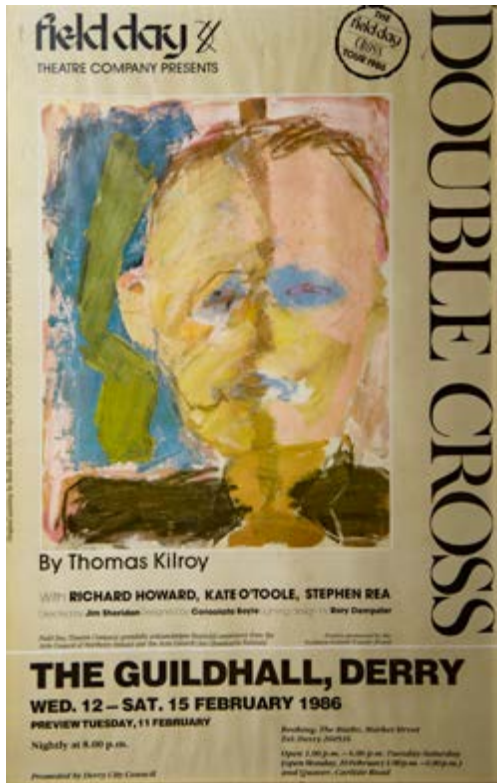
A.L. You have worked with numerous directors over your long career, including Max Stafford-Clarke and Patrick Mason. Are there any particular collaborations that you regard as being especially successful? Conversely, have there been occasions where you and the director were at odds regarding the realization of your artistic vision?

T.K. If I were pushed to choose one particular production I think it might be Patrick Manson's production of *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* at the Abbey in 1997. I'm thinking of the way in which the design of Joe Vanek, the choreography of David Bolger and the lighting design of Nick Chelton came together in a miraculous unity under Patrick's direction. As for the productions that didn't work, well, I'd prefer to close a curtain of silence on them and pass on!

A.L. You have adapted plays by other writers, specifically, Chekhov's *The Seagull*, Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, and were inspired by Wedekind's *Spring Awakening* for your play *Christ, Deliver Us* (2010). What drew you to adapting these particular plays? As a follow up, are there other works you are interested in adapting?

T.K. I can only take on an adaptation when I find a personal way into the material. I once had a great agent called Peggy Ramsay. When I was doing my adaptation of *The Seagull* for the Royal Court Theatre in the nineteen eighties Peggy said to me that it was like being offered the opportunity of having "a privileged conversation" with a great, dead author. A conversation is two-sided. If that conversation doesn't take place the adaptation will not work. For instance, I have been asked, more than once, to do an adaptation of *The Cherry Orchard*. I've had to say, no, I couldn't do it. I couldn't see a bridge between me and the Chekhov play.

A.L. The post-independent Irish society that you came of age in was characterized by a puritanical Catholic morality that persisted well into the latter part of the twentieth century. Your play, *The Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche* (1968), was the first Irish play to feature a homosexual character on stage. Did you encounter much resistance in getting the play staged? What was the critical and popular reception?



Photograph courtesy of the Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

T.K. The important thing to remember is that there was no stage censorship in Ireland when *The Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche* was first performed in Dublin, while there was in the UK. While we were trying to put together the Dublin production Peggy Ramsay was writing to me to say the play would be rejected by the Lord Chamberlain's office in London. By the time it was produced in London, in Richard Eyre's production at Hampstead, the British law on stage censorship had passed into the history books. Yes, there was disapproval of the play's content in Dublin, both public and private, but I put it down to a learning experience and a confirmation of my own opinion of the kind of Ireland we were living in at the time.

A.L. Both you and Brian Friel have written plays about Hugh O' Neill, the Earl of Tyrone (1550-1616), who led an unsuccessful Catholic uprising against English rule in Ireland. Was your play, *The O'Neill* (1969), an inspiration for Friel's later play, *Making History* (1988)?

T.K. I can't answer this question because Brian and I never talked about the two plays in this way. He expressed admiration of my own play at the time and I know I returned the compliment to him on his play when it appeared. I think the reticence is completely understandable considering how different the two plays are in style and content.

A.L. The play *Double Cross* (1986), your first for Field Day Theatre Company,³ centers on two Irish characters, Brendan Bracken and William Joyce who are both played by the same actor on stage. Bracken became Churchill's minister for Information in the Second World War, and Joyce is better known as Lord Haw Haw, who gained infamy through his radio broadcasts of Nazi propaganda. There is tremendous ironic juxtapositioning of the two protagonists throughout the play. What attracted you to examining the personalities of these two men?⁴

T.K. I was close to several members of Field Day (Deane, Friel and Heaney, in particular) before I joined the board. We were in and out of one another's houses, arguing and debating in a flow of excitement and ideas. It was inevitable that I was going to write something for them. Brian and Stephen Rea came to see me in Mayo and asked me to write

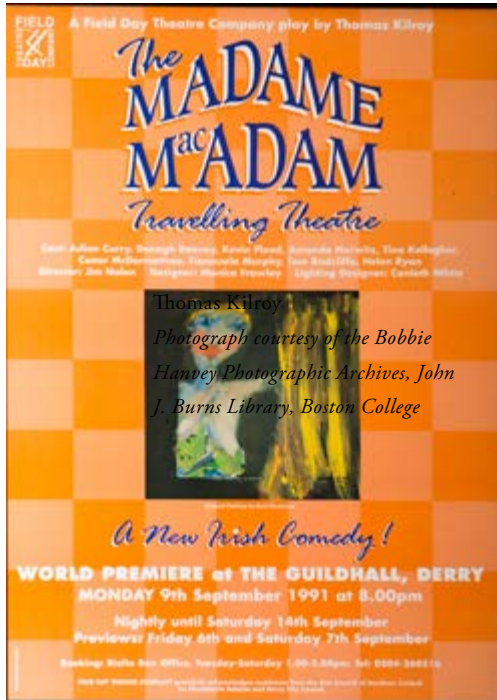
a play for them. I had just written a radio play for the BBC on Brendan Bracken. I told them of my idea about writing a stage play by introducing the figure of William Joyce. The double act of the play, the twin characters of Bracken and Joyce, came out of the Field Day discussions about national identity. The idea of having both parts played by the same actor became possible through the genius of Stephen Rea.

A.L. Anthony Roche has written that in *Double Cross* “each character becomes not a free individual who has shed his Irish past, but someone who has traded in the role of historical victim for the mirror-image of oppressor and placed all his faith in the symbols of the culturally dominant race.”⁵ Would you agree with his assessment?

T.K. Yes, I think it’s a fair summary. One of the things about Field Day is that it made the exchange of political ideas acceptable in the arts in Ireland. I suppose you could say that there was a particular kind of Field Day play and as it went on the plays responded to one another in creative ways. *Translations* set a standard in this. In some ways it is a very traditional Irish history play but what lifts it onto another level is the way Friel finds the narrative of great public issues in the privacy of the lives of a group of isolated individuals.

A.L. Along with Brian Friel and Stephen Rea you were a director of the Field Day Theatre Company from 1988 to 1991.⁶ *Double Cross* was your first play produced by Field Day. What was the reception to the play at the time? Do you think a southern audience would have reacted differently?

T.K. The context for the production of *Double Cross* was the very heated political exchanges between the British and the Irish at the time. Field Day employed professionals from the English theatre, stage managers, actors, designers and so on, largely under the guidance of Stephen Rea. The Field Day tour was set in a very deliberate way, starting in Derry, touring the Irish provinces and ending in London. Before Field Day there was minimal contact between the Irish and the English stages. A break-through took place with Field Day paving the way for other companies later on to take



Photograph courtesy of the Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.



Photograph courtesy of the Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

Irish work to London. I was very conscious of this appeal to two audiences, as it were, in the writing of *Double Cross*. The political importance of Field Day is to be found in this transnational movement in theatre, yet another way of bringing the two cultures closer together.

A.L. I have read accounts of the difficulties you experienced in mounting a successful production of *The Madame MacAdam Travelling Theatre* (1991), which was first produced by Field Day. Are there any current plans to revive the play?

T.K. Yes, *Madame MacAdam* was one of those plays that had problems in its first production. It was not a happy experience. A few years ago The Bristol Old Vic theatre school revived the play. I didn't get to see it but I met with the director and I exchanged notes with her. I was delighted to hear it was a success. The most important note that I gave her was that this play should be treated like a cartoon, with a heightened, exaggerated style in every aspect of the production. Behind this exaggerated style, I believe there is a serious play of ideas, mostly about theatre and militarism. And that strange appeal of costuming.

A.L. One of your most formally adventurous plays is *Talbot's Box* (1976), about Matt Talbot, the Dublin working-class mystic. What drew you to exploring Talbot's life?

T.K. I had a curious experience in the writing of this play *Talbot's Box*. I first started to write an angry play about Matt Talbot because I was shocked at the way Talbot abused his body under the powerful influence of Catholic teaching on human sensuality. The early drafts had the framework of the social and political satire that is in the finished play. But the figure of Talbot was different, more a deranged victim. As I wrote and developed the character of Talbot he became less a victim and more a man of vision whose vision embraced and advanced his religious faith. Talbot wouldn't allow me to subject him to a passive role. It was a question of a character taking over a play and making it entirely an expression of the self.

A.L. You have commented elsewhere about your deep interest in Anglo-Irish history and culture. The novelist Jennifer Johnston has written several novels about this disappearing world. Have you read any of her work?

T.K. I admire Jennifer's work but I can't see an influence on my own writing there. Oddly enough, the plays of her father, Denis, may have helped me in my own experiments in theatrical form. He was exceptional in his day for the playful theatricality of his plays. My version of *The Seagull* draws heavily upon Anglo-Irish cultural history.⁷ In other words, I think my sense of this came from the reading of history rather than fiction but the fiction of George Moore, *A Drama in Muslim*, for instance, is in there, somewhere, as well.

A.L. Your one novel, *The Big Chapel*, was shortlisted for the 1971 Booker Prize and won the Guardian Fiction Prize and the Heinemann Prize. In a previous interview you discussed the difference between writing plays, which you characterize as “an art form that has to do with role-playing, with acting, with pretense,” and writing other forms of fiction. You further explained that “the playwright is listening to the voice and to the voice of the actor playing that character. So what we have is a voice which is being performed and being performed in the act of writing.”⁸ Was it difficult to make the transition to writing fiction? I am also wondering if this important distinction is the reason you choose not to write another novel?

T.K. Yes, I think the narrative of prose fiction comes from a different part of the imagination to that of drama. If you think of it as the creation of voices, the writer of prose fiction hears the voice of the created character. But the writer of plays has to hear two voices, the voice of the character but also the voice of the actor playing the part of that character. The writing comes out of a sense of acting, of hearing an actor's voice. Sometimes this takes over the play which becomes little more than a sequence of possibilities of acting and nothing more. There have been many examples of great writers of fiction turning to writing for the stage and failing. I believe this may be due to an inability to imagine

the voice of an actor playing the part. I actually tried to write a second novel but it didn't work. Maybe I can go back to it again!

A.L. You recently published a memoir, *Over the Backyard Wall* (The Lilliput Press 2018), which includes two fictional chapters relating to significant historical events that impacted the town of Callan, County Kilkenny where you grew up. The first of these chapters deals with the Cromwellian siege of Callan in 1650 as seen from the perspective of two young boys.⁹ The siege is conveyed in starkly realistic terms. Did you do much historical research in preparation for writing this chapter?

T.K. I found the writing of these two pieces of prose fiction for my memoir, very exciting. I found the placing of the two chapters in the structure of a memoir illuminating as it revealed another way of restoring the past. Yes, of course, there was a great deal of research. I was trying to make the barbarism of war as realistic as I could. The slaughter of the battlefield has a kind of grim normality to it, like the feeding of soldiers in the middle of violence.

A.L. The second chapter of historical fiction in your memoir concerns a German husband and wife who move to Ireland in the aftermath of World War II. Again, the presence of outsiders is seen from the perspective of a young boy. You grew up in this era and experienced firsthand the austerity and isolation that characterized Irish life both during the war and in its aftermath. How formative was this environment in influencing your approach to writing?

T.K. So much of the culture of Ireland that I grew up with was gripped by a hatred of life. I didn't understand this at the time but I was aware of a feeling of deep depravation, of what should be a joyous experience of living, of growth being restricted and deformed by power. The second story in the book is one of childhood trauma staying with a man into old age, in other word, the portrayal of a man remembering.



Thomas Kilroy with his dog Mitzi.
*Photograph courtesy of the Bobbie
Hanvey Photographic Archives, John
J. Burns Library, Boston College.*

A.L. You detail in the book your time teaching in America, first at the University of Notre Dame and later at Vanderbilt University. During your time in the U.S. you met various writers and intellectuals including Robert Penn Warren and Flannery O'Connor, and they, along with your travels in the American South, left a deep impression on you. Were you exposed to much American theatre while you lived in the U.S. and if so, could you talk about that?

T.K. American culture had a deep effect upon me, partly because it liberated me from the Ireland of my childhood. I was to learn, though, that American life had its own impoverishment. I do remember seeing some wonderful theatre as I passed through New York, including a production of *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?* But I think the experience of American drama, particularly American acting came to me mostly through cinema. I had an absolute passion for Hollywood, as I grew up.

A.L. In your memoir you describe an occasion when the veteran actor-manager Anew McMaster visited your boarding school, St. Kieran's College, and performed scenes from *Hamlet*. You write:

The years fell away from the actor in the chair in front of our eyes. It was my first experience up close of great acting and a demonstration that such talent could theatricalize any space, that theatre, given the talent, can happen anywhere, even in a broom closet. Or a school classroom.¹⁰

Your comments seem to echo Peter Brook's theatrical philosophy and I understand that you collaborated with Brook early in your career in London. Could you speak to that experience?

T.K. I saw Brook's production of *Titus Andronicus* in London, but, no, I never actually had the experience of working with him. It would have been a startling experience I'm sure. He was a visionary presence for people of my generation and over the years I have tried to see as much of his work as I could, in Paris.

A.L. Your memoir not only recreates a picture of your early childhood and the creative struggles of a young man, but also the growing pains of the newly established Irish Free State. These parallel stories weave together seamlessly. Was that your intention, to write or explore these twin narratives?

T.K. Given the kind of writer I am, there is almost always a coming together of the private and the public in my work. It doesn't happen every time but I think it is true of my book *Over the Backyard Wall*. I didn't set out consciously to run parallels between my life and the life in general in Ireland. I would never dream of making such grandiose claims but I think that virtually every life reflects and contributes to the public sphere, some more than others.

A.L. In many respects, your memoir reads like a non-fictional version of a *Bildungsroman* novel in how it charts the formative years and intellectual awakening of the main character. The obvious parallel is *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Was Joyce's novel an influence on how you approached writing your memoir?

T.K. Joyce's fiction came back to me in a vivid fashion when I tried to write about the curious appeal of the West of Ireland to writers and painters over the years. In my childhood the border between East and West was the river Shannon with the bridges across the river as portals into another dimension. Of course, the richest treatment of this appeal in Irish writing is in the concluding paragraphs of Joyce's story *The Dead*. Gabriel's drift into sleep as the West exerts its pull upon his imagination and he travels westward is a great image of death.

A.L. You close the book on the opening night of your first produced play, *The Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche* (1967). Do you have any plans to write about the next chapters in your life?

T.K. No, I don't have any plans to do a second memory book but, who knows? I am certainly getting encouragement from some of my readers who have written to me! This book is a highly selective version of my growth to young manhood. Any second book would have to be very different in the way it would be composed. This book ends with the opening night

of my first performed play in the nineteen sixties, a convenient moment to draw the curtain on the past.

A.L. You were one of eight writers commissioned by University College Dublin to write a monologue on one of the executed leaders of the 1916 Rebellion. The finished piece, *Signatories*, was performed in Kilmainham Goal in 2016 as part of the commemorative celebrations marking the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rebellion. Your monologue was written from the perspective of Pádraig Pearse, waiting in his cell in Kilmainham Goal shortly before he was executed. It is fitting that a writer such as Pearse should have another writer imagining his final thoughts as he awaits his fate. Was this a difficult project in terms of condensing how to portray Pearse within the space of a ten-minute performance?

T.K. I was delighted to be asked to join with younger writers for the UCD commemoration of 1916. Yes, it was extremely difficult to compress so much into so little space. In the end I opted for an invented story of a young man driven to his death in the GPO. It was an attempt to create a mythical moment that would gather up a number of motifs of personal significance to Pearse.

A.L. What is your opinion on the state of contemporary Irish Theatre? Do you think the naturalistic mode of drama exerts the same influence in twentieth-first century Irish theatre as it did throughout the twentieth century?

T.K. Is there an Irish drama anymore? Much of the work that I see now might have emerged from anywhere and I think that is a healthy development. I mean in my day there was a kind of exaggerated sense of Irishness on display. Sometimes the pressure of Irish identity seemed to have had little to do with the quality of the art. There is no longer that need now, I think.

A.L. What are you working on at present?

T.K. I am working on a new play.

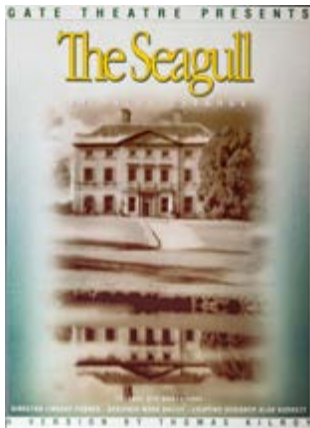
Thank you Tom.

Notes

- 1 Additional interviews with Thomas Kilroy worth reading are as follows: "An Interview with Thomas Kilroy" by Anthony Roche. *Irish University Review*, Vol. 32, No.1, Special Issue: Thomas Kilroy (Spring-summer, 2002), pp.150-158; "An Interview with Gerald Dawe" by Gerald Dawe in Krino 1986-1996: *An Anthology of Modern Irish Writing*, edited by Gerald Dawe and Jonathan Williams. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan Ltd., 1996; and "Tom Kilroy in Conversation with Gerry Dukes," in *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners*, Lilian Chambers, Ger FitzGibbon and Eamonn Jordan editors. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2001.
- 2 José Lanterns, *The Theatre of Thomas Kilroy: No Absolutes* Cork: Cork University Press, 2018, 3.
- 3 Field Day was founded in 1980 by playwright Brian Friel and actor Stephen Ray.
- 4 For a detailed discussion on this issue see Thomas Kilroy's introduction to a new edition of *Double Cross* published by The Gallery Press in 2018.
- 5 Anthony Roche, "Thomas Kilroy," in *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary Irish Playwrights*. Edited by Martin Middeke and Peter Paul Schnierer. London: Methuen Drama, 2010, 153.
- 6 As noted above, The Field Day Theatre Company began as an artistic collaboration between playwright Brian Friel and actor Stephen Rea. Their first production was Friel's landmark 1980 play, *Translations*. Seamus Deane, David Hammond, Seamus Heaney, and Tom Paulin were the original board members.
- 7 For a critical analysis of the Anglo-Irish influence in Kilroy's translation of *The Seagull* see José Lanterns essay in the current issue of *Reading Ireland*.
- 8 "Thomas Kilroy in Conversation with Gerry Dukes," 242.
- 9 The Cromwellian war in Ireland, which lasted from 1649-53, completed the British colonization of Ireland.
- 10 Thomas Kilroy, *Over The Backyard Wall: A Memory Book* Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2018, 126.

Essay: “(Not) ‘one of those Celtic things’: Thomas Kilroy’s Irish Version of *The Seagull*”

by José Lanteris



Photograph courtesy of the Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

In 1980, Max Stafford-Clark, who had directed Thomas Kilroy’s play *Tea and Sex and Shakespeare* at the Abbey Theatre in 1976, asked Kilroy to write a version of Anton Chekhov’s 1896 play *The Seagull* for a potential joint production by the Abbey and London’s Royal Court Theatre, of which Stafford-Clark was then the artistic director.¹ Had Chekhov still been around, he would have been sceptical about such an undertaking: the playwright had little confidence that Russian literature could be successfully translated into other languages, and lamented, where translations of his own plays were concerned, “that purely Russian phenomena would have no meaning for foreign audiences”.² To overcome this cultural problem, then, non-Russian versions of Chekhov’s plays would require something other than a more or less straightforward rendition of the Russian text into the target language. Kilroy understood all along that Chekhov’s world should be somehow reimagined; to him, adaptation is “a form of privileged conversation” with an author which also includes the license to “take off imaginatively: you are no longer the agent providing a vehicle for this great classic author—you are gone on another trip”.³ In this instance, the destination of that trip was Ireland.

It was Stafford-Clark who first came up with the idea of transferring the action of *The Seagull* from the Russian provinces to an Anglo-Irish estate in the West of Ireland. As a student at Trinity College, Dublin, he had become fascinated by the idea of the Big House and its culture after visiting the home of film director John Huston, St Cleran’s Manor House in Craughwell, Co. Galway. Relocating Chekhov’s play to such an Irish location might solve some of the problems Stafford-Clark saw as inherent in existing English versions of *The Seagull*, particularly his sense that “there was a screen of English acting and translation between us and Chekhov; a very genteel screen as though Russia was set in the English home counties”.⁴ An Irish setting of *The Seagull*, Stafford-Clark and Kilroy felt, might help bring out their conviction “that Chekhov belonged to a rougher theatrical tradition, at once hard-edged and farcical, filled with large passions and very socially specific”.⁵

Ireland’s most “Chekhovian” playwright is, of course, Brian Friel. In 1981—the same year that Kilroy’s adaptation of *The Seagull* premiered at the Royal Court—the Field Day Theatre Company produced his “Hiberno-English” version of *Three Sisters*, for which Kilroy wrote the programme note. Friel’s play does not change the setting or the characters’ names, but his use of the (Northern) Irish vernacular moves the drama away from “Englishness”. Friel himself commented that he wanted the audience “to see Captains and Lieutenants who look as if they came from Finner or Tullamore”.⁶ For both Friel and Kilroy, Chekhov was an important figure. Together, they travelled to Moscow and visited Melikhova, the estate where he wrote *The Seagull*. In 2008, accompanied by their wives, they also visited his White Dacha in Yalta, where the main attraction proved to be the garden, planted by the playwright himself. But it was in the “extraordinary atmosphere” of Chekhov’s simple cottage in the small fishing town of Gurzuf, where the first handwritten page of *Three Sisters* is on display, that the two Irish playwrights found the spirit of the Russian master they had been looking for.⁷

When Kilroy was approached by Stafford-Clark about the Chekhov project, he had been toying with the idea of writing an adaptation for television of George Moore’s novel *A Drama in Muslin* (1886), which takes place in the early 1880s during the Irish Land War and tells the

story of a Catholic Big House family in Co. Galway. In creating this world of landlords and tenants, Protestants and Catholics, Moore drew on his own experiences growing up in Moore Hall, Co. Mayo. His novel chronicles the declining culture of the Big House predominantly from the perspective of the two daughters of the house, who are depicted as lethargic and without purpose. Their father's way of coping with the burdens of his family and his estate is to escape into art and the imagination. One of the daughters, Alice, eventually becomes a writer, marries a doctor, and moves to a London suburb; Moore considered her "the best thing in the book" because she was 'representative of the modern idea'.⁸ Kilroy never wrote his version of *A Drama in Muslin*, but he channelled many of its ideas about the Big House into his Irish adaptation of *The Seagull*, especially Moore's notions about the fluidity of the boundaries between classes and creeds, and the stark choices faced by the characters. Chekhov, too, Kilroy said, is in some ways "offering us a future of modernity. At another level, he's offering a future of desolation".⁹

One of the things that fascinated Kilroy about the Big House was the "constant traffic" it attracted in terms of visits by relations, social acquaintances, and others whose purpose was harder to fathom. He recognized this "wonderfully theatrical" bustle from Moore's novel, which is similarly populated with a variety of characters from different religious and social backgrounds: "You had the parish priest for dinner with the Protestant landlord one day. You had the aspiring Catholic petit-bourgeois in the town dining with the landlord. You had this break-down of class. You have something similar going on in Chekhov; the lines are confused."¹⁰ Chekhov's country house (the Sorin estate) becomes, in Kilroy's version, the estate of the Desmond family in Co. Galway. It is run on behalf of the ailing Peter Desmond (Sorin) by his gruff-mannered cousin Gregory (Shamraev), whose long-suffering wife Pauline (Polina) has for many years been attracted to Dr Hickey (Dorn)—a Catholic in Kilroy's Irish context, as is James (Medvedenko), the schoolteacher. By marrying the latter, Gregory and Pauline's daughter Mary (Masha) therefore not only stoops below her status in terms of class but also of creed. Isobel Desmond, Peter's sister, is, like Chekhov's Irina Arkadina, a well-known actress while her beau, Aston (Trigorin), is a minor but prolific novelist; their relationship is ironically echoed by that of Isobel's son Constantine (Konstantin Treplyov), a budding playwright, and Lily (Nina), who aspires to a career on the stage.

Relocating the action of *The Seagull* and turning Chekhov into "O'Chekhov", as Kilroy jokingly wrote to Friel,¹¹ was one thing; finding the dynamic of the play below the social detail was another. To capture the culture of nineteenth-century Anglo-Ireland, Stafford-Clark's idea was to cast English actors—Anna Massey, Alan Rickman, Harriet Walter—as the English and Anglo-Irish characters, and to have Irish actors—including T.P. McKenna and Veronica Duffy—play the Irish characters. It worked, says Kilroy, because he wrote the Anglo-Irish parts in one kind of idiom while the other roles reflect an idiomatic West of Ireland vernacular.¹² To Gerry Dukes' observation that some of the play's characters spoke in what he considered "an odd dialect", Kilroy responded that he had endeavoured "to create a theatre language" for characters like the English novelist Aston (played by Rickman) "which would imitate the mechanistic, stilted kind of language of late Victorian prose-fiction, a language of domination and authority at odds with a world no longer content with being coerced".¹³ In Kilroy's imagination, Aston "became a dapper Victorian, parsimonious, edgy, neurotic and acutely aware of finding himself in foreign parts".¹⁴ The schoolmaster James, by contrast, frequently uses more homely Hiberno-English inflections, as when he imagines Paris as "a mighty place, altogether".¹⁵ In Chekhov's text, every character "speaks in a particular cadence and with a particular vocabulary";¹⁶ in their own way, the voices of Kilroy's characters are equally distinctive.

If one of Kilroy's tasks was "finding a local idiom" that would be "natural in the voice of the local actor",¹⁷ he also found himself wondering about his Anglo-Irish characters: what schools they might have attended, what accents they would have if they were an artistic family in the provinces, and how the west of Ireland related to cities like Dublin and London. Kilroy became fascinated with the positioning of the Anglo-Irish between Ireland on the one hand and England on the other: such complexities "made the whole play politically much more overt".¹⁸ Stafford-Clark would later argue that Kilroy's translation of the action from Russia to Ireland relocated not only the geography, but "our whole perception of the play".¹⁹

As Rob Richie points out in his introduction to the first published edition of Kilroy's version of *The Seagull*, both the Anglo-Irish and the Russian gentry "lacked strong roots in the rural areas that supplied their wealth and both were dependent on remote imperial governments for the legitimation of their rule".²⁰ In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, however, the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy was reaching a crisis point where land-owners were experiencing a gradual weakening of their powers. Kilroy's adaptation places considerable emphasis on the dire financial straits in which many Anglo-Irish estates increasingly found themselves, a sense of decline that was also conveyed by Moore in *A Drama in Muslin*. Kilroy notes that the gentility of the houses, particularly in the West of Ireland, was "very threadbare".²¹ His text specifies that the set depicting the dining room of his Anglo-Irish family "should suggest the shabby-genteel state of the Desmond fortunes" (54). Kilroy was aware that, as Anglo-Irish political power faded, it was "replaced by the extraordinary release of artistic power within the same culture".²² It therefore makes perfect sense within the play's new setting for the occupants of the house to include actors and writers, as is the case in Chekhov's original. Indeed, it was in the West of Ireland, in Big Houses like Moore Hall, Lady Gregory's Coole Park, and Edward Martyn's Tyllira Castle, that the Irish Literary Theatre was born, and the Revival received its initial impetus.

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Chekhov's *The Seagull* takes place in the 1890s, but Kilroy could not make that time-frame work for his Irish setting and allowed himself "a wider, more flexible time-scale".²³ By moving the date back a decade or two he was able "to catch the moment when Parnell, the Land League, the Home Rule movement and the Celtic literary revival were all coming to the boil", which allowed him to capture the Chekhovian sense of "an imminence, an urgency, a feeling that something is about to happen, or ought to be".²⁴ That sense in Kilroy is darker and more politically ominous than anything in the original. Where Chekhov's Arkadina reminisces about the "six country houses along the shore" which she associates with "laughter, noise-making, shooting, and one love affair after another",²⁵ Kilroy's Isobel adds a worrying note to her memory of "music and singing": "It's all so . . . so terribly changed. People gone away. Houses closed-up. Why, they tell me it is dangerous now to travel in the open from here to Ardrahan. What on earth is happening to us?" (30) Whereas Chekhov's Nina merely makes her excuses before reluctantly running off home because "Papa's waiting for me" (94), her Irish counterpart Lily explains: "I'd much rather stay. I can't abide being at home. Nothing but talk of rents, the Land League and new Coercion Acts to stop the Troubles. It's so . . . boring" (32). And while Polina merely disparages her husband's "crudeness" and the endless "squabbles" his actions give rise to (107), Pauline blames Gregory for mismanaging the estate: "It's bankrupt like every other estate in the West of Ireland. You know they've stopped paying rents again this past month. The Land leaguers will have nothing to take of what's left. . . . What is to become of us when the place is emptied?" (44). Elgy Gillespie comments that such additions add "a low note of brute and inelegant despair that is quite unlike what we think of as Chekhovian. We can hear the orchards, being chopped down more loudly".²⁶ But part of Stafford-Clark's and Kilroy's project was precisely to question that quality we have come to think of, in English translations of Chekhov's work, as Chekhovian.

As many scholars have pointed out, *The Seagull* is Chekhov's most literary drama: the playwright himself felt that he had "'sin[ned] terribly against the conventions of the theatre' by including 'lots of talk of literature' in the play".²⁷ Since *The Seagull* takes place in Chekhov's own time, these topical literary allusions would have been "immediately familiar" to educated Russians watching the play, although Chekhov's more subtle game with "embedded quotations, less obvious than explicit citations from literature" might have posed more of a challenge even for contemporary audiences.²⁸ Kilroy not only had to find equivalent Anglo-phone references to suit his new cultural context, but also to contend with the fact that he was dealing with a historical setting: the action has been moved in space but not (substantially) in time. In some instances, his substitution of Victorian references for the original Russian ones is straightforward, as when Trigorin's allusions to Tolstoy and Turgenev become Aston's references to John Morley and "Mr Meredith" (51). But Kilroy often adds a concreteness to the text that brings the Irish setting vividly to life. For example, where Chekhov's Treplyov sums up his mother's qualities by saying she is "ready to burst into tears over a novel", is capable of reciting whole reams of the popular poet Nekrasov by heart, and "has the bedside manner of an angel" (75), Constantine's mother in Kilroy's version "recites Tennyson from memory. She positively weeps over the Brontës. She visits the paupers in Ballinasloe Workhouse" (20). Such specifics—along with other new details, like Mary's pronouncement that "[e]ven the tinkers out on the road can be happy" (17), which replaces Masha's "[e]ven a poor person can be happy" (71)—evoke subtleties of class and culture that are peculiar to Ireland and that nation's complex relationship with England and Englishness.

When Kilroy moved the play from the 1890s to around the 1870s–'80s, not only the early romantic Celticism but "all the cultural references, all the references to English theatre, English literature and so on" immediately leapt out at him.²⁹ In Chekhov's text, Shamraev's reminiscences about what Arkadina calls "prehistoric characters" of the stage (85), which are meant "to label him as hopelessly old-fashioned, a Philistine with a taste for bombast"³⁰, have little resonance for a contemporary English-speaking audience: "Would you also happen to know what's become of the comedian Chadin, Pavel Chadin? He was inimitable in *Krechinsky's Wedding*, better than the great Sadovsky. . . . You don't see his like nowadays" (85). In Kilroy's adaptation, cousin Gregory's references are to the Bancrofts, Helen Faucit, and G.V. Brooke, British actors whose careers reached their peak between the 1830s and the 1860s: "But where are those splendid actors, now?" (25). In Chekhov, fictitious actors feature in a rambling story recounted by Shamraev, which culminates in a joke that falls even flatter in translation than it does in the original Russian: "Once in some melodrama . . . the line was supposed to go: 'We've fallen into a trap', but Izmailov said, 'We've trawlen into a flap'" (134). Only Shamraev roars with laughter as, around him, the others continue to go about their business. Kilroy gives Gregory a different anecdote to tell: "Well, Dixon had to dive in the lake once, on stage. . . . The damn people back of stage had forgotten the damn water. Down came Dixon on the bare boards. Smack! Just like that. And a Cork voice came from the gods: 'Cripes, she's frozen!'" (67). The story not only captures the lack of sophistication of provincial theatre companies and audiences, but also reflects Gregory's own performative failure and the frosty reception of his anecdote by the other members of the household.

In his article on *Hamlet* and *The Seagull*, T.A. Stroud notes “the extent to which Chekhov drew on *Hamlet* to establish the mood, conceive the characters, and construct the plot” of his play.³¹ Shakespeare’s tragedy is directly cited twice, most poignantly in the dialogue between Arkadina and Konstantin in Act I just before the staging of the latter’s drama:

ARKADINA: (*to her son*). My darling son, when are we to begin?

TREPLYOV: In a minute. Have some patience.

ARKADINA (*reciting from Hamlet*): “My son, Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul, And there I see such black and grainéd spots As will not leave their tinct”.

(85–6)

Treplyov’s response—“Then wherefore dost thou yield to sin, seeking love in a morass of crime?” (86)—is an expurgated version of Hamlet’s retort, since the reference to adultery in the original—“Nay, but to live / In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, / Stew’d in corruption, honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty!” (III.iv)—would not have passed the Russian censor. Like Hamlet, Treplyov is “almost a clinical example of “mother-fixation’,”³² and the quotation is an early indicator of Treplyov’s jealousy of his mother’s relationship with Trigorin, echoing Hamlet’s disgust with Gertrude for her marriage to Claudius so soon after his father’s death. Kilroy replaces the son’s response with a phrase spoken by Hamlet to his mother earlier in the same scene: “And let me wring thy heart, for so I shall / If it be made of penetrable stuff” (26). This substitution not only avoids the question whether to restore Shakespeare’s original words rather than use Chekhov’s censored text, but also has the effect of highlighting Isobel’s character and her conflicted relationship with her son by foreshadowing the impact of Constantine’s suicide on his mother in the concluding scene of the play. In the moments leading up to that final tragedy, Isobel has been patronising her son, treating him as if he were a childish nonentity: “I never seem to have time to read anything the boy has written”, she tells Dr Hickey, while proceeding to order Constantine to close the window he has just opened because he feels so “shut-in” (80–81). When the sound of a shot rings out some time later, Isobel’s response, “I really feel quite faint. For a moment I thought—” (87), begs the question whether the son will indeed be capable of wringing his mother’s heart, if only in death.

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In Chekhov, Arkadina’s relationship with Trigorin, frowned upon by Konstantin, is also echoed by the passage from Maupassant’s travel sketch *Sur l’eau* which she reads aloud to Dr Dorn in Act I. In this section of the text, Maupassant comments on the desire of society women to feature talkative and intelligent novelists at their salons, even though there is a danger that the writer will put everyone and everything he encounters there into his novel.

ARKADINA: . . . “And, of course, for people in society to pamper novelists and lure them into their homes is as dangerous as if a grain merchant were to breed rats in his granaries. Meanwhile they go on loving them. So, when a woman has picked out the writer she wishes to captivate, she lays siege to him by means of compliments, endearments and flattering attentions. . . .” Well, that may be what the French do, but there’s nothing of the sort in our country, we have no master plan. In Russia before a woman captivates a writer, she’s usually fallen head over heels in love with him herself, take my word for it. You don’t have far to look, just consider me and Trigorin. (100–101)

Arkadina, although she is nothing if not calculating, is wilfully blind to her own and Trigorin's faults. Like Maupassant's novelist, the latter constantly takes notes in a little book; Jerome Katsell observes that there is no indication that Arkadina reads Trigorin's work: "Could it be that she fears an unflattering portrait of herself in Trigorin's fiction?"³³ Maupassant's text goes on to suggest that other women will try to entice the novelist away, who would do well to turn a deaf ear to their entreaties, because the more faithful he appears to the one hostess, the more he will be sought after and loved. Most of his value would be lost if he were to allow himself to become public property. That Arkadina dismisses this part of the story as "uninteresting and untrue" (102) is further evidence of her self-absorbed and short-sighted nature.

Kilroy replaces the passage from Maupassant with quotations from Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette* (1853) that describe its protagonist Lucy Snow's impressions of a theatrical performance by "Vashti", like Isobel a renowned actress slightly past her prime, whose fading grandeur nevertheless captivates and fascinates her audience:

Behold! I found upon her something neither of woman nor of man: in each of her eyes sat a devil. These evil forces bore her through the tragedy, kept up her feeble strength—for she was but a frail creature; and as the action rose and the stir deepened, how wildly they shook her with their passions of the pit! It was a marvellous sight: a mighty revelation. It was a spectacle, low, horrible, immoral.

Isobel comments: "How divine! What insight there is, here, into the art of the great, tragic artists" (37). The (slightly edited) quotation from Brontë echoes Kilroy's frequently expressed observation that the creator of immense beauty in art can simultaneously be "monstrous" as a human being, "One of the things which fascinates me", he said in an interview about *The Seagull*, "is the discrepancy between the private person and the creative thinker; the fact that people who are absolute shits in their personal lives are capable of creating something that is deeply moral, beautiful and graceful, on the page, and on the stage".³⁴ Isobel, who is like Arkadina in that her "devotion to her work is an escape from her emotional responsibilities",³⁵ chooses to ignore certain similarities between herself and Vashti by reading *Villette* from a narrowly feminist perspective; she considers the observation by Brontë's narrator, that Dr John Bretton critically judged Vashti "as a woman, not an artist", to be an accurate reflection of "the male temper" rather than recognising it as a potential comment on the dehumanising effect on the artist of a total obsession with and dedication to the creative process. "The modern woman", Isobel claims, "has to be independent, resolute, ready to meet man as an equal. Take Mr Aston and I, for example. We are both artists—" (37–8). But as artists, the two are, above all, self-absorbed exploiters of other people, including those closest to them. Isobel's casual dismissal of Lucy Snow as being "so impressed by quite dreadful men" is unfair to Brontë's heroine, while her inability to recognise herself in the comment is further ironic evidence of her solipsism.

The most striking (and, given the new setting, necessary) move Kilroy made was to change the play-within-a-play of Act I from a "Symbolist" to a "Celtic" drama, just as he replaced the popular and sentimental Russian songs of the original with songs from Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies* (1809–34), which were popular in Victorian parlours in England and Ireland alike for the safe, romantic way in which they captured the mood of Celticism and budding Irish nationalism. The Celtic drama, Kilroy suggests, would have had "the same novelty and strangeness for its Anglo-Irish audiences as Symbolist drama would have had for the Russian audience" of the original *Seagull*.³⁶ In Chekhov, Treplyov's Symbolist playlet features Nina

as “the universal soul” awaiting the moment, in a distant future, when “matter and spirit shall blend in glorious harmony and the kingdom of universal will shall emerge” (88). Harshly criticised by Arkadina from her placidly conventional theatrical perspective for being “pretentious, decadent, adolescent nonsense” (23), the play is certainly meant to strike us as immature, but even more so as a failed experiment with “new forms” of theatre by which Arkadina feels threatened. Senelick argues that Chekhov’s model for Konstantin’s play may have been Maeterlinck, whom he actually admired, and stresses that Chekhov is therefore not ridiculing Treplyov’s espousal of strange new artistic forms but rather “his inability to preserve the purity of his ideal; his symbolist venture is actually a garble of popular stage techniques ill-connected to his poetic divagations”.³⁷ This is an insight that strikes Konstantin himself towards the end of the play: “I’ve talked so much about new forms, but now I feel as if I’m gradually slipping into routine myself. . . . Yes, I’m more and more convinced that the point isn’t old or new forms, it’s to write and not think about form, because it’s flowing freely out of your soul” (155).

Kilroy took as the model for Constantine’s drama a playwright he, too, admired: “Just as Chekhov gently mocks the avant-garde, I mock the early romantic Yeatsian vision of Irish mythology. I think Chekhov had immense respect for the emerging art of the future. I certainly had for Yeats”.³⁸ What Kilroy really had in mind were “all of those awful nineteenth century melodramas and pageants that were being written before Yeats came along. If Yeats had not gone east of a line drawn from Sligo to Coole he might have sounded like Constantine”.³⁹ Thus, where Nina in Konstantin’s play is revealed seated on stage “dressed all in white” (86), Lily in Kilroy’s version is “dressed in a long green robe and wearing a kind of crown in the style of contemporary nationalist representations of Ireland” (27). While Isobel dismisses as “Celtic rubbish” and “Hibernian drivel” the theatrical confrontation between Balor, force of Darkness and symbol of base matter, and his grandson Lugh, spirit of Light, artist, and healer (29), schoolmaster James, precariously positioned between the gentry and the peasantry, detects in the concept of indigenous Celtic culture a “dangerous” and potentially revolutionary element: “I know the people and they’re not what they appear to be at all, I can tell you that, now” (30). In Chekhov, the Symbolist performance is later recalled by Dr Dorn when he tells Konstantin that he loves Genoa because in that city one’s personality can disappear into the swarming “crowds in the streets”, which allow a person to be carried along aimlessly so that “you almost believe that there is one universal soul, like . . . in your play” (70). Kilroy’s version introduces a more specific historical focus. When Dr Hickey tells Constantine about his visit to Paris, he observes that there is “great interest nowadays over there in the Celtic thing and all that. I believe Professor de Joubainville’s lectures on the old Celtic mythology are highly regarded in the College de France. I thought of your play. Remember?” (75). In 1882, Marie Henri d’Arbois de Jubainville was appointed to the Chair of Celtic at the Collège de France, where the Anglo-Irish playwright J.M. Synge attended his lectures in 1898.⁴⁰ Yet for all the subversive and intellectual potential perceived in “the Celtic thing” by James and Dr Hickey, Constantine eventually realises that his own dabblings in Celticism are “useless” because they are neither politically nor philosophically significant: “I have no contact with the people. Merely stories out of old books written in a strange, lost language” (81). Lacking the brazen and ruthless qualities of Isobel and Aston, both Lily and Constantine see their own artistic aspirations peter out in psychological devastation. Towards the end of the play, Lily has a bleak conversation with Constantine, in which she recalls the Celtic performance of two years earlier: she envisions the arrival of Balor, “symbol of base matter and common earth”, and laments that Lugh, “the bright-faced one”, is nowhere present “to cast his sling at that terrible eye”. After she has departed, Constantine “methodically destroys all his papers” before going out and shooting himself (86).

Kilroy's version of *The Seagull*, which opened at the Royal Court on April 8, 1981, under Stafford-Clark's direction, was given "a rapturous reception": both audiences and critics "acclaimed it 'a work of illumination' and a play which 'could end up in the classical Irish repertoire'".⁴¹ The English critic Irving Wardle described the Royal Court production as "one of the most illuminating classical revivals I've seen there ever".⁴² *Irish Times* reviewer David Nowlan summed up the general opinion that Kilroy's Irish *Seagull* "manages, in the transposition, to be marvellously, mysteriously true to both worlds", finding in this version "much less of that incessant melancholia to which Chekhov's English-language audiences have become accustomed and much more of that peculiarly Irish blend of laughter and anguish characteristic, perhaps, of O'Casey or Synge".⁴³ The run of the play at the Dublin Theatre Festival in October 1981, directed by Patrick Mason under the banner of the Irish Theatre Company, was completely sold out and also received excellent reviews. Mason's interpretation of Kilroy's script was quite different from Stafford-Clark's and introduced a "more empathetic" note.⁴⁴ Since then, the play has been revived on several occasions, in Ireland, Britain, and the USA. Stafford-Clark, whose original production of *The Seagull* had been such a triumph, also directed the 2013 revival at the Culture Project in New York City. This time, with a different cast of actors, the "hard-edged and farcical" quality he had sought to emphasise in 1981, and perhaps tried to capture again, did not convince the critics: "Everything seems either deadpan or hysterical", Jesse Oxfeld observed.⁴⁵ In an interview published in 1990, Stafford-Clark had praised Kilroy's version of *The Seagull* as being "very much in the writer's tradition, and, really, the play was his, not the director's";⁴⁶ Kilroy, however, has always understood theatre as a collaborative effort in which the director performs the crucial role of helping him "imagine the final text" of a play.⁴⁷ In 1981, it was the combined vision of playwright and director, along with the ability of the actors to realize that vision on the stage, that convincingly turned a Russian *Seagull* into an Irish *Seagull*.

Notes

- 1 Max Stafford-Clark, letter to Thomas Kilroy, 28 March 1980, NUIG Hardiman P103/115(2).
- 2 Laurence Senelick, "A Note on the Translation", *The Seagull* by Anton Chekhov, trans. Laurence Senelick (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), p. 45.
- 3 "Playwrights Speak Out—Round-table Discussion on Translation and Adaptation with Thomas Kilroy and Michael West", chapter 6 of *Ibsen and Chekhov on the Irish Stage*, ed. Ros Dixon and Irina Rupp Malone (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2012), p. 181.
- 4 Robert O'Byrne, "Coming to terms with translating", *Irish Times* 21 Dec. 1989, p. 14.
- 5 Thomas Kilroy, "Introduction", *The Seagull* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1993), p. 12.
- 6 Marilyn J. Richtarik, *Acting between the Lines* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), p. 120.
- 7 Thomas Kilroy, "In celebration of a friend", *Irish Times* 10 Jan. 2009, p. E11.
- 8 Mary Mullen, "Untimely Development, Ugly History: *A Drama in Muslin* and the Rejection of National-Historical Time", *Victoriographies*, 3, 2 (2013), p. 169.
- 9 Anna Rosenstein, "State Preview: Writer transforms end-of-era 'Seagull' with Irish issues, setting", *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* 10 August 2001. <http://old.post-gazette.com/ac/20010810fnp5.asp>
- 10 "Playwrights Speak Out", p. 178.
- 11 Thomas Kilroy, letter to Brian Friel, 16 March [1981], Brian Friel Papers, "Letters from Tom Kilroy 1977-2000", NLI MS 37,254.
- 12 "Playwrights Speak Out", p. 176.
- 13 "Tom Kilroy in Conversation with Gerry Dukes", in *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners*, ed. Lilian Chambers, Ger FitzGibbon, and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2001), p. 247.
- 14 Thomas Kilroy, "The Seagull: An Adaptation", in *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, ed. Vera Gottlieb and Paul Allain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 85.
- 15 Thomas Kilroy, *The Seagull* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1993), p. 75. All references to the play in the text are to this edition.
- 16 Senelick, "A Note", p. 48.
- 17 Thomas Kilroy, "Adaptation: a privileged conversation with a dead author", *Irish Times* 13 Feb. 2010, p. 47.
- 18 Elgy Gillespie, "Tom Kilroy's *Seagull*", *Irish Times* 22 Sep. 1981, p. 8.
- 19 Gresdna A. Doty and Billy J. Harbin, *Inside the Royal Court Theatre, 1956–1981: Artists Talk* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), p. 79.
- 20 Rob Richie, "Introduction", *The Seagull* by Anton Chekhov in a new version by Thomas Kilroy (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), p. 5.
- 21 "Playwrights Speak Out", p. 178.
- 22 Mária Kurdi, "The whole idea of writing historical fiction is paradoxical": Talk with Irish Playwright Thomas Kilroy", *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 8, 1 (2002), p. 264.
- 23 "Tom Kilroy in conversation with Gerry Dukes", p. 247.
- 24 Gillespie, "Tom Kilroy's *Seagull*", p. 8.
- 25 Anton Chekhov, *The Seagull*, trans. Laurence Senelick (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), p. 91. All references to the play in the text are to this edition.
- 26 Gillespie, "Tom Kilroy's *Seagull*", p. 8.
- 27 Harai Golomb, "Referential Reflections around a Medallion: Reciprocal Art/Life Embeddings in Chekhov's *The Seagull*", *Poetics Today*, 21, 4 (Winter 2000), p. 686.
- 28 Senelick, "A Note", p. 47.
- 29 "Playwrights Speak Out", p. 177.
- 30 Laurence Senelick, "The Lake-Shore of Bohemia: *The Seagull's* Theatrical Context", *Educational Theatre Journal*, 29, 2 (May 1977), p. 200.
- 31 T.A. Stroud, "Hamlet and *The Seagull*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 9, 3 (Summer 1958), p. 367.

- 32 Stroud, "Hamlet and *The Seagull*", p. 369.
- 33 Jerome H. Katsell, "Chekhov's *The Seagull* and Maupassant's *Sur l'eau*", in *Chekhov's Great Plays: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Jean-Pierre Barricelli (New York: New York University Press, 1981), p. 21.
- 34 Luke Clancy, "Chekhov goes west", *Irish Times* 8 March 1994, p. 8.
- 35 Senelick, "The Lake-Shore of Bohemia", p. 212.
- 36 Kilroy, "*The Seagull*: An Adaptation", p. 83.
- 37 Senelick, "The Lake-Shore of Bohemia", p. 213.
- 38 Kurdi, "The whole idea", p. 264.
- 39 "Tom Kilroy in conversation with Gerry Dukes", p. 246.
- 40 Kilroy, "*The Seagull*: An Adaptation", p. 86.
- 41 "Rosaleen Linchan appears in Tralee", *Kerryman* 17 Sep.1981, p. 15.
- 42 Quoted in Doty and Harbin, *Inside the Royal Court Theatre*, p. 218.
- 43 David Nowlan, "*The Seagull* at the Olympia", *Irish Times* 6 Oct. 1981, p. 9.
- 44 David Nowlan, "Actors find live audiences too lively", *Irish Times* 7 Oct. 1981, p. 9.
- 45 Jesse Oxfeld, "A Night without Janis Joplin", *New York Observer* 15 Oct. 2013. <https://observer.com/2013/10/a-night-without-janis-joplin-a-new-musical-about-the-singer-hits-all-the-songs-but-lacks-a-story/>
- 46 Doty and Harbin, *Inside the Royal Court Theatre*, p. 79.
- 47 Paul Brennan and Thierry Dubost, "An Interview with Thomas Kilroy, 2001", in Dubost, *The Plays of Thomas Kilroy: A Critical Study* (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland, 2007), p. 126.



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Essay: “Shakespearean and Stoppardian Drama: Frank McGuinness’s *Mutabilitie*”

by Graham Price



Frank McGuinness

Photo: Dominic Martella UCD

The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it

Oscar Wilde¹

This article considers Frank McGuinness’s *Mutabilitie* (1997) as a meditation on art and artistry in a postmodern era and for a postcolonial Ireland. Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* shall be examined as being an important inspiration for McGuinness’s usage of Shakespearean, Wildean², and Beckettian styles, characters, and themes in a play that suggests a democratic/postmodern continuity between different artistic eras and traditions. Frank McGuinness’ usage of key postmodern artistic techniques (as defined by Linda Hutcheon and Frederic Jameson³), parody and pastiche, mark him out as an example of a great dramatist of the postmodern moment. McGuinness’s preference would be for pastiche over parody because he uses older writers and styles for serious and earnest purposes rather than for the comedic effect that is associated with derivative parody. *Mutabilitie* is a play whose title is directly lifted from a poem by Edmund Spenser and its thematic and formal content is created out of a creative usage of many texts and styles from various periods of modern and postmodern literary history.

Mutabilitie is a fictionalized account of the lives of Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare⁴ and depicts an apocryphal meeting between the two men in Ireland during the sixteenth century at the time of the wars of Munster. Like Prospero in *The Tempest*, William is an exile in a wilderness with only the power of his ‘magic’ to sustain him. The play

combines realism and magical unreality to create a play of magical realism. The genre of magical realism is very much present in Shakespeare's later drama—of which *The Tempest* is an important example—and is a key feature of modern Irish writing from Oscar Wilde onwards. As Declan Kiberd argues:

For [James] Joyce, as for Wilde [...] art was not just surface but symbol, a process whereby the real took on the epiphanic contours of the magical. Realist writers, cleaving to notions of an empirical, singular selfhood, had failed adequately to render the symbolic dimension of experience, but the Irish were among the first postcolonial peoples to restore the magical realism of Shakespeare's later plays [such as *The Tempest*] to modern writing'.⁵

McGuinness's play employs the technique of magical realism that is associated both with later Shakespearean drama and with much of modern—and explicitly modernist—Irish literature.

Shakespeare's *The Tempest*—a play that McGuinness taught in UCD for several years—shall be analysed as the most important intertext through which McGuinness' debt to the Bard in *Mutabilitie* can be discerned. This analysis shall also elucidate and illuminate the continuing importance of Shakespearean drama—and *The Tempest* possibly most of all—to Irish postcolonial studies. The central themes that preoccupy *The Tempest*—master/slave conflicts, civilisation vs barbarism, and the tyranny of linguistic imposition—are also very important in *Mutabilitie*. This article shall demonstrate how McGuinness's *Mutabilitie* and



Aisling O' Sullivan as the File and Diana Hardcastle as Elizabeth in *Mutabilitie* by Frank McGuinness. Photo: Stephen Vaughn courtesy of the National Theatre.

Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* stage the artistic compatibility of Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, and Samuel Beckett and elucidate and illuminate their relevance to the contemporary moment.⁶ In essence, I shall argue that *Mutabilitie* is a Shakespearian play about Shakespeare that also performs the postmodern technique of filtering the Bard's legacy through more recent dramatists and traditions. The play thus demonstrates the simultaneous constancy and evolution of the nature of Shakespeare's importance to contemporary drama worldwide and challenges the need to categorise art strictly in terms of literary periods and styles. McGuinness himself has acknowledged that Shakespeare is as much a literary creation as a historical one in an interview: "He [Shakespeare] is everything and nothing. He's not the saviour that the File and the Irish believe—he's much too clever to identify with any particular side. The model for him was Edgar in *King Lear*—the way he shifts from the innocent to the madman and can play all these parts."⁷

Although McGuinness has never explicitly acknowledged a debt to Stoppardian drama, some of the similarities between *Mutabilitie* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*—especially their creative treatment of Shakespearean textuality—are sufficiently apparent as to warrant examination. It is arguable that Brian Friel's *Translations* (1980)—a play and a playwright of whom McGuinness was certainly an admirer—might be an important mediating text between Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* and McGuinness's *Mutabilitie* because of the Stoppardian way in which Friel rewrites and comments upon Shakespeare's *Henry IV* parts 1 and 2 in terms of how those plays deal with the literal and metaphorical topographies of identity and its construction. As Anthony Roche argues: 'Among other things, Friel's *Translations* is a response—linguistic, political, cultural, and dramatic—to issues raised in and by Shakespeare's history plays [...] a revision of Shakespeare along the lines of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.'⁸ Thus, McGuinness's partiality to Friel can be regarded as helping to enhance the Stoppardian qualities in one of McGuinness's own history plays, although the presence of Shakespearean intertextuality is somewhat more prevalent in Stoppard's and McGuinness's plays than in Friel's *Translations*. Importantly, McGuinness also signalled his interest in the theatre of Samuel Beckett in his essay on Friel's *Faith Healer*, during which he compared the 'dead voices' in Friel's play to those alluded to by Vladimir in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.⁹

Mutabilitie is very much a representative play in McGuinness's oeuvre. As Joan Fitzpatrick Deane notes: 'the coherence of *Mutabilitie* derives from subtle but central linkages that surface regularly in McGuinness's other plays: the use of characters who are artists; the death of a child; the extensive use of metatheatricality'.¹⁰ A probing interest in the nature of the theatre and its relationship to external reality is one thing that Shakespeare, Wilde, Beckett, Stoppard, and McGuinness have in common as dramatists and that preoccupation for McGuinness is emphasized in the following exchange in *Mutabilitie*:

File: Theatre?

Annas: That's what they call this place, yes. In this theatre they can be kings or queens.

File: These men are allowed to become women?

Annas: They call it playing a woman. They can be in love or hate each other, kiss and kill each other, and not love nor die-

File: They can rise from the dead in this theatre?

Annas: It is a most extraordinary place. They can do and say and go anywhere in it (M, 26).¹¹

The wonder being expressed at the power of theatre in this exchange very much echoes many of Shakespeare's characters and is an underlying theme of many of his most famous plays, especially *The Tempest* which concludes with a famous moment of metatheatricality when Prospero knowingly turns to his audience in the theatre and asks that they release him from the stage with their applause.

In the last decade, academic interest has become increasingly invested in exploring the importance that Shakespeare holds for modern Irish literature. This is evidenced in the publication of two book length edited collections of essays, Janet Clare's and Stephen O'Neill's *Shakespeare and the Irish Writer* (2010), and Stanley van der Ziel's and Nicholas Taylor-Collins's *Shakespeare and Contemporary Irish Literature* (2018). Both of these books contain chapters on McGuinness and Anne Fogarty's contribution in the latter text makes the point that, for McGuinness, Shakespeare was not a theatrical deity: 'Shakespeare stirs McGuinness not as a historically remote predecessor but as a [contemporary] and fellow writer. Along with Ibsen, Euripides, Strindberg and Sophocles—all playwrights of whose works McGuinness has written multiple versions—Shakespeare feeds his inventive capacity and provides scaffolding for it'.¹² This observation partially accounts for how McGuinness is able to represent Shakespeare in *Mutabilitie* as not only a great but a distinctly human artist because he refuses to view Shakespeare through any idealized lens.

Hamlet is another Shakespearean play that emerges at certain moments during *Mutabilitie*, most notably when Edmund makes the following observation: 'My dear servants, how subtle is the instrument of the human mind. So delicate in its reasoning, so dainty in its imagining. It is yet God's great gift and God's great curse. How the soul of man can suffer through a mind diseased' (*M*, 22). In these few lines, Edmund echoes Hamlet's observation to Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern concerning 'what a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable',¹³ and also some of the most tragic themes in *Hamlet* relating to madness and the soul of man.

Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is one of the primary theatrical texts that elucidates connections between the dramatic works of Shakespeare, Wilde and Beckett.¹⁴ It's rewriting of *Hamlet* as an amalgam of Shakespearean, Wildean and Beckettian styles shows how Shakespeare's most famous play can be transformed through the postmodern tropes of reiteration, knowing parody, and pastiche into a work that transcends artistic and historical specificity. One skilful fusion of the Shakespearean with the Wildean and the Beckettian in Stoppard's play occurs near the conclusion when one of the actors rewords one of Wilde's most famous lines in the service of a stereotypically simplistic assertion about both art and life: 'We're tragedians, you see. We follow directions—there is no choice involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means'.¹⁵ This line parodically and creatively paraphrases the line from *The Importance of Being Earnest* when Miss Prism tell Cecily that, in her three volume novel, 'the good ended happily, the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means'.¹⁶ In contrast, the Player in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* gives voice to a Beckett-inflected world in which tragedy and misery are the two major forces of consequence and where lives are often lived to an unnatural and ill-suited script.

While Shakespeare asserted the intimate connection between the natural world and the theatrical stage in *As You Like It*,¹⁷ more recent dramatists, such as Beckett, Stoppard and McGuinness, seem to follow the more postmodern attitude towards the connection between art and life that is to be found in Wilde's 'Lord Arthur Saville's Crime': 'Our Guildensterns play Hamlet for us, and our Hamlets have to jest like Prince Hal. The world is a stage, but the play is badly cast'.¹⁸ A lot of postmodern drama centres around characters who seem doomed to enact roles and identities for which they seem ill suited and this is apparent in both Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* and *Mutabilitie*, two plays that foreground theatre and the relationship between the dramatic and the reality of existence. In the case of the Stoppard's play, the above quote from Wilde sums up the attitude Stoppard takes towards the reversal of roles from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In Stoppard's play, it is Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who are the tragic heroes rather than the Danish prince, who is relegated to the secondary status normally reserved for the clownish figures in tragedies. Similarly McGuinness's Shakespeare is cast in the role of godlike theatrical master by the Irish characters in *Mutabilitie* and he ultimately frustrates them by being unable to live up to the role of a deity.



By portraying Shakespeare as possibly being romantically interested in men at certain moments in *Mutabilitie*, McGuinness was allowing himself to channel Wilde's famous book *Portrait of Mr WH* which argues that the person being addressed in Shakespeare's *Sonnets* was a young actor named Willie Hughes.¹⁹ It is arguable, therefore, that McGuinness has created a character called William Shakespeare who is nearly more an invention of Oscar Wilde and other artists than he is rooted in historical fact. Like a good Wildean artist, Shakespeare admits that the powers of craft are bound up with the power of lying in *Mutabilitie* (*M*, 52). Oscar Wilde's own attitude toward the impossibility of a truly original subjectivity or work of art can be regarded as being proto-postmodern and thus influential for both Stoppard's and McGuinness's dramaturgy. As Wilde famously wrote in his prison letter 'De Profundis': 'Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation'.²⁰ One of Oscar Wilde's earliest plays, *The Duchess of Padua* (1891),²¹ is a proto-postmodernist parody and pastiche of Shakespearean themes, quotes, and styles (without ever being a particularly sophisticated or interesting piece of drama in terms of character or plot development). Wilde is thus gleefully plagiarizing the Bard's works in the same unashamed manner that Stoppard and McGuinness would later employ.

Patrick Malahide as Edmund
and Anton Lesser as William in
Mutabilitie by Frank McGuinness.

Photo: Stephen Vaughn courtesy of
the National Theatre.

The most overtly Shakespearian feature to be found in many of McGuinness's plays is the device of 'the play within a play'. Examples abound such as the Battle of Scarva in *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* and *The Burning Balaclava* in *Carthaginians*. The 'play within the play' is most famously utilized in *Hamlet* but is also a feature near the climax of *The Tempest* where the magic of theatre is exhibited to powerful effect and it is also a memorable feature of metatheatrical moment near the conclusion of *Mutabilitie*. As is the case with *The Mousetrap* in *Hamlet*, these micro-dramas are used to externalize the inner lives, guilts, fears and desires of some of the characters in the plays' main plots. The fall of Troy is enacted in *Mutabilitie* just as it is verbally relayed in *Hamlet*; however, in McGuinness's play, that mythic event is used to symbolically comment upon events in colonial Ireland in a style that is comparable to the climactic retelling of the fall of Carthage in Brian Friel's *Translations*. Where McGuinness departs from Friel is in the moral that McGuinness's characters bestow upon that classical tragedy: They see that story more as a warning to the English and her Empire concerning the possibility for demise of even the greatest cities, countries, and empires: 'Irish: Great Gloriana learn from Troy/ Your kingdom's but a paltry toy/Great Gloriana, none are saved/ When spirits rise from out their graves' (*M*, 78). Thus, the colonizers are sung of as being the tragic characters in this 'play within the play' rather than the vanquished colonized.

Mutabilitie opens with two visiting actors to Ireland, Ben and Richard (possibly modelled on the famous Renaissance actors, Ben Jonson and Richard Burbage), ponderously considering the country in which they find themselves. The following dialogue exchange between Ben and Richard has distinctly Beckettian undertones:

Ben: This is Ireland. We are in it. We are alive, breathing the air of Ireland, unknown, unwanted and unloved. The air is sweet, so maybe it bids us welcome. I love air, don't you? Where would we be without it?

Richard: Dead (*M*, 1).

The short, clipped dialogue between Richard and Ben definitely resembles the many exchanges in *Waiting for Godot* when Vladimir and Estragon muse about their circumstances in simple and often declarative statements:

Estragon: What am I to say?

Vladimir: Say I am happy.

Estragon: I am happy.

Vladimir: So am I.

Estragon: So am.

Vladimir: We are happy.

Estragon: We are happy.²²

At the same time, McGuinness' two comically clownish characters, Ben and Richard also resemble the two unfortunate and hapless men—Stephano and Trinculo—who are shipwrecked and lost on the magical island in *The Tempest*.

That the Irish and the Ireland in which this play exists are Beckett-inspired is made clear in the following exchange:

Elizabeth: How do your people respond to death?

File: They laugh at it. It is a habit amongst us, a custom, to laugh when we should cry (*M*, 66).

This assertion that death is something to be laughed at is an echo of Nell in *Endgame* when she observes that ‘Nothing is funnier than unhappiness’ and emphasizes the gallows humour that permeates many Beckettian moments in *Mutabilitie*, such as when Ben says that anyone who fancies Richard must be a nympho because he is a human who is more dead than alive (*M*, 35).

The opening of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*—which finds Guildenstern continuously flipping a coin and Rosencrantz always calling ‘heads’—strikes the Beckett sounding note that the comedic/tragic duo will continue throughout this Stoppardian drama.²³ The 50/50 chance of survival that Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern give themselves is a parody of Vladimir’s assertion in *Waiting for Godot* that ‘One of the thieves was saved [...] It’s a reasonable percentage’.²⁴ Cleverly, Stoppard’s play undercuts this assertion by having the



Alison McKenna as Annas,
Frances Tomelty as Maeve, Gawn
Grainger as Sweney and Conor
Mc Dermottoe as Niall in
Mutabilitie by Frank McGuinness.
*Photo: Stephen Vaughn courtesy of
the National Theatre.*

coin come up head over a hundred and fifty times. This biblical reference to the two thieves who were crucified beside Christ is alluded to throughout *Mutabilitie* by Ben and Richard, such as when Ben tells a version of The Two Thieves story when his friend Richard is on trial, although it does not completely match the famous version that is considered by many as being, both literally and metaphorically, gospel: 'Two friends were condemned to die. A pardon came through from the king for one of them. The punishment now was in their choosing which was to live. They both chose death and they were saved. The Two Thieves, that was its name' (*M*, 82). By offering varying versions of that well known biblical story, McGuinness is displaying that same postmodern scepticism concerning fixed metanarratives²⁵ that Vladimir expresses in *Waiting for Godot* about the same story concerning the Two Thieves: 'But all of them [the evangelists]. And only one of them speaks of a thief being saved. Why believe him rather than the others? [...] It's the only version they know'.²⁶

Crucially, Ben and Richard believe themselves to be the versions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Stoppard's play rather than Shakespeare's and that William is a version of the former's secondary character rather than the latter's tragic hero. As Richard asserts: 'William thought of it first? William has never had a thought in his head. The only reason he's been let stay with us is because he can write down what we say. He learned to write, he went to school, we didn't, and he's still more stupid than us put together' (*M*, 36). Sadly for them, they prove to be very disposable in *Mutabilitie* and much less important than the title characters were in Stoppard's play.

Mutabilitie is thus clearly a very creatively derivative play in which many moments and texts that constitute the mainstream history of modern drama—and particularly modern Irish drama—are brought together, rewritten and recontextualized in the service of creating a compelling piece of contemporary, and demonstrably postcolonial, Irish theatre.

Postcolonial Futures to Come

According to Csilla Bertha, *Mutabilitie* is a dramatic text that plays out many of the strategies that are to be found in the works of postcolonial writers and theorists such as Edward Said, Frantz Fanon and Ashis Nandy and tries to sometimes deconstruct unequal identity categories in an effort to bring them into productive dialogue: 'As if reflecting on, not only the colonial situation, but also postcolonial theory, he [McGuinness] creates a vision in which the most stereotypical and hierarchical binary oppositions are first established, then the hierarchy itself is questioned and problematized in a process that eventually leads to the playing out of these oppositions in a 'creative confluence', without merging them'.²⁷ Bertha's argument is a useful consideration of how *Mutabilitie* is a knowing commentary on both the formal and underlying theories of postcolonial literature and how colonial artists such as Oscar Wilde inspired postcolonial writers and theorists like Samuel Beckett and Edward Said. Bertha's use of the term 'creative confluence' also suggests the Hegelian aim of dialectical synthesis between opposites being sought in the work of McGuinness and in his colonial and postcolonial predecessors.

Although *Mutabilitie* is set during the Munster wars in Ireland in the 16th century, aggressive rebellion is not portrayed here as inaugurating a desirable future for Ireland. If a revolution in Ireland is to bring about a desirable, future postcolonial Ireland, then this play suggests

that it should not be created in a programmatic, tragically predictable fashion of violence which will achieve nothing except new forms of the old misery. It is for this reason that Jacques Derrida did not like using the word 'programme' when it came to talking about revolutions to come:

I would hesitate to use the word "program" [...] it implies a knowledge of norms, a pre-established authority that, using this knowledge, would dictate the decisions and the responsibilities (thus annulling them in advance and in the same gesture). There is a necessity for programs, for the secondary effects of programs, for a programmatic economy and strategy, but in the first or last instance, what is to be done is invented or inaugurated, and therefore it comes about without a program.²⁸

The love of the role of surprise and undecidability in relation to creating potential futures is also something that artists such as Shakespeare, Wilde, and Beckett had in common and exhibited in their works.

In the case of Shakespeare, the colonial interpretations of *The Tempest* are very well established and revolve strongly around the relationship between Prospero and his slave Caliban. It is given to Caliban to voice the strongest critique of colonialism in that play's script:

Caliban: This Island's mine by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou [Prospero] tak'st from me. When thou cam'st first
Thou strok'st me and made much of me; wouldst give me
Water with berries in't; and teach me how to name the bigger light.²⁹

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Colonialism in *The Tempest* is as much linguistic as it is physical. As Caliban asserts: 'You taught me language, and my profit on't/Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/For learning me your language'.³⁰ This diatribe is appropriated by Beckett in *Endgame* when Clov berates Hamm for instructing him in a very rigid and limiting form of linguistic communication: 'I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything any more, teach me others. Or let me be silent'.³¹ Unlike Caliban asserting the power of words and his mastery over them, Clov laments their failure and his inability to use them effectively.

Oscar Wilde also lamented his—and the Irish people in general—being condemned to speak 'the language of Shakespeare' but he also believed in the possibility of a linguistic harmony being created through the meeting and cross-fertilization of the English and Irish tongues.³² As Noreen Doody argues: 'Wilde's contention that the Irish improved the language of Shakespeare indicates his perception that, in the imaginative world of art, vanquished and victor are interchangeable terms; he undermines the notion that force and violence are necessary to world order and allows for the possibility of cultural exchange and mutual gain'.³³

In *Mutabilitie*, the Irish people's relationship to the English language is also portrayed as being one that involves a productive co-becoming between two tongues. As the character Hugh states: 'When the English destroyed us and our tribe, we made a vow. We had lost the power to govern our lives and part of that curse was the loss we accepted over the government of our tongue' (*M*, 68). Like Hugh in Friel's *Translations*,³⁴ this Hugh accepts the loss of his native tongue but also intends to make a new home out of the representative and descriptive powers of the language of Shakespeare. Unlike Caliban, these dramatic creations do not just intend to curse and destroy in their new tongue, they wish to create something new and

that something is called Hiberno-English. The death of the Irish language as a dominant linguistic force is also implied by *Translations* and *Mutabilitie* because both plays are entirely written and acted in English even though the audience knows that some of the characters are actually speaking Irish in the onstage world.

Many of the English characters in *Mutabilitie* fear the Calibanesque threat that their Irish subjects pose because of their mastery of both English and Irish. This fear is made abundantly clear in the following exchange between Edmund and Elizabeth:

Edmund: They now speak our language-

Elizabeth: They could when they arrived. How else could they have learned so early to lie with such excellence?

Edmund: They listen-

Elizabeth: To you and you to them. But you don't hear the whispers, plotting behind your back. These innocents, these children (*M*, 9).

Although the colonial mind may be disposed to view their colonized peoples as children and thus weak and easily led, Elizabeth knows that there is a cunning and resourcefulness in her Irish subjects that should not be underestimated.

Frank McGuinness is also willing to cunningly rewrite a key colonial moment in Shakespearean drama when he makes the English Edmund Spenser deny his allegiance to the English motherland:

William: Your powers are very great.

Edmund: As my nation is great. What is my nation?

William: England.

Edmund: England no longer needs me. I am abandoned here in exile (*M*, 51).

Edmund's verbal rejection of his nation is a rewriting of the moment in *Henry V* when the Irish Captain McMorris asks 'what is my nation? It's a villain and a bastard and a coward and a rascal. What is my nation? Who talks of my nation?'.³⁵ In *Mutabilitie* it is a member of colonizing rather than a colonized nation that is forsaking his country of birth.

The character Gonzalo in *The Tempest* actually gives voice to an imagined vision of ideal government that he would like to bring into being which could be regarded as a colonized people's idea of a perfect postcolonial future to come:

For no kind of traffic
Would I admit: No name of magistrate:
Letters should not be known: riches, poverty,
And use of service, none: contract, succession,
Bourn, bound of Land, tilth, vineyard none:
No use of metal, corne, or wine, or all:
No occupation, all men idle, all:
And Women too, but innocent and pure:
No sovereignty.³⁶

The idea of there being no dictatorial slavery or sovereignty would be most appealing to a people who had lived under imperialist yoke for a lifetime and this picture of government would certainly be regarded by many as ideal—the only problem being that Gonzalo would still wish to be king of this land so its utopian pedigree is flawed.

In *The Tempest*, the idea of there being a mutual dependence existing between the imperialist and his slaves is a key theme. According to Declan Kiberd, *The Tempest* is an allegory for the master/slave dialectic that exists between various colonizing and colonized people and the tendency for both sides of the imperialist coin to invent one another in images that most suit how the imaginer views himself: '[E]ven in their fictions of one another, a strange reciprocity bound colonizer to colonized. It might indeed be said that there were four persons involved in every Anglo-Irish relationship: the two actual persons, and the two fictions, each one a concoction of the other's imagination. Yet the concoction leaked into the true version, even as the truth modified the concoction'.³⁷ A master needs to invent a slave in order to perfect his identity and the slave needs a version of tyrannical master to fight against. Near the conclusion of *The Tempest*, Prospero admits that there is a portion of himself in the dark other that is Caliban: 'Two of these fellows you must/Must know and own; this thing of darkness I/Acknowledge mine'.³⁸ While Prospero passively and briefly acknowledges a link between himself and his colonised servant, succeeding artists such as Wilde, Beckett, and McGuinness sought to create a productive partnership and synthesis arising from the acknowledgement that there is otherness in the self and vice versa: An acknowledgement that is neatly voiced by Hamm in *Endgame* when he says to Clove, 'we are obliged to each other'.³⁹



Frances Tomelty as Maeve and Gawn Grainger as King Sweney in *Mutabilitie* by Frank McGuinness. Photo: Stephen Vaughn courtesy of the National Theatre.

As I have argued elsewhere⁴⁰, in Oscar Wilde's aesthetic vision, art and artistic production is imagined as containing within it the potential for a Hegelian dialecticism that can enable a 'going on' from rigidity and binary opposition on which imperial societies and other unequal systems of existence thrive. As Wilde famously wrote in 'The Truth of Masks': 'For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true.... [I]t is only in art criticism, and through it, that we can realise Hegel's system of contraries. The truth of metaphysics is the truth of masks'.⁴¹ For Wilde, the analysis of art—in its myriad forms and genres—by proper and ethical critics, can elucidate its utopian qualities which include a capacity to achieve a synthesis between thesis and antithesis in a fashion championed, albeit not in those exact words, in the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Hegel.

The stage directions in *Mutabilitie*, particularly in the latter section of the play, also signal a dialectical relationship between the various characters in the drama: 'Early morning in both the forest and the castle. Elizabeth sits nursing a child. There is the rising sun both in the castle and the forest. Annas sits looking at Richard. The File enters with a jug of milk' (*M*, 39). The two sets of characters, Irish and English, are often placed on stage at the same time, although they are meant to be physically in different locations which indicates a symbiotic relationship and mutual dependence between them, even though many of them are meant to be mortal enemies.

There is a strong suggestion in *Mutabilitie* that a truly perfect postcolonial future to come should also be linked with an ideal feminist futurity. As is the case with Miranda in *The Tempest*, the female characters in *Mutabilitie*—such as Maeve and The File—very often provide the greatest catalysts for change without ever seeming to subordinate themselves to a patriarchal view of what type of person should wield power in a society. In contrast, Queen Elizabeth is described as being a failed figure of revolutionary feminism by the File because all she does when she is exercising her domineering strength is perform an accepted form of hypermasculinity (*M*, 14-15).

It is in the exchanges between the female characters in *Mutabilitie* that the possibility of productive alliances through acknowledgement of common ground is most obviously suggested, such as in the following observation that the Irish File (originally played with an almost ethereal power by Aisling O'Sullivan) makes to Elizabeth: 'Lady Elizabeth, when I lost all in the late wars of Munster, I too was afraid to sleep. I could not close my eyes, as you cannot. I know you cannot sleep. To lose my senses in sleep would be to lose all, for all I had was life itself, and I do love my life. I love my home that I had lost' (*M*, 40). According to File, in imperialist conflicts, both the masters and the slaves can be victims.

The File is the character in this play who most consistently demands that the old ways be martyred at the altar of mutability and give way to a new way of being: 'A fool? Perhaps I am. It is thinking which pays homage to the principle of change, and change controls this earth and all its workings. I am proof. Once no man nor woman would dare call me fool. I once had servants, washerwomen, I too have suffered change in these late wars of Munster' (*M*, 43). In the chorus to a song that she sings, the title and central theme of the plays is made clear: 'The gods possess a power strange/For all things turn to dust and change/Mankind, the sky, the rivered sea/Sing of mutabilitie' (*M*, 43).

The theme of reproductive futurity is very important in the concluding scenes of *Mutabilitie* as it is in many works of Irish literature for well over a hundred years. As Gerardine Meaney argues in 'The Sons of Cuchulainn: Violence, the Family and the Irish Canon', in Irish literature, whether a father dies before the son or vice versa is often an indication whether a text envisages a society that is capable of renewal or one that will destroy its own future through self-cannibalisation or other similar tragic occurrences.⁴² J.M. Synge famously voiced just such a pessimistic attitude towards Irish society and its prospects for survival through the character of Maurya in *Riders to the Sea*: 'In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind them for them that do be old'.⁴³ By the end of *Riders to the Sea*, the sea has symbolically claimed any chance for futurity that this island family could possibly hope for by claiming all the men and leaving only the women alive to mourn the demise of their family and also the bleak future of their society.

Edmund is the character in *Mutabilitie* who proves to be the most fatalistic in his views concerning what the future holds for Ireland because all he sees is death and, most particularly, the death of children before their parents. In a very definite echo of The Old Man's anti-procreative statement in Yeats's *Purgatory* ('I killed that lad because had he grown up He would have struck a woman's fancy, Begot, and passed pollution on'),⁴⁴ Edmund gives voice to a desire that children not live to procreate and continue the darkness that he foresees the future as holding for all who are unlucky enough to see it: 'All children should die before their father dies. That way they may not stain their pretty feet in the pool of foul and filthy sin. Father, forgive me, I have failed' (*M*, 98).⁴⁵ One of the things that unites both William and the File is that both of them have lost a child. She killed her child because she knew that it could not survive and William's son, Hamnet, died when he was very young. William also takes a similar view to Edmund concerning the event of birth and the future in which a child is doomed to take part: 'For being born to die. He [Hamnet] returns in dreams to avenge his birth, the son against the father. I think he wishes to kill me' (*M*, 73). This line echoes the early fatalism of a pre-*Endgame* Samuel Beckett when he put the following lines into the mouth of Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot*: 'They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it is night once more'.⁴⁶

In contrast to the above examples of pessimism concerning procreation and its effects—and the fact that the violently uncompromising Irish characters Donal and Niall survive the play—the final moments in *Mutabilitie* offer a glimpse of a future for Anglo-Irish relations in which hatred and difference are replaced by the possibility of a celebration of connection and reconciliation. This possibility is symbolised by Edmund's son being adopted by Hugh and his family. The following declaration by Hugh verbally creates a future happy state of affairs for relations between the English colonizer and the Irish colonized: 'We have a child. He is to be nurtured as our own. Reared as our own. Nurtured like our own, and nurtured like his own' (*M*, 100-101). As Helen Lojek argues: 'The play's final communal moment sug-

gests that Spenser's nameless child will be transformed, and his cultural reality will be a new one, a sign of hope that the joined and nurtured powers of multiple pasts, rather than being erased, will inform a new future.⁴⁷ The figure of the child as a guarantor of a future to come is also a feature of the conclusion of Beckett's *Endgame* during which a child appears outside of Hamm and Clov's dwelling and Clov refers to him as a 'potential procreator'.⁴⁸ These two plays by Beckett and McGuinness desire birth as opposed to *Purgatory* which wishes for the extinction of a debased world and existence.

The offstage journey of Shakespeare back to England following the play's conclusion can also be interpreted as signalling the possible creation of a brave new world for Anglo-Irish relations. Shakespeare leaves Ireland just as Prospero leaves his island at the end of *The Tempest* but, although both characters feel the need to return to their places of reality, it is William who intends to continue his Irish-influenced art and to share with his countrymen what he has learnt from the Irish and to put that knowledge to positive use, unlike Prospero who intends to reject his books and their magic and retreat into a narrow shell of self. Thus, a union between the real and the artistic ideal and between colonizer and colonized that the Irish characters wished to see during the play's duration is now a possibility in the times following the denouement of McGuinness's drama. This is symbolized by William's final moment onstage during which he clasps the hand of the File, the character who most symbolizes the magic of Irish art that has bewitched William during the course of this play and the influence of which he shall take back with him to England.

In conclusion, Frank McGuinness's *Mutabilitie* can be interpreted as a theatrical rewriting and aestheticizing of history via the prism of various modern and postmodern artists' texts. If Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* demonstrated the importance of Shakespeare, Beckett and Wilde to postmodern literature in a Europe that was undergoing a post-WW2 existential crisis, McGuinness's *Mutabilitie* shows how contemporary Irish drama can use the tools of postmodernism and the legacy of its dramatic antecedents to stage subversion and to imagine postcolonial futures to come.

I am exceedingly grateful, as ever, to Frank McGuinness for his support and advice during the writing and researching of this article.

Notes

- 1 Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, fifth edition (London, Harper Collins, 2003), 1121. All other references to Oscar Wilde's work will be to this edition.
- 2 For extensive analyses of Frank McGuinness's love for and debt to Oscar Wilde's life and work, see Noreen Doody, 'Beyond the Mask: Frank McGuinness and Oscar Wilde', in Hiroko Mikami, Minako Okomuro, and Naoko Yagi (eds), *Ireland on Stage: Beckett and After* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2007), 69-86, and Graham Price, *Oscar Wilde and Contemporary Irish Drama: Learning to be Oscar's Contemporary* (London and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).
- 3 See Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992), 17.
- 4 Spenser and Shakespeare are never referred to by their surnames in the play, always as Edmund and William.
- 5 Declan Kiberd, 'Introduction', *Ulysses: Annotated Student's Edition*, Declan Kiberd (ed) (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), Lxxix.
- 6 I am very grateful to Stanley van der Ziel for reintroducing me to Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in 2017 when we went to see a live streaming of a British production in the Odeon Cinema, Limerick.
- 7 'The Troubles with Shakespeare', Interview with John Whitley, *Daily Telegraph*, 20 November 1997, 158.
- 8 Anthony Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama*, second edition (London and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 181.
- 9 See Frank McGuinness, "'Faith Healer": All the Dead Voices." *Irish University Review* 29, no. 1 (1999): 60-63.
- 10 Joan Fitzpatrick Deane, "Advice to the Players (and the Historians): The Metatheatricality of McGuinness's Mutabilitie." *Irish University Review* 40, no. 1 (2010), 82.
- 11 Frank McGuinness, *Mutabilitie* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 26. All future parenthetical references will be to this edition.
- 12 Anne Fogarty, 'Conjuring Ghosts: Shakespeare, Dramaturgy and the Plays of Frank McGuinness', in Nicholas Taylor and Stanley van der Ziel (eds), *Shakespeare and Contemporary Irish Literature* (London and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 147.
- 13 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (New York: Norton Publishing, 1992), 36
- 14 For a recent examination of the importance of Shakespeare to Beckett's drama, see Stanley van der Ziel, 'Godot's Shakespeare', *Irish Studies Review*, 27:1, 38-55.
- 15 Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 72.
- 16 Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 376.
- 17 William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (London: Wordsworth Press, 1998), 38
- 18 Oscar Wilde, 'Lord Arthur Saville's Crime', 165.
- 19 See Oscar Wilde, 'The Portrait of Mr WH', 302-251.
- 20 Oscar Wilde, 'De Profundis', *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart Davies (eds), (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 169.
- 21 The play was actually written nearly ten years before it was first performed, in 1883.
- 22 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 60.
- 23 Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, 2.
- 24 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 11.
- 25 See Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London/New York: Verso, 1998), 24-27, and Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (eds) (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
- 26 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 13.
- 27 Csilla Bertha, 'They Raigne Ouer Change, and Doe Their States Maintaine': Change, Stasis, and Postcoloniality in Frank McGuinness's "Mutabilitie"', 310.
- 28 Jacques and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow: A Dialogue*, Jeff Fort transl. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 96.
- 29 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 18.
- 30 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 19.

- 31 Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, 32.
- 32 *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 505, and Oscar Wilde, 'Irish Poets of the Nineteenth Century: Unpublished Lecture Notes of Oscar Wilde', in Michael O'Neil (ed), *University Review*, I: 4 (Spring 1955), 29.
- 33 Noreen Doody, 'William Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde and the Art of Appeal', in Janet Clare and Stephen O'Neill (eds), *Shakespeare and the Irish Writer* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2010), 126.
- 34 See Brian Friel, *Translations. Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 444.
- 35 William Shakespeare, *Henry V* (London: Penguin Press, 1968), 100.
- 36 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 29.
- 37 Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996), 279.
- 38 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 75.
- 39 Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, 50.
- 40 See Graham Price, *Oscar Wilde and Contemporary Irish Drama*, 10-15.
- 41 Oscar Wilde, "The Truth of Masks", *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishing, 2003, 1173.
- 42 See Gerardine Meaney, 'The Sons of Cuchulainn: Violence, the Family and the Irish Canon'. *Éire-Ireland* 41, no. 1 (2006): 242-261.
- 43 J.M. Synge, *Riders to the Sea, The Playboy of the Western World and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), 6.
- 44 See William Butler Yeats, *Purgatory. Two Late Plays: The Words Upon the Window-pane / Purgatory* (Clare: Clare Press, 2016), 31.
- 45 For an analysis of Shakespearean Intertextuality in Yeats's *Purgatory*, see Stanley van der Ziel, 'Shakespeare in Purgatory: "A Scene of Tragic Intensity"', in Warwick Gould (ed), *Yeats Annual*, no. 21: Yeats's Legacies. (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2018): 355-90.
- 46 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 89.
- 47 Helen Lojek, 'Playing Together: William Shakespeare and Frank McGuinness', in Janet Clare and Stephen O'Neill (eds), *Shakespeare and the Irish Writer* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2010), p. 190
- 48 Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, 50.



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Essay: “The Minit Passin’ – an’ not Returnin’: The Theatre of Tom Mac Intyre”

by John Mc Evoy



Tom Mac Intyre

Photograph courtesy of the Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

Tom Mac Intyre’s theatrical idiom broke new ground in Irish theatre when his first plays were staged at The Abbey’s Peacock Theatre during the 1970s. Experimental in nature and approach and influenced by modern dance and film, Mac Intyre, though ostensibly a playwright, treated the spoken word as only one component of his theatrical language. His self-styled “adversarial stance” led him to seek out new theatrical forms in a challenge to what he saw as the “tame, boring, verbal theatre”¹ that had dominated in Ireland. Though interwoven with European avant-garde and American dance, Mac Intyre’s theatre is inextricably bound up in an Irish idiom. Irish historical characters, myths, legends, folklore and literature are the lifeblood of his writing and William Butler Yeats, John Millington Synge, George Fitzmaurice and Maurice Meldon, if not supplying the oxygen to this pulse, are at least a part of the rhythm.

Mac Intyre always strived for a theatrical environment which opened-up to an exploration of the unconscious and the dream world, often with an emphasis on the sensual and the erotic and a search for a female sensibility within the male psyche. His is a theatre of the visual and the imagistic combined with an incantatory use of language. Often rooted in a rural idiom, this language is at once poetic and colourfully neologistic, with an emphasis on rhythm and sound. Combining narrative with the metaphorical and the symbolic, Mac Intyre’s theatre appeals directly to the unconscious and the visceral rather than the cerebral. His theatre is not just an insular theatrical collaboration, but one that extends to include the spectator. His theatre seeks, “to seduce the audience to partake in the dance”² and the communication between performers and audience is a crucial aspect of his dramaturgical means of breaking the veneer of illusion. Often visually powerful, yet disruptive and surprising, his plays are a multifaceted exploration of the themes of sex and death, which, in director Patrick Mason’s words, heightened

“our awareness to the power of gesture, to the power of objects on the stage, to the implications of that basic truth of theatre, that every word and act of theatre is both real and metaphorical.”³

Patrick Mason had directed some of Mac Intyre’s early plays in the 1970s but it was when the actor Tom Hickey joined the duo in the early 1980s (along with the designer Bronwen Casson) there began a series of collaborations which fused the various languages of text, gesture, image and movement together with the theatrical elements of space, objects and the performing body. This was the start of what Mac Intyre called “an extraordinary adventure” and, “one hell of an education”⁴ and for a period of five years, Mac Intyre’s theatre shook the Peacock stage at the Abbey. Starting with *The Great Hunger*, Mac Intyre’s radical, primarily non-verbal, mime treatment of Patrick Kavanagh’s long poem, in 1983 (and its revival in 1986) and continuing with *The Bearded Lady* (1984), *Rise up Lovely Sweeney* (1985), *Dance for*

Your Daddy (1987) and *Snow White* (1988, designed by Monica Frawley), his work challenged and radicalized the national theatre. This placed Mac Intyre simultaneously at the centre of the Irish theatrical consciousness as well as on its periphery - a duality of place he maintained throughout his career. While his avant-garde approach is no longer an isolated one in Irish theatre, for a long time, his was, arguably, the most radical and idiosyncratic operating within the realm of the national theatre itself.

Not surprisingly, critics, commentators, audiences and the Irish theatrical community alike, often struggled to understand Mac Intyre's vision. The thematic emphasis on the sexual and the erotic often alienated, and many of the performances were rejected as self-indulgent, over-wrought, wilfully opaque and purposefully obscure, defying both emotional and intellectual engagement. Yet, on the other hand he has also been lauded by critics, other playwrights, directors and practitioners, most often for his theatrical inventiveness and encapsulation of the avant-garde. Christopher Murray opined that, "in Dublin Mac Intyre is at once both loved and hated"⁵ and speaking about *Sheep's Milk on the Boil* (1984), Mac Intyre himself declared that, it is "not a show for the urban audience, for the lazy urban audience. It should really have toured the wilds of Ireland where I believe the population would have been wide open to it."⁶ This suggests that Mac Intyre's theatre, when first performed, may have appealed most to the two opposite ends of the critical spectrum. At the one extreme, he appealed to an audience with limited exposure to urban-centric theatrical tastes, who were more likely to engage on a visceral rather than a cerebral level. On the other hand, a theatrically academic or knowledgeable audience often responded to, what Frank Mc Guinness called, "the most inventive and challenging fictions it [Irish theatre] has had to encounter."⁷ This latter audience valued Mac Intyre for his formal experimentation, his determination to break with conventional practices and the influence his work had on the acceptance of a more physically based theatre in Ireland in general. In between these two extremes however, he often struggled to find a receptive audience among a theatre going public long raised, up to that point, on a diet of naturalism, melodrama and the privileged position of a verbal, text-centric theatre.

A consideration of the critical, audience and the theatrical community's response to his best-know work, *The Great Hunger*, wonderfully captures the diverse and often extreme reactions his theatrical idiom engendered in those who struggled to understand his form of theatre.

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When Patrick Mason, addressed the audience at the Leningrad (now St Petersburg) Gorky Bolshoi Theatre before a performance of *The Great Hunger* on 10th February 1988 he was marking the final lap of a remarkable journey for what had, by that stage, become one of Irish theatre's most original and most divisive productions. *The Great Hunger* along with a production of John B. Keane's *The Field*, had been brought to Russia by the Abbey Theatre for four performances (two in Leningrad and two in the world-famous Moscow Art Theatre) as part of a trade and cultural exchange between the two countries.

Before the opening night, the Irish newspapers reported of the huge excitement that was being generated and the wonderful atmosphere between the forty strong Abbey company and the seven journalists on their historical visit, "Laughter and snowflights in the Venice of the North."⁸ Patrick Mason told the packed house of twelve hundred souls in the Bolshoi, that the Abbey Theatre was greatly honoured to be playing in "the Hero City of Leningrad,"⁹ before the lights dimmed and Patrick Maguire and his peasant potato pickers took to the stage of potato drills, country walls and wooden farm gates.

However, the lights had barely come back up before questions were being raised as to the suitability of the piece for The Abbey Theatre's first visit to the spiritual home of Chekhov and Stanislavski in Moscow. Some members of the audience left during the performance and as *The Irish Times* reported, "There were a few empty seats after the interval, and many people said they were confused by a new type of theatrical experience."¹⁰ Although there was a lot of praise for the direction and acting among many of the audience and critics, the walkouts (variably reported as a few people, and up to one-fifth of the audience) had precipitated rumblings among the Irish media suggesting that the Russian audiences would have preferred a more traditional Abbey play à la Synge or O'Casey. The newspaper headlines reflected the change in mood, "Praise and puzzlement greets Abbey"¹¹ and "Choice of play splits Abbey company."¹²

Far from basking in the glow of a mostly successful first night, Patrick Mason found himself the next day (and would do for the remainder of the tour), justifying the selection of the piece, which had in fact been chosen by the Soviet Ministry of Culture, and pointing out that it had taken three years to build an audience for the play in Ireland and that the reaction had been much the same when the play originally opened and when it had toured to Edinburgh and Paris. People, he said, "love it or hate it, but the audience was gripped by it both there and here and will talk about it afterwards."¹³ Mac Intyre himself was reported as being very happy with the performances but acknowledged that the "beautifully vulnerable" audience had to work hard to come to grips with an unfamiliar idiom.¹⁴ However, the media now had a contentious angle on the tour which was hauled out in all the daily reports and the situation was not helped by Niall Toibin, playing the Bull McCabe in *The Field*, who openly said that he greatly disliked the play, "I don't even think it should be staged. It's not theatre at all; it's a lot of wasted effort and I don't mind saying so."¹⁵ Patrick Mason, pointing out that it was very important for The Abbey not to become a museum theatre and a slave to its traditions, again addressed the audience before the second performance, explaining that the play was about fragments of the life of Patrick Maguire, his work and dreams and that the hunger in the title was a spiritual one: "we tell the story in a new way, sometimes using words sometimes gestures and music. It is a dream of life." Although it was reported that the second performance, "seemed to be received with greater warmth and understanding,"¹⁶ there were still some empty seats after the interval and by now the die had been cast and the tone for the rest of the tour had been set.

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Almost five years since it had originally opened to mixed reviews and a cautious audience response, *The Great Hunger* was still causing divisions and arguments among the Irish media and theatre personnel, only this time it was happening thousands of miles from home. What was so radically different about the piece that challenged audiences from its very first showing at Dublin's Peacock Theatre in 1983? In order to understand the mixed reception the play received thirty-six years ago it is useful to consider Mac Intyre's theatrical influences and their sources.

* * *

I first met Tom Mac Intyre when he called into the Crannóg Bookshop in Cavan town a few days after I first opened the doors of the shop in December 1996. I was aware of him by reputation but had not read any of his work or seen any of his plays performed. Born in 1931, a native of Baileborough, Co Cavan, Mac Intyre has written poetry, short stories and prose as well as plays in both English and Irish. By the time of our first meeting, the fertile period at the Peacock with Mason, Hickey and Casson was in the past. However, in the intervening years he had three plays staged at the Peacock, *Kitty O'Shea* (1990, directed by Ben Barnes),

Sheep's Milk on the Boil (1994, directed by Tom Hickey) and *Good Evening Mr. Collins* (1995, directed by Kathy McArdle), as well as two others produced by Punchbag Theatre Company (*Foggy Hair and Green Eyes* (1991) and *Fine Day for a Hunt* (1992)) and one by Red Kettle Theatre Company (*Chickadee* (1993)). Over the next twenty plus years, I developed a friendship with Mac Intyre attending many of his subsequent plays and hosting a number of book launches of his poetry and prose collections in the Crannóg Bookshop.



Tom Mac Intyre

Photograph courtesy of the Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

When I returned to college in later years to study theater and drama, it was only natural that I should turn to Mac Intyre's work in essays and for my MA thesis. Over many conversations with him, I began to understand that, contrary to the notion that he willfully wrote in a challenging and provocative manner to unsettle audiences, his was a mind with a great understanding of theatrical antecedents. Though the realistic nature of his first play staged at the Peacock Theatre in 1972 (*Eye-Winker, Tom-Tinker*) did little to indicate the style and range of what was to come, (in Mac Intyre's own words it was an "innocent conventional play" that was "underwritten and misshapen"¹⁷), it did provide him with a space to experiment and two further plays were staged at the Peacock, (*Jack be Nimble* (1976) and *Find the Lady* (1977)) both directed by Patrick Mason.

Following a collaborative venture during his time teaching in the US, *Doobally/Black Way* was staged in Paris by the Calck Hook Dance Theatre before transferring to the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1979. Having become immersed in the work and writings of European and US theatrical

and dance practitioners including Pina Bausch, Jerzy Grotowski, Merce Cunningham and Vesvelod Meyerhold, Mac Intyre brought all these influences into his series of collaborations in the Abbey. By the early 1980s, after seeing in Manhattan "wonderful modern dance and a deal of adventurous theatre in what you would loosely call an imaginistic mode"¹⁸ he had developed "a kind of basic idiom, the constituents being incantatory verbal score, dance, movement, a degree of mime"¹⁹ with which he felt he could tackle Patrick Kavanagh's 1942 poem, *The Great Hunger*, which charts the emotionally stunted life of Patrick Maguire a middle-aged farmer "who made a field his bride."²⁰

Challenging the notion of the romantic, virtuous peasant figure championed by de Valera, Kavanagh's Maguire is sexually repressed, caught between desire and impotence, and metaphorically projected onto an Ireland straddling the gap between materialism and spirituality. Mac Intyre used the poem as a basis for a visual exploration of the male psyche in the changing Ireland of the 1980s as it severed the binds with tradition and moved towards a more European modernism.

According to Mac Intyre, "everybody in Irish Theatre had been asking for decades – 'How the hell would you put *The Great Hunger* on stage?'"²¹ Mac Intyre explained how, during a visit to a Boston gallery, a Pissarro drawing of men and women working in a hayfield produced a "blast from the unconscious"²² which spurred him to write his script for *The Great Hunger* and, expecting to be rejected, he presented the play to Joe Dowling in The Abbey Theatre.

To his great surprise, the play was accepted and from this he teamed up with Mason, and Tom Hickey, who was once accused of acting with “physical bizarreness” and who subscribed to the notion that an actor was “responsible for expressiveness in (his) body and (his) voice and (his) inner instrument”.²³ He was, Mac Intyre was told, the only actor in Ireland capable of performing in such a physical piece. Working primarily with Hickey he began to tease out the script and as Mac Intyre says, “the view of theatre as process was essential to our adventure” and “the development of the script emerged from repeated rehearsal and from repeated playing”²⁴ over the five or so years of the various revivals and tours of *The Great Hunger*. This is very much borne out in copies of the rehearsal script where there are many hand-scribbled notes, suggesting particular moods and images that would be explored in rehearsal. Mac Intyre said that he “got it off the page, by learning as I was putting it on the page” and he wanted to be faithful to what he called the “golden phrases”²⁵ of Kavanagh’s poem. A note at the start of the rehearsal script appears to confirm this:

‘It has not been the aim to put Patrick Kavanagh’s poem on the stage; rather, attending closely to it, to convey theatrically its central themes and supporting motifs. The language of the adaptation is taken exclusively from the poem; the images are either taken from the poem or have evident roots there.’²⁶

The play first opened on the 9th May 1983 with a six strong cast and the opening night audience was presented with a “furrowed and peaty hill-field with an embryonic stone wall and wooden five-barred gate,” whilst downstage left and right were two upright shapes cloaked in sheets which, as the play progressed, were revealed as a tabernacle and a “stolidly massive mother-effigy.”²⁷ For Mac Intyre, there had to be a gate in response to the incantatory lines in the poem, “sitting on a wooden gate, sitting on a wooden gate ...”²⁸ a key “archetypal item of the Irish countryside,”²⁹ as well as other archetypal items such as kettles, buckets and bellows which were to be used throughout in a symbolic manner.

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From the very beginning of the play, when the men came on stage to gather potatoes, carrying spades and metal buckets to the background sounds of girlish laughter, the audience was presented with a series of powerful and moving images as lines from the poem were repeated in an incantatory fashion mixed with “pre-linguistic gasps and grunts”³⁰ and the characters were moved around the stage in a carefully choreographed though sometimes frenzied manner whilst carrying out the mundane tasks of a rural life in methodical movements.

As the play progressed Maguire was depicted as a sexually repressed individual, pulled between the two dominant forces of Mother and Church and tied inexorably to the soil. He was seen performing “guilt-ridden nocturnal masturbations imaged in the fanning of the flames by the spasmodic panting of the bellows”³¹ and was presented as almost school-boyish in his dealings with the girls and women in his life. The mother effigy was the ever-present watchful sentinel with whom Maguire was unable to communicate and he was reduced to lying on the ground banging his feet in an infantile manner. The effigy contained a drawer from which Maguire fetched the bellows and other implements and he was left to communicating with her by dusting and cleaning her face and lap and banging his fists on her breast in frustration.

The local priest, represented as a conjuror/entertainer who does card tricks with a “running commentary of sounds rather than words,” angrily breaks up a fertility-type procession where everyone is waving branches in a “spring moment of release ... (with) a tremendous stir and the music rising in intensity.”³² Later in the piece he marshals the locals into a manic

collection box ritual where they are “seen to be automatons performing acts of acquisition and war under the direction of the church.”³³ Elsewhere, Maguire is depicted as almost childlike in his cavorting and horseplay with the other men, enacting games of pitch-and-toss, “heifer romp,” and “bucket-dance,” firing imaginary missiles with a sling, riding the gate like a horse and guiding an imaginary plough pulled by two of the men in a frantic piece of mime. More and more heart-wrenching and poignant images were presented and towards the end Maguire is dragged towards the corpse of the mother figure and “crying like an animal” he kisses her before he himself is seen moving “about the space with the awkward grace of an animal nosing about for a clean place to die.”³⁴

* * *

From the time that *The Great Hunger* was initially produced until it finished touring in 1988, Ireland went through many social upheavals that might have impinged directly on an audience reaction to the piece. This was the time of demonstrations and rallies, on the subjects of abortion and divorce, of the tragic death of Ann Lovett and the scandal of the Kerry babies. There were religious statues moving and principals of the church having affairs and we now know that there was much clerical abuse in institutions and elsewhere. As Mac Intyre said, “we knew we were playing with central themes of society and psyche”³⁵ and there was an awareness that what was being presented had the potential for a negative and maybe even hostile response.

It is little surprise therefore that, according to Mac Intyre, the opening night was distinguished by a well-known Irish Press journalist “having a fit”³⁶ in response to the play and who, having started shouting, had to be removed from the performance. As *Theatre Ireland* reported, “The audiences were quiet at first, unconfident in their own ability to engage with the unfamiliar form. Then, increasingly, they began to respond – to laugh, nod, gasp, to be stilled.”³⁷ Although the reviews in general were mixed both Fintan O’Toole in the *Sunday Tribune* and Gerry Colgan in *The Irish Times* were, in the main, positive. O’Toole felt that the piece attained “a remarkable clarity and strength,” achieving most of its goals and he said, “with goals as high as Mac Intyre’s, that is a very considerable achievement.”³⁸ Colgan however felt that despite the powerful imagery the piece lacked ‘coherence’ and O’Toole, in agreement, put it down to reluctance on the part of Patrick Mason to “cut off the anchor in naturalism.” O’Toole felt that the production seemed “to lose its nerve at times” and that some of the acting (with Tom Hickey as a notable exception) clashed with the general intention of the piece in that some of the characters were presented as more real than symbolic, “played as full characters, rather than collections of characteristics.”³⁹ This, for Mac Intyre, was a fair and accurate reflection of the opening run of the play, though he did say that by the time of the 1986 revival, “advances had been made in that direction ... and the idiom was by then more communal.” This mixed critical response together with some negative reactions to a mode of theatre new to an Irish audience meant that the initial run had an approximately 30% house. This however was enough to encourage Mac Intyre and the others to “cajole and maneuver the Abbey into a revival.”⁴⁰ As Robert Welch noted, “the production did not achieve its full impact until the revised revival in *The Abbey*”⁴¹ in 1986 before undertaking tours to London, Edinburgh, Paris, New York and as previously mentioned, Russia.

* * *

But, if Mac Intyre's theatre was very often rooted in an Irish sensibility, what specifically were the theatrical influences on his dramaturgical choices and where did these emerge from?

The two major theatrical influences most frequently cited by Mac Intyre in conversations and interviews are Pina Bausch and Jerzy Grotowski.⁴² Yet, when I first came across the work of the Polish practitioner Tadeusz Kantor (1915-1990), I was immediately struck by similarities in their theatrical styles. Kantor was previously unknown to me, and Mac Intyre, in numerous conversations with me about theatre and art, had never mentioned him. The mark of Kantor had been noted by some critics and commentators,⁴³ though only a few, and I couldn't find anywhere that Mac Intyre directly cited Kantor as an influence or discussed having seen his work.

A key figure in European avant-garde theatre, Kantor is best known for his stunningly visual productions, *The Dead Class* and *Wielopole Wielopole*, which toured extensively throughout Europe and the US in the 1970s and 1980s. His theoretical writings, concepts and manifestos such as 'Theatre of Death', 'Theatre of Memory', 'Impossible Theatre', 'Autonomous Theatre' and 'Informel Theatre' have had a noticeable influence on European avant-garde theatre and art.

During a career that stretched from the mid-1930s up to the time of his death, Kantor became, in the words of Michal Kobialka, one of "the twentieth century's most influential theatre practitioners."⁴⁴ As a painter, theatre director, stage designer, actor, writer and theorist, Kantor fused all of these activities into an artistic whole, often informed and defined by fragments of his own history and memories. Like many post-war artists he reacted against the idea of a true representation of reality, and he considered art as a site of disclosure rather than reflection. His theories on the use of space and objects in painting were incorporated into his stage work and his manifestos are a log of the development of his theatrical vision, as well as a record of the artistic and theatrical influences that informed his work. Dadaism, Surrealism and Constructivism, Polish Romanticism, Symbolism and Expressionism, the theatrical work and theories of Antonin Artaud, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Edward Gordon Craig are only a sample of the colours in Kantor's palette.

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For Kantor, conventional theatrical environments and practices worked to support the established order. The function of his theatre was to question, and work against, classical and traditional representation, through the creation of an autonomous form with its own independent existence. This autonomy freed his theatre to take on new forms and allowed it to function in multiple and parallel realities of time and space. Objects within these spaces could function in new and surprising ways, further opening-up the presentation to allow the audience to generate its own meanings. Both texts and performers were treated on the same level as the other theatrical objects in the space, rejecting the privileged status they maintain in traditional theatrical practice. Kantor's theatre dispenses with many of the elements associated with the conventional form. Within his multi-dimensional spaces, plot structures are dismembered and narratives destabilized, imagery and movement are fore-grounded and text decentred, the trivial, the poor and the inane are elevated and the artistic rejected, non-acting and the body of the actor are promoted and characterization is reduced.

Kantor worked with a regular company of actors or performers, many of whom were personal friends and through years of working intensely together, he knew intimately the history and character of each member of the company as well as their abilities and skills. For Kantor, his performers were just one aspect of the production to be combined with all the other elements of text, objects, mannequins and space, to create a performance through a process of suggestion, collaboration and improvisation around a theme that could alter during the process.

Bearing all this in mind, it was not a big stretch to see similarities with Mac Intyre's work and, seeking a subject for my MA thesis, I wondered what a Kantorian perspective could bring to an analysis and understanding of Mac Intyre's theatre and what a reading of a Mac Intyre play through the prism of Kantor's theories and manifestos could unlock from a performative basis. If Mac Intyre has one foot firmly planted in the Irish storytelling tradition, the other danced among the various theorists and practitioners of twentieth century European theatre and the fulcrum of this, at times unsteady dance, seemed to me to be the work of Kantor.

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When asked directly, Mac Intyre said that he would "find it hard to say no" to the question as to whether he had consciously used some of Kantor's dramaturgies in his own work. "I'd call it a direct influence [...] he is very important to me" he says, mentioning at one point that he considered re-setting *The Dead Class* within an Irish context.⁴⁵

Christopher Murray described *The Great Hunger* as "a piece of theatre where text is of less importance than mime, stage properties and use of space."⁴⁶ This quote pointed me in a direction as to a consideration of the body, the use of props and objects and the choice of spatial arrangements, as an appropriate means of exploring the dramaturgical foundations of Mac Intyre's theatre. I set out to examine what space meant in his theatre and how it worked, how the various theatrical objects operated and impacted on that space as well as on the role of the actor, and what that means in terms of both characterization and performance. Kantor's use of, and theories on, each of these three theatrical elements was explored in parallel, with a view to opening-up to an understanding of Mac Intyre's dramaturgical choices within both a Kantorian and a wider European avant-garde perspective. Intersecting with each of these three areas of interest, was an in-depth analysis of three of Mac Intyre's plays: *The Great Hunger*; *Sheep's Milk on the Boil* (1994); and *What Happened Bridgie Cleary* (2005). The analysis was a mix of the performative⁴⁷ and the textual⁴⁸, especially where it pertained to scripted movement, gesture and the use of objects. By looking across a broader perspective, covering twenty years of Mac Intyre's career, the aim was to put some context on how Mac Intyre's theatre had changed and how the Kantorian influence had been adapted, altered or indeed lost as Mac Intyre had to adjust to the Irish theatrical environment within which he operated.

Mac Intyre himself described *Sheep's Milk on the Boil* as "an assault on Synge"⁴⁹ and "a free-for-all folk tale" with a "verbal score of wild crazy colours."⁵⁰ The play uses as its starting point a folk-tale about a man who brings home a mirror, after falling in love with the image he sees within it. In Mac Intyre's play, this provides the platform for an exuberant theatrical exploration of the unconscious, through the troubled relationship of a rural couple, Matt and Biddy, and the wild band of spirit demon figures that enter and toy with their emotions.

Despite its title, *What Happened Bridgie Cleary* is not explicitly about what happened to the eponymous Bridgie. Rather it is about the effects and the consequences of the event and what might happen in an after-world conceived of memory. Bridgie was famously murdered in Tipperary in 1895. Her husband and her extended family were all tried for her murder and it transpired that she had been tortured and burned because they believed that the real Bridgie had been taken by the fairies and a changeling left in her place. In essence, the event may be as much about a society on the cusp of modernity, as about a jealous husband who, fearing her wilfulness and strong sense of self, was resentful of his wife. His jealousy, mixed with the suggestion that she may have been having affairs, and fuelled by superstition, tradition and

a people who “sometimes thrust upon the fairies the guilt for desires and jealousies whose crudities they shrank from facing,”⁵¹ all combined to ignite the fire. It is these aspects of the story, residing in the margins of the accounts of the trial, which Mac Intyre explores. It is a play about regret, guilt, remorse, memory, and the transcendent possibility of true love.

* * *

Like Kantor, Mac Intyre was interested in providing a space for the audience to incorporate their own interpretations. However, unlike Kantor, who often used unconventional ‘found’ spaces, the three Mac Intyre plays under consideration were only performed in conventional theatres. And yet, when viewed from a Kantorian perspective, this opened-up an understanding of Mac Intyre’s use of space as an area of possibility beyond the mimetic. We are not presented with naturalistic settings or easily recognizable iconic spaces. The stage space while representing some space is not necessarily a real location. Thus we have the “*loosely defined, fluid as possible*” (9) space in *The Great Hunger*. In *Sheep’s Milk on the Boil* there is a physical rupturing of the “*primitive abode*” (72) and in *What Happened Bridgie Cleary* the afterlife setting has a significance beyond that of a convenient location for the coming together of Bridgie, her husband and one of her lovers in order to reconcile with the past. In analysing Kantor’s theories on theatrical space I found many parallels with Mac Intyre’s attempted theatrical rejection of the iconic status of the artistic space behind the proscenium. Similarly, events and interactions within the spaces created realms of possibility beyond the mimetic, opening out the space beyond the three dimensional concrete presentation.

Although the spaces in *Sheep’s Milk on the Boil* and *What Happened Bridgie Cleary* may not be as fluid as that in *The Great Hunger*, they still function in multiple dimensions of time and space. They are autonomous spaces of possibility that can be transformed and extended beyond the concrete and into which ‘dead’ characters and situations, from literature, folklore, history or wherever, are brought. Their interaction with the space creates and presents new situations and new conflicts and the characters slip their moorings and confront us anew. Where Kantor used the space to interrogate the memory of his own history, Mac Intyre spatially explores his own psych and unconscious. As he said of *Sheep’s Milk on the Boil*, “[It is] Tom Mac Intyre’s unconscious, don’t have any doubt about that.”⁵²

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The concrete elements that fill the theatrical space can be grouped together under the term ‘objects’ and can consist of: the actor’s bodies; the elements of the stage décor; and the various properties occupying the stage space or brought into the space by the actions of the actors. The mere physical presence of the actor can signify in the same manner as any other stage object and each of the three elements are interchangeable, each impacting directly on the others in such a manner as to render it impossible to define their systems of functioning in any autonomous manner. This interchangeability and interdependence is a crucial aspect of Kantor’s theatre and underpins much of what Mac Intyre presents on stage. In both cases there are also non-concrete or non-physical objects to take into consideration namely space (Kantor considered theatrical space as an object with its own rhythm) and pre-existing texts (such as Mac Intyre’s use of Kavanagh’s text). Kantor treated pre-existing texts he used in his performances as ready-made theatrical objects. A significant difference between Kantor and Mac Intyre was that Kantor had no dramatic text of his own to which he needed to be faithful. He was un-interested in reproducing a pre-existing dramatic text on stage in a conventional manner. Instead he brought into the performances, fragments of various texts, dramatic and otherwise, presenting them as just one part of his theatrical language combined democratically with the other elements and objects. In Kantor’s theatre the text, in whatever form it pre-existed, did not stand above any of the other elements in a scale of importance.

However, as a playwright, Mac Intyre did look to the conventional practice of presenting his own text on stage and excavating its meanings through the interplay between the various theatrical components. Just as Kantor was uninterested in reproducing a pre-existing dramatic text on stage, Mac Intyre was just as uninterested in presenting faithful renditions of pieces of literature or historical events. He was more interested in exploring aspects of the psyche of the characters from these texts and events (as he did with Bridgie Cleary's story), but this was done primarily through the creation of his own poetic text rather than via the created performance. The fundamental difference between the two is that Kantor did his 'grinding' in a performative manner generating a tension within the action of his own production, while on the other hand, Mac Intyre, working within an Irish tradition that valued the written text above all else, created this tension during the development of his own texts. And yet in *The Great Hunger* for example, practically all the text of the play is taken from Kavanagh's poem and most of the imagery also emanates directly from the text. Although he created a dramatic text first, he was doing so from a pre-existing text in much the same manner and with the same objective, as Kantor did.



Tom Mac Intyre
Photograph courtesy of the Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

Mac Intyre inherently understood the potent and poetic power of objects (both physical and non-physical) when used in performance and when incorporated into a text. Just as Kantor imbued them with the power to create holes or containers for the audience to fill with their imagination, Mac Intyre carefully wrote objects into his texts in such a fashion as to allow the similar opening up of these possibilities (as the various objects in *The Great Hunger* do). Mac Intyre's use of a vernacular language, in essence a 'poor' or 'found' speech object, also operates in a similar manner. As Mac Intyre says, a quality actor can make objects "sing and become magic" and the use of the object often alters during rehearsal and performance. The magic was in being open to these possibilities through the process of 'play' among the various objects in the creation of Mac Intyre's performances.

Just as the textual object can be shifted from its privileged central position, the characters as defined by that text can be freed from their literary or mimetic representation. In this destabilization of characterization as part of the performance, the role of the actor becomes less that of playing a psychological, emotive character and more operator of the body instrument or body object on the stage, suggesting a further freeing of the spectator to create his/her own meaning, this time through the actor's body.

It is imperative therefore, in both Kantor's and Mac Intyre's non-mimetic theatre, that these characters be freed from referential discourse, thus freeing the body object to operate on a more democratic footing with the other objects in the theatrical presentation. Despite this shift of character from its central position, the role of the performer as the operator of the body object is still as Pavis suggests, "at the centre of the *mise-en-scène* and tends to be a focal point drawing together the other elements of a production."⁵³ The term performer can be used to distinguish from the actor who undertakes a mimetic representation of a role. Freed from the requirement to represent a character or action mimetically, the performers' objective or function is to stimulate a reaction in the audience rather than simulate an existing reality.

The new relationship created between the actor and the physical objects often meant that the 'characters' were conditioned and influenced by the objects with which they were linked. Kantor often listed 'characters' in his productions in such a way as they became indelibly associated with specific objects: 'A Woman with a Mechanical Cradle', 'An Old Man with a Bicycle' and 'A Woman in a Window' are all character/objects in *The Dead Class*.⁵⁴

Mac Intyre tended to mix archetypes with somewhat more definable characters. Although his archetypal characters are not necessarily described in terms of being associated with particular objects, they often lack proper names, such as 'The Mother', 'The Priest', 'The Schoolgirl' and the 'Young Women' in *The Great Hunger*. In *Sheep's Milk on the Boil*, the mystical figures that invade Matt's and Biddy's house are listed as 'The Visitor', 'The Inspector of Wrack', 'Two Bookkeepers' and 'Local Ghosts' (72). Even the named characters in *The Great Hunger*, Agnes, Tom Malone, Packy and Joe are archetypal peasant individuals of the Irish countryside rather than fleshed out psychological characters and at various stages in the play they abdicate any notion of characterization and become dogs, horses and birds. Maguire himself is also an archetypal individual, though in comparison to the others in the play he displays more complex aspects of characterization, creating a level of empathy in the audience. The use of archetypes provided a space for Mac Intyre to interrogate stereotypes as well as a space for the audience to shift their perception from the particular to the universal.

Kantor continually distorted and ruptured the referential link between the actor and the 'character.' But Mac Intyre, wedded as he was to the language of his plays, could never truly break and only occasionally disrupt this bond. Because of his reliance on performers and directors that were outside his control, many elements of his theatrical vision had to, by necessity, be side-lined. Although through his use of space, texts and objects he displayed many theatrical similarities to Kantor, in the use of the body object of his actors a crucial difference emerges. This comes about both by virtue of the different environments within which they found themselves working and also in terms of their opposite starting points – Kantor as theatrical artist and practitioner, Mac Intyre as poet and playwright.

* * *

While approaching an analysis of Mac Intyre's theatrical practice through the prism of Kantor's work unlocked a greater appreciation of his dramaturgical choices and strategies within a European avant-garde tradition, it also revealed the extent of the gap across which Mac Intyre the playwright had to leap in order to bring his poetic vision to a performative conclusion. Mac Intyre conceded that he had to "make an act of trust" in leaping from the solitariness of the desk to the communal world of theatre and that an open fruitful process of collaboration was necessary for the seeds of his vision to take hold. He may have written with elements of movement, gesture, mime, choreography and the use of objects in mind, but he had to rely to a large degree on the element of 'play' in the rehearsal process for it to take final shape. If this 'play' aspect was absent or of a stilted nature, the vision sometimes became distorted and the resulting performance, however it may be received by audience and critics, was far removed from how it was viewed from the writer's desk.

That *The Great Hunger* came closest in spirit to Kantor is probably as a direct result of his continual collaboration, from its initial production in 1983 to its revival in 1986, with Patrick Mason, Tom Hickey and the others. As that band of collaborators dispersed, with the exception of Hickey, the Kantorian aspects, while possibly still envisioned, were often squeezed out. The nature of collaboration is such that it can work both ways, and while some vestiges of the Kantorian influence remain in both *Sheep's Milk on the Boil* and *What*

Happened Bridgie Cleary, many fell, not just to the floor of the rehearsal room but also to the floor of the study. Whereas much of the movement and use of objects may have been edited out during the rehearsal process for *What Happened Bridgie Cleary*, in *Sheep's Milk on the Boil* much of this editing was done by Mac Intyre himself as he attempted to get the play into production. The play went through many re-writes including an early draft almost totally comprised of movement. Another draft was rejected in a November 1991 letter from the Bush Theatre in London because "its obscurity is not sufficiently resolved" and in a letter from the Field Day Theatre Company in February 1992 it was suggested that a production "would require a resident company, with strong ensemble training in very specific skills, together with innovative choreography and direction, to see this work into production."⁵⁵ In short, what was needed was a company such as the one available to Kantor.

Christopher Murray, writing in 1997, felt that Mac Intyre, "no longer writing wild, inter-textual theatre of image" was being assimilated into the establishment as part of the natural process of the absorption of the avant-garde in Irish theatre.⁵⁶ But it may also be as much about the fact that Mac Intyre was first and foremost a poetic storyteller, but one who, if not a practicing practitioner, has the theatrical vision of one, yet who had to rely on others in order to create that dance. As he said of the period from 1983 to 1988, when the collaborative mode was in full flight, "it was thrilling, it was over [...] magic doesn't stay around for long, it arrives, it goes and if you're saying your prayers to the right powers, you'll be able to bring it back for another adventure."⁵⁷

Now in his late-eighties, that period of fertile collaboration is firmly in the past. Although he returned to The Abbey with *Only an Apple* (2009, directed by Selina Cartmell), it was the last time a Mac Intyre play was produced by the national theatre. None of the 1980s collaborators were involved and the production, while receiving a mixed critical response, would have benefited greatly from a collaborative ensemble that better understood Mac Intyre's vision and theatrical idiom.

In later years Mac Intyre was pushing for an Abbey revival of *The Great Hunger*, "it should be revived" he said and would be "a great opportunity to improve the text". In response to a question as to whether he thought the play had left any legacy he said, possibly reflecting the differences in audience and theatre community responses to the 1986 revival, "I think inside Irish theatre it has left sweet-damn-all legacy ... but in the world of the Irish audience for those who saw it, it is a bench-mark."⁵⁸ Looking back now, I think he was being disingenuous. It would be very interesting indeed to see how a revival of *The Great Hunger* might be received in today's Irish theatrical landscape, much altered from that which he set about to disrupt.

In conclusion, Phildy Reddin's warning to Bridgie Cleary, "Tek care, Bridgie, tek care the minit passin' – an' not returnin'" (99), can be taken, as well as a reference to the ephemeral nature of performance, as a nod to Mac Intyre's understanding that the key 'minit' of the 1980s, was indeed grasped by him with both hands, leaving a legacy that, to my mind, was instrumental in the development of Irish theatre during the 1970s and 1980s.

Notes

- 1 Fiach Mac Conghail, 'Tom Mac Intyre in Conversation with Fiach Mac Conghail', in *Theatre Talk – Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners*, ed. by Lilian Chambers, Ger Fitzgibbon and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2001), pp. 308-317 (p. 309).
- 2 Tom Mc Intyre, Personal Interview, Cavan, 22nd November 2007.
- 3 Patrick Mason quoted in Deirdre Mulrooney, 'Tom Mac Intyre's Text-ure', in *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*, ed. by Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000), pp. 185-193 (p. 188).
- 4 Fiach Mac Conghail, p. 312
- 5 Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), p. 233.
- 6 Mac Conghail, p. 314.
- 7 Frank Mc Guinness, 'Introduction', *The Dazzling Dark: New Irish Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. xi.
- 8 *Irish Independent* 10/2/88.
- 9 Seamus Hosey, "The Abbey in Russia", *Theatre Ireland Magazine*/15 (May/August) 1988, pp 14-17 (p. 15).
- 10 *Irish Times* 11/2/88
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 *Irish Times* 12/2/88
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 *Irish Times* 13/2/88
- 17 Tom Mc Intyre, Personal Interview, Cavan, 13th February 2006.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Mac Conghail, p. 311.
- 20 Patrick Kavanagh, "The Great Hunger" in "*Selected Poems*". London: Penguin Books, 1996, p. 20
- 21 Tom Mc Intyre, Personal Interview, Cavan, 13th February 2006.
- 22 Mac Conghail, p. 311.
- 23 Liz Heade. Interview with Tom Hickey in *Theatre Ireland Magazine*/3 (June/September 1983), pp 125-127 (p. 126).
- 24 Tom Mc Intyre, Personal Interview, Cavan, 13th February 2006.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Tom Mac Intyre. Personal Papers, NLI Ms. 33,560/8, p1 "*The Great Hunger*", Rehearsal Script
- 27 *Theatre Ireland Magazine*/3 (June/September 1983), review of "*The Great Hunger*", pp 130-131 (p. 130)
- 28 Patrick Kavanagh, "The Great Hunger" in "*Selected Poems*". London: Penguin Books, 1996, p. 29
- 29 Tom Mc Intyre, Personal Interview, Cavan, 13th February 2006.
- 30 *Theatre Ireland Magazine*/3 (June/September 1983), review of "*The Great Hunger*", pp 130-131 (p. 131)
- 31 *Theatre Ireland Magazine*/3 (June/September 1983), review of "*The Great Hunger*", pp 130-131
- 32 Tom Mac Intyre, "*The Great Hunger/The Gallant John-Joe*". Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2002, pp 18-20
- 33 *Theatre Ireland Magazine*/3 (June/September 1983), review of "*The Great Hunger*", pp 130-131 (p. 131)
- 34 Tom Mac Intyre, "*The Great Hunger/The Gallant John-Joe*". Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2002, pp 49-52
- 35 Tom Mc Intyre, Personal Interview, Cavan, 13th February 2006.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 *Theatre Ireland Magazine*/3 (June/September 1983), review of "*The Great Hunger*", pp 130-131 (p. 131)
- 38 Fintan O'Toole, p. 21.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Tom Mc Intyre, Personal Interview, Cavan, 13th February 2006
- 41 Robert Welsh, "*The Abbey Theatre 1899-1999*". Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp 214.
- 42 For example, Fiach Mac Conghail in *Theatre Talk* and Tom Mac Intyre interview with Mick Heaney, 'Keeping Sight of his Goals', *Sunday Times*, 24 April 2005, pp. 16-17.

- 43 For Deirdre Mulrooney, Mac Intyre's theatre contains some of the "stringent aesthetics espoused by the like of Grotowski and Kantor." Deirdre Mulrooney, 'Tom Mac Intyre's Text-ure' p. 188. An American reviewer also noted, "In its theatrical style, *The Great Hunger* resembles the theatrical pieces of Tadeusz Kantor and the Cricot 2 Theatre of Poland, particularly in Kantor's most autobiographical piece *Wielopole*." Joel G. Fink, 'Review of *The Great Hunger*' in *Theatre Journal*, 40, 4 (1988), 550-552. Tom Hickey has also noted that Mac Intyre saw some of Kantor's touring productions whilst living in the US. Tom Hickey quoted in Deirdre Mulrooney, *Irish Moves: An Illustrated History of Dance and Physical Theatre in Ireland* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2006), p.185.
- 44 Michal Kobialka, 'Preface', to *A Journey Through Other Spaces: Essays and Manifestos, 1944-1990*, Tadeusz Kantor, ed. by Michal Kobialka (California: University of California Press, 1993), pp. xv-xxi (p. xv).
- 45 Tom Mac Intyre, Personal Interview 22nd November 2007.
- 46 Christopher Murray, p. 232.
- 47 Performance analysis was based on the recorded performances of the Abbey Theatre productions of each of the three plays, as well on a personal viewing of *What Happened Bridgie Cleary* during its touring run.
- 48 Each of the three plays under consideration is published in book form and these, together with earlier drafts of the first two stored with Mac Intyre's personal papers in the National Library of Ireland, provided a basis for the textual analysis. Quotes from the plays are referenced throughout by page numbers from these sources: Tom Mac Intyre, *The Great Hunger/The Gallant John-Joe* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, (2002); Tom Mac Intyre, "Sheep's Milk on the Boil" in *New Plays from the Abbey Theatre 1993-1995* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), pp. 71-110; Tom Mac Intyre, *What Happened Bridgie Cleary* (Dublin: New Island, 2005).
- 49 Tom Mac Intyre, Personal Interview, 22/11/07.
- 50 Fiach Mac Conghail, p. 314.
- 51 Hubert Butler, *Escape from the Anthill* (Mullingar: The Lilliput Press, 1985), p.65.
- 52 Mac Conghail, p. 314.
- 53 Patrice Pavis, *Analyzing Performance: Theatre, Dance and Film* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 55.
- 54 List of characters taken from the programme of the first night of *The Dead Class* on the 15th November 1975 at the Krzysztofory Gallery in Kraków, Poland.
- 55 NLI, MS, 33,560/24 (ii), [no page number]. Many of the other drafts are contained in the National Library collection: MS, 33,560/20/1-5; MS, 36,099/7/1-2; MS, 36/073/6/1-2; MS, 33,560/27.
- 56 Murray, p. 238.
- 57 Mac Conghail, p. 313.
- 58 Tom Mc Intyre, Personal Interview, Cavan, 13th February 2006



Bio: John Mc Evoy

John Mc Evoy owned and managed the award winning Crannóg Bookshop in Cavan town for twenty years before its closure in 2017. He holds a Diploma in Theatre and Drama from NUI Maynooth (2006) and a Master's Degree in Drama and Performance Studies from University College Dublin (2007). He currently works in Marketing and Development with Druid Theatre Company in Galway.

Essay: “‘With Hope of a Better Life’: Jaki McCarrick’s *Belfast Girls*”

by Charlotte Headrick



Belfast Girls

Tiffany Groben, Brenan Dwyer,
Anya Pearson, Summer Olsson and
Hannah Edelson.

Photo Adam Liberman. Corrib
Theatre, Portland, Oregon 2017.

“History is not about dates, and quotes, and obscure provisos. History is about life, about change, about consequences, cause and effect. It’s about the mystery of human nature, the mystery of time. And isn’t just about politics and the military and social issues, which is almost always the way it’s taught. It’s about music, and poetry, and drama, and science, and medicine, and money, and love.”
Historian David McCullough.

Jaki McCarrick’s work illustrates David McCullough’s words. In her plays, history comes to life. This is especially true of her *Belfast Girls*. She has said that inspiration for her work varies. The empty shop for her *The Naturalists*. For *Leopoldville*, it was images of a gang of young men. For *Belfast Girls*, she has said she “was exploring a theme—women and Famine.”*

Born in London, McCarrick moved to Dundalk, Ireland when her mother inherited a family home. In her early twenties she went to Middlesex University to study dance and drama. At the same time she was at Middlesex, she was studying at the Lee Strasberg Institute (one of her teachers was my friend, the late Don Fellows.) She was an actress, once playing *Lady Macbeth* in a production that transferred to the Lyric Hammersmith. Her first play *The Mushroom Pickers* was read on the stage at the Old Vic. She then completed her MPhil in Creative Writing at Trinity College, Dublin, after moving back to Ireland where she now lives. McCarrick’s work spans many genres from novels, plays, poetry, and dramatic criticism.



Belfast Girls

Anya Pearson and Brenan Dwyer.

Photo Adam Liberman. Corrib Theatre, Portland, Oregon 2017.

It was her dramatic criticism that led me to *Belfast Girls* which is her most widely produced play. In 2015, she wrote an astute review of *Irish Women Dramatists: 1908-2001* (Syracuse University Press, 2014, 2016) for the *Times Literary Supplement*. This book was co-edited by Eileen Kearney and me. So impressed with what McCarrick had written in the review, I tracked her down through a production of *Belfast Girls*. This was the American Premiere of the play produced by Artemisia Theatre in Chicago. Through that company and Julie Proudfoot, the director, I found her email because I wanted to write to thank her for the review. Knowing my work through my book, she suggested that I might be interested in *Belfast Girls*. She sent me a copy and upon reading the play, I knew it was a perfect fit for Corrib Theatre, Portland, Oregon's Irish theatre company. Since I am on Corrib's Resource Council, I recommended it to Gemma Whelan, artistic director of Corrib. She had an equally strong reaction to the play and directed the U. S. West Coast premiere of the play in the fall of 2017. (It should be noted that in March, 2017, Peninsula Productions in Vancouver, B.C. produced *Belfast Girls*, the Canadian, North American premiere of the play directed by Wendy Bollard. Since Vancouver is also on the West Coast, it might be argued that Peninsula deserves the kudos for the "West Coast Premiere.") Whelan has a strong commitment to women centered theatre; in an interview she commented,

I was moved by this play, because it depicted a group of high-spirited women who come to realize that the powers-that-be in their country have spat them out; it resonated with recent events in Ireland and the U.S., such as the financial collapse, which bailed out big banks and corporations, while scapegoating the less powerful. It continues to have resonance in the daily news as the U.S. powers-that-be attempt to shape immigration laws that reject certain "undesirable" applicants, and privilege others. (<https://www.broadwayworld.com/portland/article/BELFAST-GIRLS-Begins-117-at-Corrib-Theatre-20171025>)

Because I admired McCarrick's play so much, I volunteered to be the dramaturg for the production. With this admission and my work as a dramaturg for Corrib, obviously my academic distance could be suspect. Because I have directed numerous Irish plays by women, I was drawn to the strong characters in *Belfast Girls* and I recognized the excellent writing in McCarrick's play. In some ways it reminds me of Patricia Burke Brogan's *Eclipsed* which I directed in 1999. *Eclipsed*, like *Belfast Girls* happens in an enclosed space, the Magdalene Laundry of *Eclipsed* and the contained space of the *Inchinnan*, the ship bound for Australia. Both plays have remarkable and diverse characters.

I am not alone in my admiration for McCarrick's work. She has won numerous awards for her writing. *Leopoldville* won the 2010 Papatango Prize for New Writing. *Belfast Girls* was short listed for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize in 2012 and won the 2014 BBC Tony Doyle Award. The Susan Smith Blackburn Prize goes to the best play by a woman in the English language, and it is a real honor to be short listed. Her volume of short stories *The Scattering* was short listed for the Edge Hill Prize.

The title of this essay was taken from Judy Nedry's review of the Corrib production "Belfast Girls Share Hopes for a Better Life." In her positive review of the play, she writes, "The girls who volunteered for relocation, and made it onto the ships were able-bodied dreamers willing to work themselves into a better life. But they were also upper-crust Ireland's undesirables—particularly the "Belfast girls" who made their living on the streets in the world's oldest profession." (<https://judynedry.com/belfast-girls/>)

As noted, Jaki McCarrick's 2015 *Belfast Girls* draws on Irish history for its inspiration. Although she is Irish and knows Irish history, McCarrick writes of how she was surprised to discover the story of the Earl Grey Scheme which was created for famine relief. The idea of the scheme was to send young, able-bodied women from the workhouses and poorhouses to Australia where the populace was "male heavy." These were not convict transport ships nor were they the "coffin" ships of the famine years. Earl Grey was Secretary of State for the Colonies during the time of the Famine. (The famous tea was named for Charles, not for Henry, his son, the Earl Grey of this story). The Earl Grey Famine Orphan Scheme operated from 1848-1850. Around four thousand young women were transported to Australia landing in the cities of Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide.



Belfast Girls

Hannah Edelson, Brenan Dwyer,
Tiffany Groben and Summer
Olsson.

*Photo Adam Liberman. Corrib
Theatre, Portland, Oregon 2017.*



Belfast Girls

Tiffany Groben, Summer Olsson,
Brenan Dwyer, Hannah Edelson
and Anya Pearson.

*Photo Adam Liberman. Corrib
Theatre, Portland, Oregon 2017.*

As we discover in the play, these women were desperate to leave Ireland, to escape the scourge of famine and death that surrounded the land. The Irish Famine, more commonly known in Ireland as the Great Hunger, the literal translation of the Irish “An Gorta Mor.” In 1845 the potato crop had failed and this failure lasted until 1852; the Irish people were plunged into starvation. Although there was food in the land, it was exported to London and abroad leaving the Irish to a sad fate. The Great Hunger was a time of starvation, disease, and emigration. Although the potato crop failed all over Europe, it was especially hard in Ireland where so many were tied to this one crop. Estimates are that a million died and another million left the country. Some historians believe, that to this day, the population of Ireland has never recovered from these losses.

During this period, the Catholic populace of the island was particularly ill-treated by the Protestant Ascendancy. Irish peasant farmers worked the estates of absentee Protestant landlords. To clarify, the famine was no respecter of persons. Protestants also suffered and died, but the enmity between the Catholics and the Protestants especially in the north of Ireland was especially fierce.

All of these facts color the historical world of McCarrick's play. These women have endured hardship whether they are Sligo country girls or Belfast streetwise city girls. In order for a chance at a better life, they have done what they had to do—lied, disguised, fought their way on board the ship *Inchinnan*, with the hope for a better life in Australia. Dennis Sparks reviewed the Corrib production thus:

McCarrick has written a powerful play of the endurance of the human spirit. For all these people's failings a greater good would emerge. Whelan has beautifully balanced the wide stage in her blocking of the actors and has modulated the emotions of them to get the best impact of their situation. Likewise, the set, stark with a long playing area (Lara Klingeman) and lighting (Anthony Arnista), as well as music, does much to compliment that action and story. And the whole cast is first-rate, one of the best ensembles I've seen! (<http://dennissparksreviews.blogspot.com/2017/11/belfast-girls-corrib-theatre-se-portland.html>)

As the play unfolds, we discover the individual reasons each woman has found their way onto the ship. And one of them has a much darker reason for finding her way bound for Australia. As these women talk, discuss, argue on the ship, prejudice raises its ugly head and some of the women turn vicious. One of the characters in McCarrick's play is a Protestant, starving like the rest, who has taken the identity of her deceased maid in order to secure a place on the ship. One of them is black, daughter of a Jamaican seaman. Krista Garver in her review of Corrib's production writes,

Who were these women? BELFAST GIRLS gives us a variety. Judith Noon (Anya Pearson) was born in Jamaica and adopted by an Irish couple. As the eldest, she becomes the leader/mother to the younger girls with whom she shares a cabin. Hannah Gibney (Summer Olsson) was sold by her father for the price of alcohol, while Ellen Clarke (Brenan Dwyer) and Sarah Jane Wylie (Hannah Edelson) both lost children. None of them were strangers to the street. Molly Durcan (Tiffany Groben) is decidedly different - she's not from Belfast, and her suitcase is full of books by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. While Hannah dreams of marrying a rich English man, Molly is seeking freedom for women and a life on the stage. And they all have secrets. Over the course of the play, these secrets come out, threatening their fantasies of the lives they will live when they get to Australia. (<https://www.broadwayworld.com/portland/article/BWW-Review-Corrib-Theatre-BELFAST-GIRLS-is-Full-of-Fascinating-History-Could-Use-More-Emotion-20171121>)

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Belfast Girls

Anya Pearson and Tiffany Groben.

Photo Adam Liberman. Corrib Theatre, Portland, Oregon 2017.

Jaki McCarrick was able to visit and see the Corrib production; we chatted after the performance and I was so impressed with her admiration for directors commenting on the different actor and director interpretations of the ending. She did not say that one was better than another, but that she was impressed with the variety of choices these artists found in her words.

David McCullough writes that history is drama. In the case of *Belfast Girls*, Jaki McCarrick has reclaimed a lost piece of women's history and turned it into a piece of drama that tells that piece of history. In reviewing the production history of this play, the majority of the productions have been directed by women. The Ghostlight production in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania was directed by a man with a woman associate director. Two productions are slated for London, one by Lipstick Theatre (Amy Matthews) and one for the Trafalgar Studios in

the West End (director is Tilly Vosburgh). In August of 2019, there will be a production at Queanbeyan Performing Arts Centre in Queanbeyan, Canberra, Australia, by Echo Theatre Company, directed by Jordan Best. The European premiere of *Belfast Girls* opens in Stockholm, Sweden on 5 November, and will be in Swedish by Batalj Scenkost. McCarrick tells me that there was a well-received college production by Cottey College in Missouri directed by Laura Chaney. In addition there was a March, 2018 Kansas City, Missouri production by Fishtank Theatre directed by Heidi Van. Women directors are drawn to McCarrick's strong women-centered play. She has written a play about lost history and these directors are sharing that history through these many productions. Not only are they sharing the history, but they are also telling McCarrick's creative reimagining of the stories of Judith, Molly, Hannah, Ellen, and Sarah, the Belfast Girls.

*For research on this essay, I am indebted to two interviews with McCarrick: Samuel French's *Breaking Character Magazine* and *Aurora Metro Books*.



Bio: Charlotte J. Headrick

Charlotte J. Headrick is a Professor Emerita of Theatre Arts at Oregon State University where she is a recipient of the Elizabeth P. Ritchie Distinguished Professor Award for Undergraduate Teaching, the CLA Excellence Award, and The Warren Hovland Service Award. She is the recipient of the Kennedy Center/American College Theater Festival Kennedy Medallion for her service to the Northwest Region. A former Moore Visiting Scholar at the National University of Ireland, Galway, she is the co-editor of *Irish Women Dramatists: 1908-2001*, Syracuse University Press. A member of Actors Equity, she has directed and acted in over one hundred plays all over the United States and in Turkey. She is widely published in the area of Irish Drama.

Interview: Adrienne Leavy in conversation with Jaki McCarrick



Jaki McCarrick

Photo courtesy of Bobbie Hanvey.

A.L. Let's start with a question about your background growing up. When you were twelve years old your family left London for the Irish border town of Dundalk, in County Louth. Was it a difficult transition at that age to make the adjustment from living in a large English city like London to a small town in Ireland?

J.McC. Yes, for me it was very difficult as I recall. It seemed to be easier for my siblings, who were younger. I was old enough to be sensitive to the differences between the two places, plus I left behind school friends in London. I remember when we left London there were punks on the streets of Gospel Oak where we lived. I thought they were amazing, so colourful. It was a hot and bright summer, too. Then we arrived in Dundalk (which was a much greyer, more dour place than it is today) and the vibe in the streets was entirely different. We lived close to a church in Dundalk (The Friary) and there was one priest who walked around with a cane, donning long dark robes. People were deferential to him and bowed their heads as they passed. I'd never seen that kind of thing before. So, when people ask me what was it like to have come from London to Dundalk in the late-70s, I usually reply by saying that it was like going from light to darkness. It was a very shocking experience to my young self, just beginning to develop.

It took a while to accept my new home. I did, eventually, because, one, I had to, I was twelve years old, after all, and not going anywhere else; and two – because I discovered the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh. There's a line in Kavanagh's poem "Kerr's Ass": "we borrowed the loan of Kerr's ass / To go to Dundalk with butter, ...". The fact that the name of the town we had moved to appeared in a poem in a book, made me realise that art (and life) can happen anywhere, and that if Dundalk was good enough for a Kavanagh poem it was good enough for me. Also, Kavanagh's many references to Iniskeen, which is a few miles up the road from Dundalk, really helped locate me. Suddenly I was in a place that poems were written about, and this Kavanagh fellow was like my compass. I settled in fast then. I have always felt indebted to Kavanagh for that.

A.L. You grew up at the height of “The Troubles,” and in your introduction to your first play, *The Mushroom Pickers* (which won the 2005 SCDA Playwriting Award), you describe how living so close to the border between Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland had a huge influence on your imagination. Eugene McCabe’s work is also preoccupied with the dramatic potential of border life. Could expand a little on how this influenced your aesthetic?

J.McC. Perhaps because I’d arrived from London I seemed particularly alert to the presence of the border. It intrigued me. Especially the fact that at several points around North Louth, or Monaghan/South Armagh, you might be in the UK for a few minutes then back in the Republic. The presence of checkpoints, customs, and the entire infrastructure, helicopters, police and soldiers etc, especially those on the Newry Road, were quite something to live with and see on a regular basis. It meant that Dundalk, for instance, felt like an “end point”, a buttress, rather than the free-flowing gateway town that it is today.

The presence of a physical border impinges on one’s sense of identity, too, in that you can be in “the South”, physically, but face to face with the British Army (at the Newry Road checkpoint anyway) – which was a regular occurrence for those of us growing up in border areas in the 1980s. Checkpoints were “expected” in the North, but we were in the Republic, yet had this permanent British infrastructure staring in on us. There were the British Army watchtowers at Forkhill, too, which could be seen looming over Dundalk. And in Bessbrook, in South Armagh, there was a heliport, rumoured to have been the busiest in Europe, which meant constant helicopter activity. The border also robbed Dundalk of its true geographical identity – which is not “South”, it’s Northeast, hence it created all sorts of language confusions, too.

I remember cycling once from Dundalk to Crossmaglen, Armagh, and going into a shop. When I came out there was an army manoeuvre going on in the streets, which was scary. I also had friends who regularly saw soldiers in their back gardens as the army would infringe a little further south than it ought to have done. Plus the social fabric of my growing up in Dundalk was littered with references to the Troubles. “So and so” was in the IRA, “so and so” was in jail for smuggling etc; I also had friends whose families had moved to Dundalk during the pogroms in the North (which occurred as close as County Down). Hence, I’ve always been interested in this line between two fairly distinct states, what it means etc. I’ve often thought a part of this interest is also because the border sort of reflects my own “split identity”;

I am both a citizen of the UK and Ireland – a bit London as well as Irish. I was exempt from Irish language at school, for instance, and in some ways I don’t feel entirely “Irish”, whatever that means.

A.L. You started your career as a music journalist in London after graduating from Trinity College, Dublin, with a master’s degree in Philosophy and Creative Writing. When did you first get a sense that you wanted to be a writer?

J. McC. Actually it was the other way round. I got a place at Trinity to study English but went to London instead and shortly afterwards got a job writing for a music magazine. Later, after my degree in Performing Arts at Middlesex University, I went back to Trinity to study for my MPhil.

I had always written. At school (even in my school in London), I’d won prizes for writing – essays, stories, poems etc. I always wanted to write. When I was 15 I joined a band (in Dundalk), and brought my writing interest to song writing. I loved the music of the whole post-punk era, so when I left school I wanted to work in music journalism which is what I did. (My next novel, *Muso*, is influenced by this period of my life.) What I didn’t know was how to make my writing “art” – other than in song writing. That took time, and it really was only after several years working in theatre (where I had acted, directed and choreographed) – that I began to write my own plays, often with a movement, devised element, too.

A.L. In contrast to many playwrights, you also write fiction and poetry. Is there a particular genre or form that you prefer?

J. McC. This changes all the time. I love poetry for its ability to concentrate the mind. To work on a line in a poem is to be absolutely forensic with language. I often start my writing day with poetry work. But I’ve been slow to bring out a collection and hope to do so soon.

Fiction I find quite meditative and certainly the most enjoyable of the forms. Plays are hard work and are very intense entities, close to poetry.

I think the idea determines the form, and some ideas cross forms – like my short story “The Congo” which I also wrote as a play.

A.L. In a previous interview you mentioned both Edward Bond and Sam Shepard as two dramatists who you admire. Do you think their work has influenced how you write and if so in what manner?

J.McC. Edward Bond has been a big influence, particularly on my plays *Leopoldville* and *Belfast Girls* (and some newer work), especially as I came to read more of his critical writings. Bond is a pretty uncompromising writer and there's a fierce political underpinning to all of his plays. I admire this immensely, and am sure it has rubbed off on my own work. For instance, Bond believes that what happens at the top of society - war, imperialism etc - will show itself in violence on the streets, and that you can't wage war elsewhere and expect your own streets not to have crime. These things are connected, he claims, and I agree with this.

I love Sam Shepard's work too though am not sure how much this has influenced my plays - perhaps *The Naturalists*, which some audience members have compared to Shepard's work. The main thing I adore about Shepard is his aesthetic. Many of his plays were slammed by critics (especially in the UK) but he didn't care - or that's how it seemed anyway. He wrote his stories his way, with his ideas and politics, and carried on regardless. Shepard never plays to the gallery, nor does Bond. They have a very insulated "take it or leave it" quality which I admire. Similarly, I just want to be able to put out my work, whether it fails or not. Failure is not even something I care about; the piece, whatever it is, is something I will have made a contract with, to finish, to create as best I can and that's it. I'm very "process orientated". Afterwards, what anyone thinks, critics included, does not matter that much to me.

A.L. Are there specific Irish playwrights whose work influenced you?

J.McC. I love the work of Tom Murphy. I think Murphy's sensibility is European rather than a part of "the Irish thing"; he often cited Genet as an influence and liked the idea of "ritual" in theatre, and I also love this. *Whistle in the Dark* is a play I saw at a young age at the Royal Court. One of my first published pieces is a letter to The Irish Post defending this play, which a lot of folks in London were slagging off (mostly other Irish people in London who did not want to see Murphy's version of Ireland on a British stage). The shape of his play, with its murderous climax, is also the shape of *Leopoldville*. So, Murphy I think is a definite influence; in particular his sense of detachment from the Irish scene, his following his own course etc.

I also like Yeats' plays. *At the Hawk's Well* is a beautiful piece. I was once asked to adapt it but the project did not happen (perhaps I will look at this in the future). Of course Beckett, too, is a great love. I've previously adapted a modern dance adaptation of Beckett's *Quad* and loved its mathematical and architectural precision. There are specific Irish plays I like such as Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* and Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman*. I also really love Synge. I once read all of Synge's plays back-to-back and found the work flawless, not a word out of place - Beckett loved Synge also. Synge is such a perfect playwright in that he brilliantly combines precision with emotion and depth - and that's a difficult feat.

A.L. When you first start writing a play, are the characters and the structure of the play already formed in your imagination?

J.McC. Usually, yes. To put pen to paper at all I really have to be passionate about an idea. Once I have that I am quite obsessive and will read and research a lot, allowing the world of the idea to fill my imagination and soon characters will come. As soon as they do I find their voices quickly and I try to have a first draft quickly, too, - just so the piece, overall, has the same "tune" throughout. Though I might write close to a hundred drafts after that. In terms of structure, with each work I seem to want to be more daring than in the last project, perhaps to satisfy my sense of experiment. I would like to write a verse play next for instance.

A.L. What theatrical traditions are you most interested in?

J.McC. Increasingly I am less interested in "traditions" though I have studied many of these. I loved Graham Technique in dance, and Contact Improvisation; in terms of acting I still adore The Method and all the techniques closely affiliated to this. I increasingly like to see what I call "hyper reality" on stage. I've trained in all sorts of visual, stylised, movement-based techniques - I adore Peter Brook and Brecht and Artaudian Spectacle and all forms of contemporary dance and have even taught these - but of late I've gone the other way, towards a more American, Method-inclined interest, chasing after the truth of the scene and situation rather than what it looks like, visually. I find this kind of work more honest. The company who staged my play *The Naturalists* in New York in September (The Pond Theatre Company) were trained in a really interesting technique, connected to the Barrow Group Theatre in New York. The actors inhabited my material so brilliantly, and sometimes took their time, overlapped lines, which I did not mind at all. Their truthful performances were just amazing to watch.

A.L. Your play, *Leopoldville*, which won the 2010 Papatango New Writing Prize, is based your short story “The Congo.” Did you intend to turn this story into a play when you began writing it or did this decision evolve with time?

J.McC. The only reason I developed “The Congo” further, into a play etc, is because the characters would not leave my head. I kept thinking about them. I would look at people in Dundalk and wonder if they were a more grown-up Devlin or Mansfield (characters in the play). So I knew I was not done with these dark characters, and that I had to return to the distressing world of The Congo Bar.

A.L. *Belfast Girls*, which was developed at the National Theatre Studio, London, and was short listed for the 2012 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize and the 2014 BBC Tony Doyle Award, deals with an aspect of the Great Famine that has received very little scholarly attention. What drew you to write a play about Irish emigrant girls who were sent to Australia as a way of effectively getting rid of those women deemed undesirable or unworthy of assistance at home?

J. McC. The answer to this question is quite long!

At the beginning of 2010 my play *Leopoldville* won the Papatango New Writing Prize. The cast of *Leopoldville* is all male (five young men, one older male) –and in 2009 I was already beginning to think about writing something that would be the converse of this work: an all female play. I did not have a story at this stage but knew I wanted to write something for and about women, preferably a group of feisty women – almost as a riposte or some kind of balance to *Leopoldville*.

Back in Ireland, after the London production of *Leopoldville*, I began to notice the terrible effects of Austerity. People seemed to be leaving the country in droves – as I had done myself in the 1980s – but this time they were heading further afield, to Canada and Australia rather than to London. The now infamous ‘Guarantee’ made by Brian Lenihan and Brian Cowen, which guaranteed the bondholders who’d invested in Anglo Irish Bank (many of whom were themselves banks, or billionaire investors from abroad), and the subsequent calling in of the IMF and ECB, and the ensuing bailout arrangements, simply drove me to distraction! I could not believe that elected leaders would so openly sabotage the lives of a populace – and be so readily prepared to drain the country of its money for a guarantee arrangement that has since been deemed by Germany as

“unnecessary”. I began to think of the Famine – and noted that the effects of the bondholder payments and subsequent Austerity measures were being compared to the politics of the Famine period by economists such as Michael Lewis (for Vanity Fair) and Professor Morgan Kelly etc. Every day, the Liveline programme on RTE Radio One seemed to be full of accounts of evictions with historical comparisons to the Famine being made. I realised then that in Ireland, in 2009, the Famine, once again, held a prominent place in the public consciousness.

I began to wonder if any of my own ancestors had had to leave Ireland during the Famine. I Googled ‘McCarrick’ and ‘the Famine’, surfed the net for a while, and chanced upon a register of young females leaving for Australia in 1850. One of the names was Nora McCarrick, from Easkey, Sligo. I became excited. I read more, and discovered that over 4,000 young females had left Ireland between 1848 and 1851 as part of a scheme called the Orphan Emigration scheme, established by Earl Grey. It was a chapter of Irish history I knew nothing about. At the time there seemed to be little information on the internet about such an important event (there is a lot more now etc, and more recently, documentaries have been made, novels and other plays written), so I read what books I could find on the subject, including Robert Hughes’ *The Fatal Shore*, Thomas Kennelly’s *History of Australia*, Trevor McClaughlin’s *Barefoot and Pregnant? Irish Famine Orphans in Australia, Irish Women and Irish Migration* edited by Patrick O’Sullivan. In my reading of these books and articles, I discovered that a particular group of ‘orphans’ were considered to have been especially feisty and colourful, known for their use of obscene language and riotous behaviour. These were known as ‘the Belfast girls’. Right there I sensed the makings of the story I’d been looking for.

Along the way came contributions that were fortuitous. For instance, my meeting with a Cavan schoolteacher who told me that in her home-town, local myth has it that, with reference to the Orphan Emigration Scheme, the Catholic Church colluded with the workhouses to purge her particular Cavan community of prostitutes and “fallen” women. Again, I became angry listening to this woman’s story. I could not believe that the *morality* of women might be something to consider during a Famine! Further reading confirmed the veracity of this “local story” – backed up in various essays in *Famine, Land and Culture in Ireland*, edited by Carla King. A fascinating fact also emerges in Liam Kennedy’s essay, “Bastardy and the Great Famine”: that, during

the Famine, in some parts of Ireland such as Monaghan – the so-called “bastardy” (illegitimacy) rates actually shoot up, often by as much as 180%. Kennedy writes

It was certainly the case that some unmarried mothers, including prostitutes, made use of the new poor-law system as a means of survival. It was said of the Lurgan workhouse: ‘The house appears to be a most convenient place of accommodation for the cure of disease, and delivery of illegitimate children; and the facility of going in and going out, has very considerably increased the number of unfortunate females, who live by the wages of sin in the populous parts of the union.’

During the Famine years, then, women’s bodies became their one reliable currency – for rent paying and otherwise. Often marriages were cancelled – either because the grooms-to-be had emigrated – or because those men who were left behind could have their pick of wives. Many women had children outside of marriage, some committed suicide or/and infanticide. After getting a sense of how the entire social fabric of Irish life had been damaged by the Famine, I also realised that my play could tell the story of the Famine years from a purely feminine perspective – a perspective that had not previously been taken in Famine fiction or Theatre – and that in many ways, the more I explored and read, the more I realised that to a huge extent the Famine is very much a female/feminine story.

By now it was clear to me that the Earl Grey Scheme had been abused by many: by the Church and workhouses who quite probably colluded – at least to some extent – to get as many “unwanted” women out of Ireland as they could; that the Earl Grey himself and the Victorian British administration capitalised on the Famine environment in Ireland to enrich Australia with female servants and workers etc – and that here and there the women themselves abused the scheme, in order to seek a way out of Famine-ravaged Ireland. Though most of the orphan girls were exactly who they said they were, and were supposed to have been, the ones I was interested in were at the bottom of that pile: the Belfast Girls.

A.L. Did you read Eugene McCabe’s four-part monologue *Tales from the Poorhouse* as part of your research on *Belfast Girls*?

J.McC. No, actually, I haven’t read this monologue, but I will now!

A.L. The effects of the 2008 financial crash and its aftermath on ordinary people are recurrent themes in your work. *Belfast Girls* could arguably be read as an allegory for the Irish government’s mis-management of the economy after the collapse of the Celtic Tiger. Would you agree?

J.McC. *Leopoldville* is set in the recession of the 1980s and partly explores the effect of a long recession on young men and their dashed hopes. *Belfast Girls* is partly an allegory, yes. I wanted to tell a story that worked in its own right but that also spoke to the audience of today. I was very angry at the mismanagement of the country, and the haemorrhaging of people through emigration while funds were leaving the country to bondholders, so this absolutely finds a way into the script.

A.L. To what extent do you view the interaction between the writer, director and actors as a collaborative process? In other words do you arrive at the first rehearsal with a fully realized vision of how you want the play to be staged and performed (as some playwrights do), or would you prefer to work out certain aspects of the play in rehearsal?

J.McC. By and large the text is finished by the time I reach rehearsal. But I am also a writer who adores improvisation and input from actors especially. So there have been several points in rehearsals where things have not worked out (which is totally possible as before rehearsals a play’s action has only ever been imagined) and so sometimes I like to try a few ideas and, usually, whatever the issue has been, it gets resolved in the rehearsal room or later at my desk. I also have a vision on how the play should look and sound etc (music is quite important to me) and I will discuss this with the director before rehearsals. But I also like to work collaboratively throughout, and in the future I would love to write a play from scratch in the rehearsal room, in the way Mike Leigh used to work.

A.L. The grassroots campaign, #Waking the Feminists, came together as a protest against the male-dominated line-up proposed by the Abbey Theatre for its 2016 Easter Rising Centenary Program. As a consequence of the public outcry, a report on gender equality in the theater was commissioned. The group worked in conjunction with the Irish Theatre Institute and the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance at NUI Galway, and their report, which found evidence of significant gender disparity in the performing arts, was published in June 2017. Do you think matters have improved much since the publication of their findings?

J.McC. In June 2015 I reviewed a book for the Times Literary Supplement, *Irish Women Dramatists*, which is a fantastic anthology of plays by Irish women, many of which have still not received productions in Ireland. I wanted to know about Irish play commissioning statistics according to gender etc, and so got in touch with Patrick Lonergan, Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies at NUI Galway. I included some of his findings in my TLS feature. For instance, up until 2015, since the new Abbey Theatre building opened in Dublin in 1966 there had been six plays on the main Abbey stage written by women - Edna O'Brien, Jeanne Binnie, Elaine Murphy, three plays by Marina Carr. That's a total of four women commissioned, compared to approximately 320 plays staged during this period that had been written by men. So by 2015 the ratio of female to male playwrights produced by Ireland's National theatre was roughly 98:2%. That's a pretty shocking statistic. Shortly afterwards these stats got further attention from the Waking the Feminists movement which I completely supported. I attended the much publicised meeting at the Abbey in 2016.

I believe that things in Ireland have improved in the past couple of years, yes. Having said that, due to the success of *Belfast Girls* abroad, I've not been around much so can't entirely vouch for this; if it's anything like the UK situation, some progress has definitely been made.

A.L. On a similar topic, the controversial departure of Michael Coughlan as Artistic Director of the Gate Theatre due to allegations of bullying and harassment by female staff and theatre professionals, caused further soul searching about the treatment of women in the arts. You have broad experience of working in the English theatre. Did you experience similar concerns there?

J.McC. I am fortunate to have never experienced a single instance of bullying or sexual harassment in the theatre in the UK or US. I know of instances of bullying for sure, and someone close to me was bullied, so I am lucky not to have experienced this directly. Having said that, part of my training included a period on the prestigious Directors Course at The National Theatre in London. Here I was trained by some of the best directors and dramaturgs in British Theatre – but it was very “male-centric”, very much a boy's club. And I think this was the same situation in Ireland: male directors ruled the roost – and they tended to choose plays written by other males who reinforced the male directors' view of the world etc. So my personal opinion on the case of Colgan is that the problem is much deeper than one person harassing or bullying another; I believe that there was, in Ireland and the UK, a culture of “over reverence” to male directors and

a mistrust of female leaders/directors (and usually, therefore, female writers, stories about and by women etc), a sense that women were not trusted enough to do the job of running a theatre as well as men. Hence, the men who were entrusted to become “important” artistic directors, choosers of plays and playwrights etc, were over-indulged and their decisions went unquestioned. So “the system” is also at fault. The egotistical male director stereotype is also a result of an endemically sexist, patriarchal situation/system etc. Someone has to put them there. To ensure this doesn't happen again, there should be far more female artistic directors (as there is now at The Gate), and both male and female directors should have much greater accountability to the boards who appoint them.

A.L. While we are on the subject of women, Lady Augusta Gregory was seminal to the foundation of the Abbey Theatre, which became the Irish National Theatre, and also a significant playwright in her own right. Would you ever consider writing a play about Lady Gregory?

J.McC. Yes, I'd love to. She is a fascinating character.

A.L. Your most recent play, *The Naturalists*, which is set in a rural area of County Monaghan, Ireland, had its world premier in New York last September. The central character, Francis, is the fictionalized mastermind behind the August 27, 1979, bombing of eighteen soldiers that took place at Narrow Water, near Warrenpoint in County Down. I am curious as to how an audience with perhaps little knowledge of the events you describe and the fall out from them, reacted to this play?

J.McC. This play has only been staged once so far – in the Walkerspace Theatre at Soho Rep space in New York, in September 2018, so I can only go on the reaction of the audience there, which was pretty phenomenal. Firstly, I “set up” Francis as an absolutely lovable figure, a bit gauche, awkward with women etc, a great lover of nature and the land – so that by the time the audience discovers what he has done it's too late, they already love him. When the facts emerge about the terrible crime committed in his youth, and how it has tortured him his whole life, the audience is ready to forgive him and follow him on his journey of atonement. I don't recall a single incidence of someone becoming annoyed or withdrawing his or her sympathy, or renouncing Francis for what he had done. Though I did think that I would be hauled over hot coals for doing that, choosing such a heinous crime for his backstory etc, I actually wasn't. I love the character of Francis so much - and I think this shows in the play.

A.L. What are you currently working on?

J.McC. I have just finished the screenplay adaptation of *Belfast Girls* and this is currently with producers and about to go into a period of development – so I will probably be rewriting this for the best part of a year. I am also developing a comedy pilot for TV about an Irish family living in London, and I'm adapting my story "The Tribe" from my book *The Scattering* as a long TV series. A film and television producer read this story and got in touch. I'm also trying to sort out my first novel which I wrote as a multi-narrative story; I've started a new novel, too (*Muso*) and I'm collating some recently published short stories into a second collection. I'm also writing a book of essays, some of which are about growing up in London and then coming to Dundalk! In terms of new plays, I have a few ideas I'm working on, including a couple of adaptations.

A.L. Have you any interest in adapting the work of other playwrights?

J.McC. Yes, I've begun a contemporary adaptation of Ibsen's *Lady from the Sea* and have set it in Carlingford. I'm also keen to adapt *Cymbeline* – and Brecht's *St Joan of The Stockyards*.

A.L. As a follow-on question, I believe you have devoted a considerable amount of your academic research to the work of Patrick Kavanagh. In 1983 Tom MacIntyre adapted Kavanagh's long modernist poem, The Great Hunger, for the stage. Would you be interested in doing a similar adaptation for a twenty-first century audience?

J.McC. Yes, I have thought about this. I once met a very well known British theatre director who said his favourite work of theatre (ever) was Tom MacIntyre's *Great Hunger* play (which he'd seen at The Gate). It's a phenomenal piece of writing. I absolutely adore Kavanagh and I feel he is not given his dues.

A.L. Looking around you, what do you think of the present state of theatre in Ireland?

J.McC. To be perfectly honest I go to the theatre more regularly in London than Ireland. I sort of chase down what I'm interested in. I love the writing of Annie Baker, an American playwright, so one of the plays I most enjoyed recently is her Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Flick* at the National. I also love her play *John*. I'm a writing-centric playwright and often read a play before I go to see it.

Max Stafford Clarke, the theatre director, once said to me that the problem with Irish theatre is there isn't the critical mass, so we still need those links to the UK and abroad (having said that, there seems to be less and less "Irish plays" on UK stages these days). Regional theatre really needs a financial boost, too; there are fewer and fewer local companies and funding is difficult to find. I've often thought that Ireland should adopt the German model, whereby in the 1970s the German government declared a policy of "culture for everyone", a "civil right to culture" which led to (well-funded) artistic institutions being set up all over the country rather than concentrated in the capital. This is how Pina Bausch ended up in Wuppertal, a small car-manufacturing city, forming Tanztheater Wuppertal. The idea was not just to rely on the people of Wuppertal to attend the shows either, but to bring the world to Wuppertal. And the world went. So if the Irish government was to do the same, provide funding for world-class artists (Ireland has any amount of these) to set up groups around the country, then regional theatre would be utterly rejuvenated. As it stands now, theatre in the regions is under-funded if it exists at all. This is important because, let's be honest, Dublin theatres are not always that interested in regional stories. Do Dublin theatre directors want to read stories from the border or the North or from Limerick or the Aran Islands? They more than likely want to read stories about Dublin. Which means that stories from the under-funded regions often get neither a national or local platform. A play like *Leopoldville*, set in an Irish border town was staged first in London. Had there been a healthy regional scene then the play could have been staged in Dundalk. (Having said that, I think things are improving in Dundalk – Quintessance Theatre Company is a great new Dundalk company; and I've done some lovely work with Livin Dred in Monaghan, too). But a new vision and plan is required. Happy to contribute thoughts on this if anyone wants to get in touch!

Thank you Jaki.



Jaki McCarrick

Photo courtesy of Bobbie Hanvey.

Bio Jaki McCarrick

Jaki McCarrick is an award-winning writer of plays, poetry and fiction. Her play LEOPOLDVILLE won the 2010 Papatango Prize for New Writing, and her most recent play, THE NATURALISTS, has premiered last year in New York to rave reviews: “Best Bet International Theatre”, *Theatre is Easy*; “Impeccable, a gift to its actors” *New York Times*; “Beautifully performed” *The New Yorker*. Staged by The Pond Theatre Company at the Soho Repertory Theatre, NY. Her play BELFAST GIRLS was developed at the National Theatre Studio, London, was shortlisted for the 2012 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize and the 2014 BBC Tony Doyle Award. It premiered in the US in Chicago in 2015 to much critical acclaim and has since been staged widely internationally and will premiere in Australia and Sweden in 2019. In 2016, Jaki was selected for Screen Ireland’s Talent Development Initiative and has recently completed the screen adaptation of BELFAST GIRLS. Jaki’s short story, The Visit, won the 2010 Wasafiri Short Fiction Prize and her story collection, *The Scattering*, was published by Seren Books and was shortlisted for the 2014 Edge Hill Prize. Jaki, who was longlisted in 2014 for the inaugural Irish Fiction Laureate, is currently editing her first novel.

Essay: “A Portrait of the Playwright as a Young Man: Stewart Parker’s *Hopdance*” by Marilyn Richarik

by Marilyn Richarik



Stewart Parker in the 1960s.
Photo courtesy of Rough Magic
Theatre Company.

Stewart Parker’s autobiographical novel *Hopdance*, posthumously published by The Lilliput Press in 2017, has brought new attention to the phase of his career that predated his breakthrough stage play, *Spokesong* (1975). Written in the early 1970s, *Hopdance* focuses on the time in Parker’s life just before and after the cancer diagnosis that resulted in the amputation of his left leg when he was a 19-year-old student at Queen’s University Belfast. Its vivid depictions of his alter-ego Tosh’s self-consciousness, shock, and physical and emotional suffering may surprise readers who know Parker only from his witty dramatic works. Considering the relationship between this novel and his better-known achievement as a playwright, however, enhances one’s appreciation of both.

In some ways, this relationship is an inverse one. When drafting *Hopdance* Parker did not yet know that the theatre would be the arena for his main life’s work, and he set the novel aside at the beginning of 1975 to concentrate instead on writing his ‘bicycle play’ shortly after deciding to devote his energy to drama. Parker tinkered with the *Hopdance* manuscript in subsequent years, but it was not until 1988, in a theatrical lull after the successful Field Day production of *Pentecost* (1987), that he returned to his novel in earnest, determined to polish it for publication at last – an effort, sadly, derailed by a second, fatal, cancer.

Most of *Hopdance* dates to the period of Parker’s life when he thought of himself primarily as a poet, as its lyrical intensity and structure of short, disjointed vignettes indicate. In the novel, which Parker began writing in 1972, Tosh’s tormented mind and the physical and social space of Belfast at the beginning of the 1960s both emerge clearly. He matures and learns how to navigate one-legged in a world in which doctors are free to chain-smoke while tending to patients, hell-fire evangelists abound, and young men assume that every young woman’s highest ambition is to trap them into marriage. Throughout the book, scenes depicting Tosh’s unfulfilling relationships with his male peers and frustrated yearning for a female soul mate play in counterpoint with others that suggest his incipient awareness of himself as part of a larger human community.

There are hints of Parker’s future vocation in several scenes depicting Tosh’s involvement in student theatricals, which mirror Parker’s own participation in the Queen’s Dramatic Society, or Dramsoc. In one early vignette, Tosh and his friend Harrison (modelled on Parker’s university companion Bill Morrison, who also became a professional playwright) perform a one-act play they have composed together at a university drama festival. Tosh, already complaining about a mysterious swelling around his knee, goes through the motions on stage in ‘a calm ballet of pain’. Afterwards, the adjudicator ‘spoke about a new renaissance in the theatre, stirrings of new voices, he picked out a line from the play and repeated it many times; it rattled round the walls like a piece of the play that had broken off’.

In another scene later in the novel, Tosh (still unaware that he suffers from anything more serious than growing pains and adolescent alienation) describes to Harrison his idea for an avant-garde play based on ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. This episode has self-reflexive significance in *Hopdance* (Tosh identifies ‘confessional fever’, ‘the obsessive need to rehearse your memory of hell’, as the essence of ‘the artistic impulse’), but it also depicts two budding

dramatists wrestling with questions of theatrical craft as they debate how best to convey the significance of the albatross and stage the supernatural elements of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem. Harrison's accurate prediction of the Productions Committee's likely response to Tosh's proposal – 'They won't touch an experimental show for the festivals. They'll go for the forty-seventh production this year of *Man For All Seasons*' – also prefigures Parker's many disappointing encounters with producers in years to come.



82 Stewart Parker in the 1970s.
Photo courtesy of Rough Magic Theatre Company.

Before his cancer diagnosis, Parker had harbored the notion of becoming a professional actor, a fact that helps to explain the extraordinary rapport he enjoyed with actors as a dramatist. In *Hopdance*, two post-amputation scenes with Harrison show when and why he abandoned this early ambition. In one, the young men perform while the band takes a break during the intermission of a formal dance. Tosh forgets his glasses, can't read the lyrics of his own comic songs, and loses the rhythm of the music. As the audience jeers, he reflects that 'Always before a spring in him had wound up for occasions like this, providing co-ordination and resilience to carry it off, no matter how drunk or ill-prepared. The spring had broken, he didn't care.'

In a related vignette, Tosh, Harrison, and others write and perform a satirical revue based on one that Parker and friends produced for the first Queen's Festival in 1961, assessed in the student newspaper as 'original, adventurous and enterprising and – to everyone's surprise, hilariously funny'. Morrison remembered the night as a triumph, but Parker's experience of it was vastly different, as Tosh's reaction illustrates: 'It seemed that the evening would never reach its end. He could sense already the failure of a previously hidden nerve: he would never again be able to get up before an audience and perform with an unconscious faith in the easy security of his own stage presence. The world no longer offered security, of any sort whatsoever.'

Parker's experience of his amputation was not entirely one of loss, however. In *The Green Light*, an autobiographical radio talk written about a decade after this surgery, he asserted that 'I was maimed. But the process of coping with that reality developed or uncovered a stability and a serenity that I had desperately wanted for as long as I could remember.' The clearest signs of personal growth can be found in the *Hopdance* scenes set in the limb-fitting centre Tosh visits periodically as an amputee. Here he gradually comes to realize that his artificial leg, rather than branding him a freak, is a badge of the mortality he shares with every other human being. At the *Hopdance* launch two years ago, actor Stephen Rea brought down the house with a scene set in a waiting-room and involving a minister, a welder, a family doctor, a grizzled farmer, and Tosh, demonstrating unmistakably the idiosyncratic vision and flair for dialogue that would make Parker one of the best Irish playwrights of the twentieth century.

Bio: Marilyn Richtarik



Marilynn Richtarik is a Professor of English at Georgia State University in Atlanta, where she teaches British, Irish, and world literature. Her publications include *Acting Between the Lines: The Field Day Theatre Company and Irish Cultural Politics 1980-1984* (Oxford University Press, 1994), *Stewart Parker: A Life* (Oxford University Press, 2012), and an edition of Parker's novel *Hopdance* (The Lilliput Press, 2017). In the spring of 2017, she was a US Fulbright Scholar at Queen's University Belfast.

Spotlight on Rough Magic Theatre Company; An interview with Lynne Parker, Artistic Director of Rough Magic

A.L. Let's start with talking about your uncle, Stewart Parker, who has been a tremendous influence on you, both personally and professionally. Could you speak about him and his work?

L.P. I first saw Stewart's work when I was fourteen, when I was taken by my Aunt Joan to see Spokesong at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1975. I had never seen theatre like that before and it was like being struck by lightning. The breadth of imagination, the virtuosity, the sheer fun. From then on I began to form a real relationship with this uncle who had been a sparkling visitor at Christmas, but who now became my mentor and a profound influence on my work and the work of Rough Magic. I think the dark humour and joyous lightness of touch that supports his seriousness of purpose is reflected in our work at its best.

A.L. Do you envision directing a revival of *Pentecost* or another of Stewart's plays in the future?

L.P. Yes. With a whole new generation of actors, and the perspective of the current, maddening, absurd stasis in Northern Irish politics that makes the play even more relevant in the post-conflict era. I can't wait.

A.L. Rough Magic emerged as a professional theatre company out of your student days in Players Theatre at Trinity College in the early 1980s. Given the exorbitant costs now associated with renting or acquiring a performance space in Dublin, and the high cost of living in Dublin generally, do you think it's possible for another young company to emerge in this fashion?

L.P. It is extremely difficult, but it doesn't stop people trying, and many young artists have been supported by Rough Magic in setting up their own operation, though the SEEDS programme and informal mentoring. The problem isn't getting started, it's sustaining the work, and the people who make it, after the initial heady days of genesis. Many companies started off in 1980s Ireland - of that era, only Rough Magic is still fully functioning (Druid began a decade earlier).



Spokesong

Photo courtesy of Rough Magic Theatre Company.

A.L. Do you think the audience for live theatre has changed much over the years?

L.P. Changed, but oddly enough I think it may be returning to that hoary old event, the well-made play. Certainly technology and social media have offered all sorts of exciting productions but the audience in Ireland still loves a good story. We have seen a decline in numbers through the recession that has not properly restored. Audiences are more cautious and are less likely to risk new work. But although the Dublin Fringe Festival is saturated by new work - much of which is unfunded - it has shrunk in scale, and we now need to rebuild a well-supported, ambitious programme of work that has genuine reach and appeal, as well as artistic ambition - particularly outside Dublin.

A.L. Rough Magic had two productions in the 2018 Dublin Theatre Festival, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the world premiere of Arthur Riordan's stage adaptation of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. For this year's festival, which will run from September 26 – October 13, you will direct the Irish premiere of Marina Carr's *Hecuba*, about the widowed Trojan queen. Carr's play challenges Euripides's version of Hecuba as a bloodthirsty avenger, portraying her instead as a sympathetic figure who lost her husband and son and saw her youngest daughter sacrificed. I have read the play and Carr makes a convincing case. Do you think audiences will buy into this version of Hecuba?

L.P. Marina's great insight is to take her characters not as mythic but as profoundly human, and to adopt a technique that brings you directly into their thought pattern. She's interested in the human grief of their situation, and that is as true of Agamemnon as it is of Hecuba or her children. We are encouraged to think the unthinkable - what if it was me being asked to do these things, or suffering their consequences? In the time of the devastation of Syria and the global refugee crisis, when climate change is bringing catastrophe closer every day to the shores of the West, it's not an inappropriate question.

A.L. Has the company toured much internationally in recent years?

L.P. Yes, with our delightful show *How To Keep an Alien* by Sonya Kelly, which took in the UK (Edinburgh and London), New York, Finland and Australia as well as a national tour in Ireland. We're looking forward to more international touring in the coming years, hopefully with more large-scale pieces.

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Joyce ensemble
Photo courtesy of Rough Magic
Theatre Company.

A.L. Do you ever work with a dramaturg when directing a play? Do you find this role helpful for certain productions?

L.P. I have worked with Dramaturg Maureen White on a number of new plays for Rough Magic as the script was being prepared for rehearsal. But I've never had a production dramaturg, although I wouldn't rule that out. Sometimes the assistant director will take that role, in terms of research and feedback. I'm always keen to know what my colleagues think of the production as it forms, but there is a sense in which I need the feedback to be from the objective viewpoint of the uninformed outside eye, and I can't help thinking that the dramaturg is by definition a subjective insider.

A. L. Rough Magic is a very versatile theatre company, commissioning new Irish drama, as well as performing both contemporary international work and plays from the classical repertoire. Is there a recognizable Rough Magic show? If not, do you see that as a difficulty in raising awareness with the public as to the kind of work the theatre does?

L.P. That has been the subject of much discussion in the last few years. Has the eclectic nature of the programme been a blessing or a curse? I've come to the conclusion that there are three essential elements to our productions. Actors, humo, and surprise. Now the work of the director and the design team is of course essential, and the writer is the creator. But what the public sees and comes for, is performance. What the actors perform has to be intelligently thought through and have seriousness of purpose; but it won't be successful - and it won't be truthful - if it isn't entertaining or engaging, and funny - frequently in the blackest sense. And it has to be unexpected (which is the method in our eclectic madness). But large or small it's an ensemble endeavour and that's a whole creative team of which actors are the public face. That's true whether it's a classic production or a brand new play. Diversity is key to Rough Magic's identity and programme of work - that means diversity of themes, styles, subject matter - and people.

A.L. You are well known for your ensemble work with actors, in fact the cast of Rough Magic's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* recently won the Best Ensemble Award at the 2018 Irish Times Theatre Awards. Do you prefer as a director to work with a large cast?

L.P. I have to confess that I do, although some of the smaller shows I've done have been a pure joy. At the moment I'm rehearsing *Cleft* by Fergal McElherron, which has a cast of just two actors, Simone Kirby and Penny Layden - and we have had a ball in rehearsals; there's no rule.

A.L. Could you talk a little about the Rough Magic SEEDS program? What was the basis for starting this program? Are there comparable opportunities in other Irish theatres for beginning theatre practitioners to get the kind of mentoring and training that the SEEDS initiative offers?

L.P. Around 2001 we looked at the scene in Ireland, then at the height of the Celtic Tiger, and wondered how people like ourselves were going to get off the ground (or out of student drama). We set up SEEDS - Seek out, Encourage, Enable, Develop and Stage - originally to support writers but it was quickly apparent that the initiative was needed in all the theatre disciplines. There are other support programmes now, but SEEDS was the first - and in many ways still the most comprehensive.

A.L. Although Rough Magic is based in Dublin, I get the impression that you view the company as a national theatre company rather than simply a Dublin theatre company. You brought your production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to the Kilkenny Arts Festival last year, and you will be staging the world premiere of Fergal McElherron's *Cleft* in Ennis and at the Galway International Arts Festival in July. Are there other productions planned for outside the Dublin area?

L.P. Having a national presence is key to our approach in these and coming years. We are working towards a production next year of a piece that looks at the whole nation through the particular prism of choral singing. Choirs are nationwide, cross gender, cross-community and cross-border. We aim to make this a national co-production with regional venues, performed by our ensemble of actors but intersecting with local choirs wherever we go. The following year we intend to look at the Irish border, coming up to the anniversary of partition. We want our work to be great art, primarily; but also a reflection of where our society, in all its forms, is heading.

A.L. The quality and regularity of regional theatre varies throughout the country, often due to lack of government and community funding. Would it be possible for a company such as Rough Magic, who seem to make a concerted effort to engage with the broader community, to conduct workshops in secondary schools? It seems to me that this would be a good way to expose young people to the theatrical world.

L.P. We already do some demos of our approach to theatre-making in schools, partly to promote the tours we undertake. I would see this as a contribution by the professional theatre sector to the delivery of, and philosophy behind, education - but that delivery is the responsibility of government, one it has shirked abysmally in recent years. Publicly funded theatre certainly has a responsibility to inform and educate as well as to entertain, but drama has a central role in education which must be fundamental to its infrastructure and not just added on an extra-curricular activity. That policy-makers fail to see this baffles me. But the best thing we can do is to bring strong productions to audiences around the country that inspire interest in theatre as a window on the world.

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A.L. Were you surprised when the Abbey Theatre announced their program for *Waking the Nation*, the year-long commemoration of the 1916 Centenary? (Note to our readers: 9 of the 10 playwrights were men and 7 of the 10 directors were men). The lack of female representation in the line up provoked outrage and sparked the #*Waking the Feminists* movement. It seems remarkable that in the twenty-first century the Abbey could have been so out of step on this issue. What are your thoughts on the striking gender imbalance in the profession?

L.P. I was a proud member of #WTF and one of the many women who said 'enough is enough'. It was indeed shocking that the Abbey's Artistic Director and Board had failed to spot the omission, and in fairness they responded quickly and honorably to the challenge. The good thing was that the debate has produced some excellent initiatives and new policies. But we have a long, long way to go.

A.L. With the recent appointment of Selina Cartmell as Artistic Director of the Gate Theatre, there are now three female Artistic Directors of prominent theatres in Ireland, the other two being yourself at Rough Magic and Garry Hynes with Druid Theatre, Galway. Will this lead to more gender parity in terms of opportunities for women to direct, write, act and take the lead in the technical aspects of theatrical production?

L.P. There are a number of other women running companies, such as Annie Ryan of the Corn Exchange, Louise Lowe of ANU and Emma Jordan of Prime Cut in Belfast. Also venue based Artistic Directors like Julie Kelleher in Cork, Marketa Dowling in Limerick and Orla Flanagan, our co-producer in Ennis. But significantly, only Selina is in charge of a fully funded production house. Rough Magic has always commissioned and produced the work of women, but the major allocation of funding still remains with the Abbey, so the privilege and responsibility of redressing the balance is not evenly spread.

A.L. Would you be interested in producing the full cycle of Yeats's dramas as Druid did with the work of Synge?

L.P. I would indeed! It strikes me that Yeats would be particularly well-served by productions that use modern technologies to give a new form to his poetic drama, where abstraction could offer visual and psychological poetry through sophisticated lighting, projection and sound design. I also think that Yeats and his circle are the most wonderful bunch of eccentrics and very rich material for the Rough Magic approach. As Roy Foster, the great authority on Yeats is a Rough Magic board member, we have an unparalleled source of insight. But I suppose the thing that has stopped us in the past is the feeling that Yeats belongs to the Abbey...

A.L. If money were no object, is there a particular play you would like Rough Magic to stage?

L. P. I don't really want to think of money as the essential ingredient in any production - it both is and isn't a conduit or barrier to achieving one's dream. Everyone has a *King Lear* they'd like to do, but I'm also very attracted to Ben Jonson's work - darker and dirtier than Shakespeare and very contemporary in many ways. *The Alchemist* is a fabulous shyster play, though not overburdened with female roles (you'd have to address this). I'd love to do more Restoration and 18th century work; those plays were my first love, and they are wonderful for women - as women finally got to develop and play the female characters. Big plays with big stories - Gorky would be high on my list.

A.L. What are the productions you have directed that you are most proud of?

L.P. *Pentecost*, Declan Hughes' *Digging For Fire* and Arthur Riordan's *Improbable Frequency* are the ones that people remember. But the best work I've done, in my own view, was Stewart's great play about Boucicault, *Heavenly Bodies* for the Abbey; and Rough Magic's *The Taming of the Shrew*, set in small-town Ireland - and still I think the most fully realized production I've done.

A.L. Do you ever have to choose to do certain work because of financial pressures?

L.P. Yes. Rarely, but at a time when money was very tight I had to do Sheridan's *The Critic* on a low budget with a cast partly made up of student actors. It was a tough gig, because my plans for the play just weren't achievable on the resources available - lack of time as much as money. It was fun, but nowhere near the production I had originally imagined.

A.L. Are there any particular directors who have influenced your approach to directing?

L.P. Ariane Mnouchkine and Peter Brook are obvious influences, but some of the people who have really formed my approach are choreographers - Christopher Bruce's work for Ballet Rambert, Pina Bausch, Trisha Brown and more recently the Swedish theatre director and choreographer Mats Ek. I love dance that has political bite and humor.

A.L. How do you envision the future of Rough Magic Theatre company?

L.P. Big and bright.

Thank you Lynne.



Elenor Methven and Carol Moore
in *Pentecost*.

*Photo courtesy of Rough Magic
Theatre Company.*



Photo: Ros Kavanagh

Bio: Lynne Parker

Lynne is Artistic Director and co-founder of Rough Magic. Since its foundation in 1984 Rough Magic has built an organisation characterised by continual regeneration. Its adherence to artistic excellence, pluralism, and an egalitarian approach to the creative ensemble, has delivered over 50 Irish premieres, the debuts of many theatre-makers, and the pioneering SEEDS programme.

Productions for Rough Magic include: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare with Kilkenny Arts Festival (Best Ensemble Irish Times Theatre Awards 2018), *Melt* by Shane Mac an Bhaird, *The Train*, *The House Keeper* (Irish Times Best New Play 2012), *Famished Castle*, *The Critic*, *Travesties*, *Peer Gynt*, *Phaedra*, *Don Carlos* (Irish Times Best Production 2007), *The Taming of the Shrew* (Best Production 2006), *Improbable Frequency* (Best Production, Best Director, 2004), *Copenhagen* (Best Production 2002), *Sodome, my love*, *Three days of Rain*, *The Sugar Wife*, *Northern Star*, *Spokesong*, *Pentecost*, *Hidden Charges*, *Down Onto Blue*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *Digging for Fire*, *Love and a Bottle* (Bank of Ireland/Arts Show Award), *Danti-Dan*, *New Morning*, *I Can't Get Started*, *The Way of the World*, *The Country Wife*, *Decadence*, *Top Girls*.

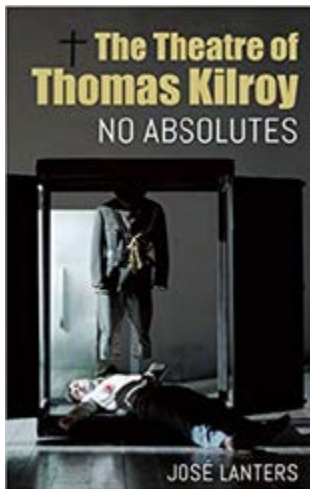
Other Theatre includes – *Heavenly Bodies*, (Best Director, 2004), *The Sanctuary Lamp*, *Down the Line*, *The Trojan Women*, *The Doctor's Dilemma*, *Tartuffe*, *The Shape of Metal* (Abbey Theatre); *The Drawer Boy* (Abbey Theatre/Galway Arts Festival); *Lovers* (Druid); *Bernard Alba*, *Me and My Friend* (Charabanc); *Catchpenny Twist* (Tinderbox); *Bold Girls* (7:84 Scotland); *The Shadow of a Gunman* (Gate Theatre); *The Clearing* (Bush Theatre); *Playboy of the Western World*, *Silver Tassie* (Almeida Theatre); *Playhouse Creatures* (Old Vic); *Importance of Being Earnest* (West Yorkshire Playhouse); *Love Me?!* (Corn Exchange); *Comedy of Errors* (RSC); *Olga*, *Shimmer* (Traverse Theatre); *Only the Lonely* (Birmingham Rep); *La Voix Humaine* (Opera Theatre Company); *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Opera Ireland); *The Drunkard*, *Benefactors* (B*spoke); *The Girl Who Forgot to Sing Badly* (The Ark/Theatre Lovett); *Macbeth* (Lyric Theatre Belfast); *The Cunning Little Vixen*, *Albert Herring* (RIAM). Most recently, Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf* (Tron Theatre, Glasgow) Stewart Parker's *Northern Star*, *The Provoked Wife* by John Vanbrugh, Gorky's *Children of the Sun* and Schnitzler's *la Ronde* (The Lir Academy).

She was an Associate Artist of Charabanc Theatre Company.

Lynne was awarded the Irish Times Special Tribute Award in 2008 and an Honorary Doctorate by Trinity College Dublin in 2010.

Book Review: *The Theatre of Thomas Kilroy: No Absolutes* by José Lanfers

Reviewed by Brian McCabe



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Implicit in its title, José Lanfers' recent, near-comprehensive study on the work of sometime-Field Day director and titan of Irish stage, Thomas Kilroy, lies the idea that the playwright and his work simply refuse to be pinned down in any conventional sense. Lanfers cites a body of work steeped in intellectualism, broad theatre literacy, and "the rejection of absolutism and certainty in favour of provisionality and doubt"(1). Kilroy's is, indeed, work which requires that Brechtian sense whereby no audience viewing it ought to "hang their brains up in the cloakroom along with its coat." In her introduction, Lanfers characterizes both the plays and their author:

His resistance to firm categories and boundaries form a reaction against remnants of rigidity and inflexible thinking that remains embedded in many facets of Irish culture, including in the theatre. Kilroy has consistently challenged his audiences by confronting them with dramatic forms not usually seen in Ireland, and subject matter often perceived as disturbing, even shocking. His plays have tackled numerous taboos within Irish culture: homophobia and misogyny, marital unhappiness, child abuse, mental illness, the perils of nationalist extremism (of any variety), and the disturbing features of religious fanaticism. (1)

Challenging though the playwright's work may be to peg, one has to be able to make some general observations; as a start, Lanfers assesses Kilroy as perhaps the ideal playwright taking up the mantle of the theatrical legacy shaped by J.M. Synge and Sean O'Casey. In particular, she notes his preparation for this in exposure to "new forms of writing for the stage" while he worked and studied in London at the Royal Court Theatre. From the beginning, Lanfers points out, Kilroy was thinking broadly, almost "totally," to borrow a word Kilroy himself used at times to describe his theatre: "In 'Groundwork for an Irish Theatre' [...] Kilroy argues that theatre-making should be a communal effort, and that the constituent members of the community – writer, actor, director, designer – should be 'very responsive to the demands of the society about it'" (2). Given this Boal-esque declaration, Kilroy was, then, the ideal playwright to write for a society which, after the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922, was dominated by state and religious censorship, and had an increasing emphasis on "a puritanical Catholic morality" which "alienated women from men"(3).

It comes as no surprise, then, that Kilroy approaches this task in ways that push his audiences and the theatre community in Ireland outside of their comfort zones. Lanfers writes that in both technique and topic, Kilroy possesses and expresses a modernistic sense that Ireland needed:

His own work reflects 'the modern' both in its choice of themes and techniques. Kilroy's fascination with the psychology of his characters, for example, also extends to an interest in the use of modes such as expressionism and surrealism to explore and give shape to that interiority. His concern with the fragmented state of Irish society finds a reflection in his resistance to a cohesive narrative style and his frequent choice of episodic techniques. (5)

In the variety of influences and techniques upon the which Kilroy draws, Lanfers notes *Talbot's Box* (1997) as an attempt at “total theatre”; *The O'Neill* (1969) and *The Madame MacAdam Traveling Theatre* (1991) as inspired by Brecht; and *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde's* use of Japanese Kabuki and Bunraku theatre techniques. Kilroy's willingness to draw on other theatre-makers includes an illustrious list of influences, including Peter Brook, Jean-Louis Barrault and Maurice Béjart, John Arden, and David Rudkin, among others. However, perhaps the most influential “assistants” to the playwright have been his directors, whom Kilroy regards as those who will “‘help you to imagine the final text’ of a play” (Kilroy qtd. in Lanfers 3). As a schema for studying Kilroy's work in this text, Lanfers first mentions that she primarily addresses Kilroy's own unique work, rather than his several adaptations—she makes some exception to this for *Christ, Deliver Us!* (2010), a work based closely on Frank Wedekind's controversial 1891 play *Spring Awakenings*, in which “Kilroy makes the plight of young people in a morally repressive culture entirely his own by focusing on their travails through the lens of 1950s Ireland” (9). By way of further organizing her study of Kilroy's existing ten original works, Lanfers divides them into three categories on which they dwell thematically, but notes that they also speak to one another across these categories and that the “boundaries” she uses should be understood as somewhat arbitrary, and “permeable and flexible” (10). Thus, *The Theatre of Thomas Kilroy* arranges these ten plays under groupings of “Nationalism and Identity” (*The O'Neill, Double Cross* (1994), and *The Madame MacAdam Traveling Theatre*); “Gender and Sexuality” (*The Death and Resurrection of Mr Roche* (2002), *Tea and Sex and Shakespeare* (1998), *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*, and *Christ, Deliver Us!*); and “Art and Mysticism” (*Talbot's Box* (1997); *The Shape of Metal* (2003), and *Blake* (2015)).

In “Nationalism and Identity,” Lanfers elucidates Kilroy's constant discomfiture with “all forms of extreme nationalism – whether expressed as imperialism, fascism, republicanism or unionism – [which] share at their root a fundamental fear of Otherness” (11). Kilroy's distaste for such ideological zealotry translates directly to the stage in many of his works, but particularly in *The O'Neill, Double Cross* and *The Madame MacAdam Traveling Theatre*, according to Lanfers. In “Divided Loyalties,” on *The O'Neill*, Kilroy takes on the towering figure of the Gaelic Earl of Tyrone, whose complicated politics saw him embroiled in the Nine Years' War against Queen Elizabeth I, and die in exile in Rome. Given the play's genesis, in 1969, it makes complete sense that “For Kilroy, the modern parallels were most immediate with the burgeoning conflict in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic's entry into the European Economic Community” (26). “Deformities of Nationalism” addresses *Double Cross*, produced in 1986 by Field Day Theatre Company as the Troubles reached their pitch. In it, Kilroy “set out to write about nationalism which, in its extreme form, becomes ‘a dark burden, a source of trauma and debilitation’” (40). Quoting Kilroy's introduction to the Gallery Press edition of the play, Lanfers again points out Kilroy's unarguable talent for crafting work precisely on point for its times. Lanfers notes that, like *The O'Neill, Double*

Cross is “less a history play than a drama of ideas” (47). In what might be a bittersweet fortuity, those 1969 ideas translate well into the current global environment, as Lanters writes:

When the Abbey Theatre announced the revival of *Double Cross* for the autumn of 2018 [...] its website noted that the play’s focus on the propaganda battle between Bracken and Joyce ‘takes on a new relevance in an era of heightened nationalism and “fake news.”’ (58)

“Mum’s the Word,” about *The Madame MacAdam Traveling Theatre*, Kilroy’s second work for Field Day, “depicts the insularity of the ‘Emergency’ rather as an occasion for nationalist paranoia” (60). In the play’s exploration of xenophobia and social instability, Kilroy interrogates the realities of a small country in the grip of its own fear, and asks how far Ireland has come – World War II in Ireland was referred to as the “Emergency” and Irish policy was neutrality. However serious its subject matter, the play itself was a comedy, and Kilroy has explained the work as being “about Theatre, its limits, its magic and what happens when the ‘theatrical’ meets ‘real’ life” (Kilroy qtd. in Lanters 63). The chapter drills down into company and actor response to the play, and the challenges of touring the show, as well as Kilroy’s subsequent 1992 decision to leave the board of directors of Field Day. Lanters’ collective analysis of these three plays through the lens of nationalism and identity is well worth reading, especially given its incorporation of contemporary issues:

The predominant themes of *The O’Neill*, *Double Cross* and *The Madame MacAdam Traveling Theatre* relate to the public sphere, and each of these plays reverberates with echoes of remote or recent historical events that are relevant for contemporary Ireland both north and south of the border. But even as *The O’Neill* parses the tragic consequences of the identity crisis that results from colonisation, *Double Cross* explores the perils of black-and-white thinking within extreme nationalism of both the global and local variety, and *Madam MacAdam* probes the dangerous consequences of the fascist’s fear of otherness, each play adds depth to the psychology of its characters by focusing the political through the lens of gender and sexuality. (78)

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Analysis like this throughout her study makes Lanters’ book a treasure for those looking to delve deeply into Kilroy and his world.

Part II, “Gender and Sexuality,” continues to explore the public / private sphere split in Irish society, but with a particular angle on how sexuality and power intersect, particularly diverse sexuality, which a narrow-minded society might term “deviant.” In *The Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche*, Kilroy explored “the notion that a profound sense of insecurity propels the strong and powerful to bully the weak and marginalised” (12). This was also, according to sources at the time of its production, the first play by an Irish writer featuring a homosexual title character. Lanters explains the significance of such a move to the playwright, writing, “Kilroy’s thematic focus in this early work on homophobia and misogyny is the first instance

of what in his later plays would become a growing preoccupation with sexual identity and gender fluidity” (83). Lanters explains that by exposing behavior that ultimately results in the death of the defamed Mr. Roche, the play suggests that a society which enforces secrecy, a lack of self-awareness, and enables prejudice as a means of covering its own discomfort is the true cause of personal, social, and mental agony. However, the gender divide is also one of Kilroy’s main concerns, as Lanters writes, “Male anxiety about the expression of gender and sexuality remains a central issue in Kilroy’s third play, *Tea and Sex and Shakespeare*; there, however, the emphasis falls more heavily on documenting the mental breakdown of the central character, who is a writer, than on mirroring the queer state of the nation” (103). In another first, the play featured “sex” for the first time in the title of an Abbey Theatre production. The play is also closely connected to Kilroy’s own crisis in the early 1970s, when he gave up his lectureship at University College Dublin to pursue writing full-time. As a measure of his dedication, Kilroy exploited his own personal and professional experiences in *Tea and Sex and Shakespeare*, translating them to his protagonist, playwright Brien. According to Lanters, “The ending of Kilroy’s play hangs comically suspended in the unwritten (because impossible?) moment of reconciliation between Brien’s life and his art. The typewriter beckons, so does his wife. Kilroy’s conclusion suggests that the way forward, in both human and artistic terms, lies in the embrace of such incompleteness and imperfection” (119). In “The Wound of Gender: *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*,” Lanters explores a play which was Kilroy’s attempt to “understand what it is to be female/male” (Kilroy, qtd. in Lanters 123). Notes about the production, which employed modes from classical Japanese theatre, are rich and fascinating, and a welcome addition to the chapter on a complicated play. In *The Secret Fall*, Kilroy brought together similar thematic elements as in *Mr. Roche* and *Tea and Sex*: “an artist and his wife within a complex marriage, a homosexual relationship, psychological trauma” (121). Lanters traces the lineage of the play through multiple draft projects, each of which brought Kilroy closer to exposing the challenges faced by Mrs. Wilde, again, as much private as public. The final play of “Gender and Sexuality,” *Christ, Deliver Us!*, is a stark but heartfelt interpretation of *Frühlings Erwachen* [*Spring Awakenings*], German playwright Frank Wedekind’s notorious work in which Kilroy contrasts sexual ignorance with moral authoritarianism. As if authored for the 20th century era of sexual scandals, however, Kilroy’s work presents a climate in which “sexual repression prevailed; ignorance and timidity were confused with innocence; moral standards were at times brutally enforced by patriarchal authorities; and transgressors of the moral code were punished or became tragic victims of fear and self-loathing” (144). Along with casting clergy and religious of the Roman Catholic Church as the dominant forces in the play, Kilroy’s title allusion to “The Lord’s Prayer” reinforced for Irish audiences the parallels to their own very real off-stage tragedy. Unsurprisingly, the play caused a great deal of controversy, yet, “The open debate sparked by *Christ, Deliver Us!* was itself an indicator that much has fundamentally changed in Ireland since the 1950s, even if the hurt and injustice referenced in the play still have not been fully confronted and redressed” (162).

Lanters' final section, entitled "Art and Mysticism," studies Kilroy's intense fascination with the inner life of the artist / mystic and its outer consequences on the self and those around one. As Lanters explains, these plays show that "An important strand in Kilroy's work deals with the notion that the single-minded focus of artists and mystics on their inner vision at times makes them behave 'monstrously' to their nearest and dearest and places them, in a sense, beyond the bounds of common humanity" (165). *Talbot's Box*, one of Kilroy's early works explores both the zealot-like life of workers' saint Matt Talbot (1856-1925), juxtaposed against the cooption of his historical / biographical presence. Kilroy is as interested in the man himself, and what made him tick, as he is the psychology of manipulation of his story by forces like the Church and State. Additionally, Lanters spends a good deal of this chapter taking readers through stage notes regarding the set design – a literal box – and its importance to the themes of the play, and it is a more than useful exercise, reminding those who've only read the play of the vibrant impact of the staged work. "The Art of Imperfection: *The Shape of Metal*" explores Kilroy's 2003 play as revelatory of several aspects of his work, including "the quest for perfection in art and life, the sublime artist as reprehensible human being, mental illness and psychological breakdown, the Protestant Anglo-Irish versus the Catholic Irish sensibility, the fluidity of gender, and the Second World War as eye-opener about the perils of fanatical extremism" (186). That Kilroy can take on all of this through the intensely focused lens of a single character, Nell (a truly gifted sculptor) and her interactions with family, speaks to his own abilities as artist. As well, Lanters points out that Kilroy takes the play as an opportunity to move away from a misaligned gender division which sees creativity as male (artistic) and female (biological). The question at hand in the play, however, is less about gender, and more about whether the artist, in committing to their art, is destined to turn so far inward that they revile their own. In the final play of the section, *Blake*, about the great English poet, William Blake (1757-1827), "the journey leads the protagonist through the dark tunnel of mental breakdown and creative stagnation into an unprecedented state of equilibrium and productivity" (205). These themes are similar to what Kilroy took on in *Tea and Sex and Shakespeare* and *The Shape of Metal*; however, Blake comes through his breakdown stronger, and more creative, as opposed to Kilroy's previous artist-characters. Interestingly, Kilroy's play presents an "imaginative reconstruction[]" of Blake's life, fantasizing a spell during which the poet might have been confined to Finchley Grange lunatic asylum. In what seems a fitting decision regarding production, given the work's investigation of the larger-than-life poet, "*Blake* is an attempt at 'total theatre,' as was *Talbot's Box*; but compared to the earlier work, Kilroy sees *Blake* as more ambitious, 'almost operatic in its use of choral singing,' with large scenic effects" (Kilroy qtd. in Lanters 210). In fact, the play ends with a striking solo male voice singing the lyrics of Blake's "England! awake! awake! awake!," later joined by the entire asylum in chorus. Lanters asserts that "If *Blake* represents, as Kilroy has suggested, the end of a seam of writing in his work, it is an end that heralds a personal and creative rebirth and a new dawn. No other Kilroy play ends on quite such an affirmative note" (225).

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While *The Theatre of Thomas Kilroy: No Absolutes* may be lacking in terms of only peripherally addressing Kilroy's numerous adaptations, Lanters' thoroughness in terms of addressing the playwright's major works still leaves readers feeling fulfilled; perhaps we can hope that a second volume, on these other works, will come next. And while I originally began skeptical

of Lanters' assertion that "Kilroy has established himself as Ireland's leading intellectual playwright," the depth and breadth of Lanters' look into Kilroy's work may well have me convinced. In addition to Lanters' own insights into Kilroy's work, perhaps the most fulfilling aspect of this study is her deep and obvious archival research. Lanters deftly draws upon not only essays and criticism from Kilroy's career, but interviews, Abbey and numerous other theatre records, director commentary, and Irish theatre history in the main to craft a text that leaves one with a holistic sense of the playwright's *oeuvre*. Lanters' research gifts readers with its own little archive, revealing much about the playwright that a lesser scholar might have glossed over. For example, where else could readers find:

- (1) a letter to drama producer Robert Cooper describe[ing] the center of [*Double Cross*] as a drunken all-night vigil during the 1940 London Blitz" (43);
- or (2) that "The concept of role playing lies at the heart of *Double Cross*, as [Seamus] Deane wrote to Kilroy when his friend was still working on the script: 'Performance makes a man present to others rather than to himself; it is therefore opposed to self-consciousness; it gives action to privilege and disdains thought or contemplation. In its dandy form it is comic; in its revenge form it is violent...'" (52-53);
- or (3) that, of *The Madame MacAdam Traveling Theatre*, "John McGahern declared he was delighted with the work, which he felt might prove itself 'a hit,' 'but that is a dangerous invocation' [and] Seamus Deane thought the 'marvellous piece' was unmistakable 'Kilrovian'" (61);
- or (4) that theatre, "Kilroy has said, has to do with 'artifice at the level of revelation and concealment with illusion'" and called theatre and playwriting "ways of, inevitably, giving public exposure to privacies" (184-185)?

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Indeed, nowhere else—Lanters' text is a masterwork of scholarship, and vital to anyone who would truly endeavor to study the theatre of Thomas Kilroy.

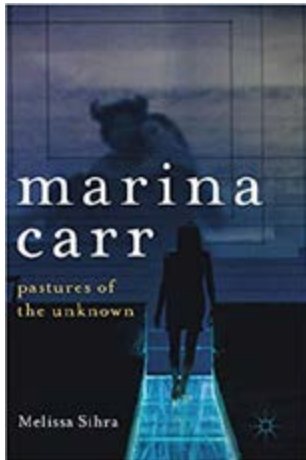


Bio: Brian McCabe

Brian McCabe holds a Ph.D. in English from Claremont Graduate University and a master's degree in Irish Literature and Culture from Boston College. Brian's experience includes teaching First Year Writing, Literature, English as a Second Language, and Legal Writing. Currently, Dr. McCabe works as Director of the Writing Center at the University of La Verne College of Law and as Managing Editor of *Foothill: a journal of poetry*. As well, Brian served as guest editor to *Women's Studies* for its two recent issues on Irish women's writing and experience. His publications include work on Brian Friel, Frank McGuinness, and Patrick Kavanagh; his current project, *Burning the Balaclava*, examines drama from the Northern Ireland Troubles. In 2015, Brian was named the Emerging Scholar for ACIS-West.

Book Review: *Marina Carr: Pastures of the Unknown* by Melissa Sihra

Reviewed by Adrienne Leavy



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Melissa Sihra, the head of Drama at Trinity College Dublin, is clearly qualified to author a study on Carr, one of the foremost Irish playwrights working in theatre today. Sihra's book, however, reaches beyond a straightforward analysis of the plays as her thesis focuses on locating Carr's theatre "within a female genealogy that revises the patriarchal sweep of modern Irish drama." Specifically, it is the creative vision of Lady Augusta Gregory which provides the analytical prism through which Sihra views Carr's contributions to Irish drama. In connecting the work of Gregory and Carr, Sihra's intention is to "illuminate a matriarchal lineage" in a tradition which has historically marginalized female playwrights, and in so doing illustrate the continuing presence of women in Irish theatre. Written from a feminist perspective in keeping with the overall tenor of Carr's impressive oeuvre, this book is nevertheless refreshingly free of deep forays into feminist analytical theory as a way of interpreting the work under discussion.

Gregory is remembered primarily as a folklorist and as one of the key individuals in the Irish Literary Revival as well as for co-founding, along with W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge, the Abbey Theatre. However, her role as a dramatist and the fact that over thirty of her plays were performed in the period 1903-1927 has largely been forgotten. As Sihra writes, "situating Gregory as the centrifugal force of Irish theatre offers a lineage with Carr which can be identified through aspects of language, landscape, women and nature." In her opening chapter Sihra identifies "a nexus of creativity between Carr and Gregory," pointing to both writers aesthetic use of folklore, myth, humor and incorporation of original forms of Hiberno-English dialect. She further argues that both playwrights "combine realms of the numinous with transformational modes of storytelling and strong female characters." In chapter two Sihra discusses Carr's early experimental plays where issues of gender identity, female sexuality, childbirth, abortion and the church's historical oppression of women are explored, often with an unexpected comedic touch. Sihra writes that collectively, Carr's first four plays "foreground an instinctive interrogation of patriarchy and the canon through humor and subversion." One of these early plays is *Low in the Dark* (1989), which debunks stereotypes and myths surrounding issues of gender. Sihra finds similarities between the folk tale narrated by the unseen character of Curtains in Carr's play, and the story of Gregory's doomed exiled lovers, Diarmuid and Grania in *Grania* (1910). She also contends that Gregory's play, in which the main character Grania crowns herself at the end of the play, "anticipates Carr's 1990s heroines who strive for autonomy within stifling patriarchy while rewriting male Greek or Irish mythic structures." As her study progresses the veracity of Sihra's argument becomes clear.

Chapter three is devoted to a discussion of Carr's breakthrough play, *The Mai* (1994), the first of her Midlands cycle of plays. As a play with a predominantly female cast Sihra identifies a feminist expansion on Brian Friel's earlier celebrated work, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), which dramatized women's lives in 1930s rural Ireland. The difference being that this play about women is also authored by a female playwright. Sihra establishes the importance of this play to Carr's canon as, in its own groundbreaking way, "*The Mai* reconstructs the patri-

archal architecture of *Lughnasa* and the foundations of Irish theatre as an all-male preserve.” With the character of the 100-year-old Grandma Fraochliáin, who was born in 1897, Carr first introduces the Midlands dialect which she has described as “very specific” to the place where she grew up. Carr’s Midlands stage dialect has direct antecedents in Lady Gregory’s aesthetic experiments with Hiberno-English dialect and Sihra argues that Carr’s next play, *Portia Coughlan* (1996), “is the apotheosis of a fully realised Midlands dialect which is carried through varying degrees of strength in Carr’s subsequent plays.” One of the most distinctive characteristics of Gregory’s plays is the rural speech patterns she incorporated into her comedies about Irish country characters to great dramatic effect. Named after a town near her home at Coole Park, the Kiltartain dialect was a mixture of local Galway dialect and Irish language syntax which drew on Gregory’s previous work in folklore collecting and recording.

The thematic device of waiting is a central motif in *The Mai*, particularly for the main character, the Mai, who is waiting in the big house she built on Owl Lake for her husband Robert to return. Sihra believes such inaction is used by Carr to comment on women’s lack of agency. She writes: “each of Carr’s Midlands plays from 1994 to 2000 are variations on *Waiting for Godot* where the plot device of waiting is an expression of woman’s stasis within patriarchal structures.” In this chapter Sihra also outlines the repressive legal, cultural and sexual climate which Irish women were still contending with as late as the 1980s and 1990s, which adds additional resonance to her discussion of Carr’s work and underscores the urgency for this kind of drama.

The third play in Carr’s midlands cycle is *By the Bog of Cats...*(1998), about three generations of Traveller women: Big Josie Swane, her daughter Hester, and her granddaughter Josie. A critical and commercial success, the play is a modern-day retelling of Euripides’s *Medea*, with Hester Swane reimagined as a mother who kills her child out of love rather than as the vengeful child killer Medea. Sihra finds parallels in the outcast status of Hester Swane and the historical exclusion of women from the main stages of Irish theatre. The absent figure of Big Josie, missing for over three decades, is in Sihra’s reading “a specter of womanhood on the Irish stage whose unexplained disappearance has simply been accepted.” Returning to her opening thesis regarding the aesthetic connections between Carr and Lady Gregory, Sihra argues that “in *By the Bog of Cats ...* Carr continues this lineage of wandering women from Gregory’s *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*, *The Gaol Gate*, *Grania* and *The Full Moon*.” Lady Gregory’s comedy, *The Full Moon*, is read as anticipating *By the Bog of Cats...* in that it is also a play “about community and the symbolic power of pagan or alternative energies to challenge social bigotry.”

The penultimate play in Carr’s Midland cycle is the searing drama *On Raftery’s Hill* (2000), which deals with the issues of rape and incest and how such abuse often repeats itself through generations. The familiar dramatic setting of the home and specifically the kitchen are used to chilling effect in Carr’s play, as the house is a place of psychological imprisonment and stasis for the female characters and their terrorized brother, Ded. Moreover, the rape of the eighteen year old Sorrel by her father Red Raftery occurs on the kitchen table. In Sihra’s reading, *On Raftery’s Hill* can be interpreted as a “theatrical hologram” of Gregory’s *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902). Set in the revolutionary year of 1798, Gregory’s play centers on a Poor Old woman (the feminized figure of Ireland) who mysteriously appears in a cottage in the West of Ireland and exhorts the young men of the village to die a martyr’s death for Ireland. Responding to the Old Woman’s appeal, Michael, the eldest son of the house, rushes

out after the Old woman, leaving behind his family and the girl he was scheduled to marry the following day. Just as women and children are victimized and abused down through the generations in Carr's play, Gregory's Poor Old Woman has endured centuries of colonial oppression culminating in the destruction of her native language and the systematic rape of her property.

By comparing *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* to *On Raftery's Hill* Sihra draws an interesting parallel between the sacrifice of the female voice in Carr's play and the silencing of the female author Gregory, as her drama was notoriously credited solely to Yeats for many years. (Yeats is thought to have contributed to some of the later scenes.) The play, which was a huge success, first appeared in print in the second issue of *Sambain* (1902), the theatrical journal founded by Yeats, with Yeats listed as the author under the title. The 1904 issue of *Sambain* compounded this error wherein Yeats listed the new plays produced and the productions revived by the National theatre Society in 1903 in the following manner: after listing "*Twenty Five* by Lady Gregory, he continues with "*Cathleen Ni Houlihan, The Pot of Gold, and The Hour Glass, by myself.*"

One of the most interesting suggestions Sihra makes in her book is the following:

A production of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* and *On Raftery's Hill* in repertory with a single-set and ensemble casting would powerfully foreground the haunting resonances of these two works from either end of the century, enabling a ghostly confrontation between the past and present, and Gregory and Carr. Echoing the early iconography of Gregory's and Yeats's collaborative attempts to shape a nation in performance Carr dismantles the family in *On Raftery's Hill* in order to rebuild structures on the home in the twenty-first century.

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Carr's final Midlands play, *Ariel* (2002), is an acerbic commentary on the crass materialism and political corruption of the Celtic Tiger era, structured within the context of a reworking of Aeschylus's classical Greek trilogy, *The Oresteia*. Sihra deftly weaves many shameful incidents from Ireland's recent treatment of women into a discussion of the play, which involves a father killing his daughter on her sixteenth birthday in a misguided pact with God for political power. As Sihra notes, "in *Ariel* the ritual of female-sacrifice functions at the level of myth to highlight the abuse of women within today's patriarchal society." As with her other Midlands plays, nature and the surrounding landscape are steeped in memories and dark secrets. Sihra finds that "a palpable sense of unresolved trauma is never far away in *Ariel*." Sadly, her discussion of the 1984 unresolved Kerry Babies Case (where Joanne Hayes was wrongly accused of killing a newborn baby because she was pregnant out of wedlock) and the 1984 death of fifteen-year old Ann Lovett, who concealed her pregnancy and died after giving birth to a stillborn baby alone, confirms the manner in which Carr dramatically critiques the abandonment and vilification of women in Irish society.

Also discussed in this study are Carr's Tripartite "Dream Cycle" which comprises *The Cordelia Dream* (2008), *The Giant Blue Hand* (2009) and *Marble* (2009). Sihra notes that in these works, instead of the characters retelling dreams as they frequently do in the Midland plays, "the Dream Play Cycle is marked by the act of dreaming as the central dramatic through-line of each play." Whereas *The Cordelia Dream* is about artistic rivalry and patriarchal suppression of female talent, explored through the relationship of a male classical composer and his more successful daughter, *The Giant Blue Hand* was written specifically for children.

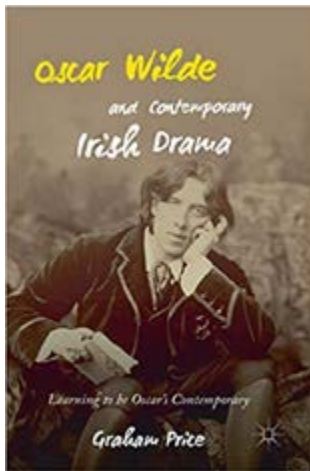
The third dream play *Marble* is set in a urban environment, which is a departure for Carr, but its depiction of the disintegration of two marriages continues to explore one of the major themes of Carr's theatre – the tragedy of the unlived life. Again, Sihra finds parallels in Gregory and Carr's aesthetic incorporation of the intuitive power of the otherworld and these plays.

Chapter ten discusses three of Carr's more recent plays: *Sixteen Possible Glimpses* (2011), *Phaedra Backwards* (2011), and *Hecuba* (2015). In *Sixteen Possible Glimpses* fourteen scenes offering varying perspectives on the life of Anton Chekhov provide Carr with an opportunity to challenge the dominance of the male centered canon and also explore the craft of writing. Continuing her questioning of the patriarchal foundations of literature, Carr turns her attention to classical Greek theatre in her next two plays. As she did in earlier work, Carr refuses to endorse Euripides's depiction of women, and in *Phaedra Backwards* she reverses the sexual dynamics found in the myth of *Hippolytus*, where Phaedra falls in love with her stepson Hippolytus. In Carr's version it is the younger man Hippolytus who falls in love with his stepmother. *Hecuba* is a powerful anti-war play that exposes the effects of conflict and violence upon women and children, and in her sympathetic treatment of the figure of Queen Hecuba Sihra writes that yet again "Carr challenges patriarchal constructions of history and myth."

In conclusion, *Marina Carr: Pastures of the Unknown* is a well-argued and thought-provoking addition to the small but growing corpus of critical studies on the theatre of Marina Carr. As she ably demonstrates throughout the book, Gregory's plays offer an intuitive lineage with Carr which can be identified in their similar use of language, myth, women, the transformative power of storytelling and the infinite energies of nature and the metaphysical realm. With this extensively researched study Sihra succeeds in reconnecting the severed bridge between two crucial dramatists, Carr and Gregory, in order to acknowledge a foundational status for all women in Irish theatre.

Book Review: *Oscar Wilde and Contemporary Irish Drama: Learning to be Oscar's Contemporary* by Graham Price

Reviewed by Adrienne Leavy



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In this detailed study, Graham Price analyzes the extent to which Oscar Wilde's drama, critical essays and aesthetic theories have influenced a number of contemporary Irish playwrights, specifically five major dramatists who emerged in the second half of the twentieth century – Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Thomas Kilroy, Frank McGuinness and Marina Carr. In his opening chapter Price argues that “the persistence of Wilde's relevance to Irish art has not been given its due acknowledgment,” and he outlines the case for placing “Oscar Wilde alongside W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge, and Samuel Beckett as a major influence on contemporary Irish theatre.” Building on the argument outlined in chapter one, and drawing on various strands of literary criticism, Price proceeds to engage in a thorough analysis of the philosophical Wildean underpinnings of many of the seminal Irish plays of the twentieth century.

Price begins with the work of Brian Friel, who he argues, “was the first contemporary Irish dramatist to productively engage with the legacy of Oscar Wilde.” Several Friel plays are discussed; however, the primary focus is on two plays in particular, *Philadelphia, Here I Come* (1964) and *Faith Healer* (1979). Adopting an intertextual approach, Price cites examples of Wilde's critical writing, specifically three of his essays, “The Critic as Artist,” “The Decay of Lying,” and “The Truth of Masks,” as well as his dramatic works, to demonstrate Friel's “partiality toward the Wildean oeuvre,” not just in the aforementioned plays but in his entire dramatic oeuvre. Price also draws a fruitful comparison between Wilde's gothic novel, *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (1889), and his play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), with Friel's *Philadelphia*, in which the character of Gar is split into two distinct characters, Public Gar and his alter ego or conscience, Private Gar. Price demonstrates how in the world of Wilde and Friel the physical space is as important as the psychic space the characters occupy as their behaviour changes depending on their location. (For example, Gar's interaction with other character or alone with his thoughts, and Wilde's Jack or Ernest depends on whether the character is in town or the country). Similarly, Dorian's explorations of the seedier side of London cause him to behave in a different manner than when he is at home in the more respectable area of London. All three works deal with the concept of the “double” or the “enemy within.” Price also sees a commonality in how male characters in both Wilde and Friel's plays are “presented as being somewhat ineffectual and occasionally emotionally stunted when compared to their female counterparts.”

Price further contends that “the precise area of Wildean philosophy that Friel found so attractive [was] the aesthetics of lying,” and his analysis of *Faith Healer* bears out the veracity of his thesis. In the character of Frank Hardy, the doomed faith healer in the play, Friel draws a portrait of an artist who, deliberately and for effect, fictionalizes past experiences. He is in effect fulfilling Wilde's belief that a man should invent his own myth. For Price, Frank Hardy can be categorized as a being “a specifically Wildean artist,” where truth is subsumed in favor of art and “what is unreal and non-existent.” Price also points out that “just as Wilde makes the distinction between different forms of lying in ‘The Decay of Lying,’ so does Friel in *Faith Healer*,” as Grace and Frankie, the other two characters in the play, merely misremember events rather than intentionally fabricate memories.

Chapter three focuses on Tom Murphy, whose work Price interprets as mirroring Wilde's philosophy that art should be moral, ethical and positive. Price concentrates on several Murphy plays, beginning with his first major work, *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961). Here, Price finds parallels in the play's tragic conclusion, where Michael kills his younger brother Des, with the conclusion of *Dorian Grey*. Ironically, in both instances, the protagonists find themselves bound to their past lives by virtue of their attempts to kill that past. Price also discusses one of Murphy's most important plays, *The Gigli Concert* (1983), about an Irishman who seeks out an English quack psychotherapist, J.P. W. King, to help him sing like the operatic tenor Benaimino Gigli. In the self-contained world of King's office (which is also his home), themes of self-invention and artistic and spiritual fulfillment are played out in the context of a world of opposites and doubling, such that at the play's conclusion, the roles of the Irishman and King have been reversed, and King magically achieves the power to sing like Gigli. Price argues that Murphy uses the interaction between the two men "to subtly probe issues concerning national and racial identities and stereotypes in a distinctly Wildean fashion." Like Wilde, Murphy demonstrates considerable skepticism towards conventional stabilizing narratives, favoring instead a combination of real and aesthetic ideals. Price also examines the similarities between the representation of women in *The Gigli Concert* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in that in both instances, women are viewed by the male protagonists in terms of the binary oppositions between real and ideal. Two other Murphy plays are also discussed in this chapter, *Conversations on a Homecoming* (1985) and *The Alice Trilogy* (2005).

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Wilde's influence on Thomas Kilroy, the playwright who is the focus of chapter four, is more obviously apparent than with some of the other writers discussed in this study. As he points out at the beginning of this chapter, Kilroy has readily credited the importance of Anglo-Irish dramatists such as Wilde to the Irish dramatic canon, and his views on the "autonomous nature of art" echo Wilde's philosophy. Kilroy's *Double Cross* (1986), concerning the intertwined fate of two reinvented Irishmen, Brendan Bracken and William Joyce, is a play about characters creating alternative lives to the ones bequeathed to them at birth. One of this study's central arguments is that "the figure of the double and the act of doubling are major forces within Wilde's oeuvre." Kilroy's utilization of the trope in *Double Cross* is shown to be akin to Wilde's utilization in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Price also reads Bracken as a version of Jack Worthing in *Earnest*). Bracken's Irish mastery and manipulation of the English language is another theme in the play, and as Price points out, "the power of English in the hands of Wilde and Bracken was their way of coping with their status as Irishmen in England."

In his discussion of *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* (1997), Price characterizes Kilroy's play as "a Wildean play about Wilde," not simply because of the subject matter of the play, but rather because he views it as "an attempt to depict Wilde's life in a self-consciously theatrical and fictitious manner." The play also underscores the Wildean impulse toward anti-realism (always a strength in Kilroy's work) as it employs puppets as a means of propelling the action forward. Price further argues that by incorporating excerpts from Wilde's work into the play Kilroy was able to present Wilde's life as "an overtly self-theatricalising process."

Price next turns his attention to the plays of Frank McGuinness, and given McGuinness's stated interest in and admiration for Wilde it is not surprising that it is in this writer's canon where he finds the presence of Wilde most palpable. He writes: "McGuinness's notion of the dandy as an important figure in modern drama, his love of theatrical (metaphorical) masks, and his willingness to champion the world of illusion over that of the real make him an overtly Wildean dramatist." One crucial component of McGuinness's drama that Price draws on to support his thesis is McGuinness's use of comedy and wit in what are ostensibly

serious dramas. Likewise, his incorporation of high and low culture and what Price describes as “his refusal to subscribe to any grand narrative regarding versions of personal or collective selfhoods,” place McGuinness squarely in the contemporary moment but also make him an inheritor “of the Wildean aesthetic that anticipated postmodernism.” Price focuses on four of McGuinness’s plays from his early and middle period which he reads as being particularly indebted to Wilde’s legacy: *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Toward the Somme* (1985), *Carthaginians* (1988), *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me* (1992), and *Dolly West’s Kitchen* (1999).

The Wildean trope of doubling is a major structural device in *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Toward the Somme*, with the eight male characters divided into pairs. With regard to the play’s companion piece, *Carthaginians* which is haunted by the 1972 tragedy of Bloody Sunday, Price draws attention to the fact that in both *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Toward the Somme* and *Carthaginians*, the central character is an outsider, a modern-day Wildean dandy, whose sexuality is used performatively. In his analysis of *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me* Price points out that transcending national differences becomes “intertwined (not unlike the underlying plot in *The Importance of Being Earnest*) with being released from the binds of gender and sexual difference.” He also reads McGuinness’s play as a “variation” on Wilde’s long prison letter, “De Profundis,” most obviously with its prison setting, but also in terms of its theme of ‘purgation and redemption through suffering and pain.’ Wilde’s influence is also overt in *Dolly West’s Kitchen*, where Price finds “a Wildean rejection of facts and realism for performance and illusion.”

The lone female dramatist considered in this study is Marina Carr, who is the subject of chapter six. Characterizing her plays as “the perfect example of ‘verbal operas,’” Price notes that Carr herself has cited Wilde as an influence on her work, and in this chapter he focuses primarily on three plays: *Portia Coughlan* (1996), *By the Bog of Cats...* (1998), and *Woman and Scarecrow* (2006). In Price’s reading, these dramas collectively contain to greater or lesser degrees three Wildean elements, which he identifies as “tragic female leads in the tradition of Wilde’s *Salome*, society satire, and characters that seamlessly act as doubles of other characters in the play.” Specifically, Price’s discussion focuses on the heroines in these plays and he notes that “a lot of the tragedy of representation that is staged in Carr’s plays is often relatable to the inequality of gender relations and the rigidity of gender norms that Wilde diagnosed in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.”

Finding “the same fusion of the modern and the mythic” in both Carr’s drama and Wilde’s *Salome*, Price points to a number of commonalities between Portia Coughlan, Hester Swane and Wilde’s heroine Salome. In Price’s reading, “both Wilde and Carr use suicide in their tragedies as a way for their characters to escape the worlds in which they are trapped.” This is especially evident in Wilde’s *Salome* and Carr’s *Portia Coughlan* and *By the Bog of Cats*, for as Price points out in all these dramas, “women are terrifyingly ‘unfeminine’ and they insist on having the final say on their deaths and the manner in which it occurs.” In *Woman and Scarecrow* Carr creates two characters that are different parts of the same entity. Price reads the way in which Carr uses the trope of doubling to convey fractured subjectivity as reminiscent of Wilde’s interest in “the body/soul union.” However, unlike Wilde’s *Dorian Grey*, or even Friel’s Private and Public Gar, Price concludes that in *Woman and Scarecrow* Carr successfully “stages Irish literature’s greatest alliance between self and soul.”

This study concludes with a brief examination of the work of two additional dramatists, Martin McDonagh and Mark Halloran, whom Price identifies as representing the continuing influence of Wilde on Irish drama. It would be interesting to see Price return to a consideration of these two playwrights at a later point in their career.

In conclusion, Price offers a comprehensive and discerning thesis of how a Wildean influence, whether it be derived from Wilde's drama or his aesthetic theories, can be read into the dramatists who are the subject of this study. This allows for exciting new ways in which to consider the work of these writers which goes beyond mere comparative analysis. Not only does this study prompt readers to view the work of these playwrights through a different, thought provoking prism, it also accomplishes Price's other stated goal which is to underscore Wilde's fundamental importance to contemporary Irish drama. *Oscar Wilde and Contemporary Irish Drama* clearly shows just how relevant the work of Oscar Wilde is to the continuing narrative of the Irish theatrical tradition.

Essay: “Belfast’s Lyric: Charting 50 dramatic years in Northern Irish Theatre History”

by Michael Quinn



Mary O'Malley with blueprints for the new theatre in 1968.

Photo courtesy of the Lyric Theatre, Belfast.

Three days after Belfast’s Lyric Theatre opened on October 26, 1968, its founder and artistic director Mary O’Malley resigned in protest at demands for the British National Anthem to be played after every performance. A harbinger of difficult times ahead as the fledgling venue struggled to find its feet, it was not an auspicious start despite O’Malley’s swift return as “artistic advisor”, retaining the position until her retirement in 1976.

Worse was to follow. The bloody sectarian conflict that came to be known, with typical Ulster diffidence, as “the Troubles” erupted the same year and blighted Northern Ireland for the next three decades, its violent aftershocks still being felt. Situated in leafy, South Belfast by the River Lagan, the Lyric was not immune to the events unfolding on its doorstep.

In 1975, on the first night of Patrick Galvin’s *We Do it for Love*, a musical about the Troubles, a 200lb bomb exploded under O’Malley’s car taking a chunk out of the theatre’s exterior. “Everyone’s a critic,” one wag allegedly said at the time. Undaunted, the run continued and gave the Lyric an early success, with a UK tour bookended by appearances at the Royal Court and Young Vic in London.

The company’s response to the explosion – as much, perhaps, as Galvin’s title – became the abiding metaphor for Northern Ireland’s only building-based theatre company as it grappled with realising O’Malley’s vision of “a poet’s theatre”, weathered perennial funding problems and survived a turnover of artistic directors that might have caused other companies to buckle and fold. With characteristically headstrong Belfast fortitude, it survived and this weekend celebrates its 50th anniversary.



Liam Neesen in the Rise and Fall of Barney Kerrigan (1977).

Photo courtesy of the Lyric Theatre, Belfast.

The Lyric's origins date back to 1951 when the Cork-born, Belfast-domiciled Labour councillor O'Malley and her doctor husband, Pearse, formed the Lyric Players Theatre in the front room of their home. Demand led to the building of a bespoke performing space, triggering the ambition for a permanent home.

Echoing issues with its recent rebuild in 2011, the company's 300-seat home was scheduled to open in 1967 but delayed by what *The Stage* reported as "financial problems that necessitated a change in the architectural plans".

When it finally opened the following year, at a cost of £70,000, it announced itself with a week of WB Yeats' *Cú Chulainn* cycle, the theatre's original constitution obliging the company to produce one of his plays every season. Legend has it that the Lyric is the only company in the world to have staged all of the writer's plays.

Yeats was followed by John Whiting's *Penny for a Song*, Peter Shaffer's *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* and then a month-long closure to allow for a "management re-organisation" that ushered in O'Malley's return alongside Christopher Fitz-Simon as director of productions. It closed again in late 1969 following allegations of "political overtones" – dangerous words in Northern Ireland at the time – in a period that witnessed the shortest tenure for the Lyric's long list of directors of production: Peter Jackson departing after just three weeks.

But the Lyric bounced back and under Jackson's successor, Tomas Mac Anna (acclaimed by Joe Dowling as "one of the great heroes of Irish theatre"), began to forge a reputation for itself. His 1972 staging of Bertolt Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* prompted *The Stage* to remark: "With a producer like him, the company could become one of the most important in the United Kingdom." Mac Anna's departure for the United States soon after curtailed that ambition.

The next two decades were marked by a dizzying succession of directors at the helm – Michael Poynton, Tony Dinner (later head of the BBC's now long-gone script department), Leon Rubin, Roland Jaquarello, Richard Digby Day and Robin Midgley among them. As artistic director for five

years from 2001, Belfast-born Paula McFetridge remains the only woman apart from O'Malley to have held the Lyric's reins.

That constant churn had some positive consequences, the theatre's sense of point and purpose constantly refreshed as it wrestled with the creative conundrum that remains the same now as it was half a century ago: how do you make theatre for a divided society?

Its response has been a mix of classic plays, modern standards and new work and the emergence of successive generations of actors and writers giving questioning voice to a region locked in perpetual dispute with itself.

Actors such as Stella McCusker, John Hewitt, Mark Mulholland, Louis Rolston and Dan Gordon created a new standard for performance in the region with then newcomers Liam Neeson, Simon Callow and Gerard Murphy all finding their feet on the Lyric stage.

Writers given a platform included Stewart Parker, John Boyd, Christina Reid, Robin Glendinning and Graham Reid, joined more recently by Gary Mitchell, Owen McCafferty, Jimmy Murphy, David Ireland and Abbie Spallen.

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Its biggest success to date has been the second iteration of Marie Jones' *Stones in His Pockets* (the first was produced by DubbelJoint) in 1999, which earned the playwright an Olivier award and introduced actor Conleth Hill to the West End. Jones' latest, *Dear Arabella*, has just opened at the Lyric.

Plans for a new home on its original site were mooted in 1993 when the price tag was £4 million. Just over a decade later, the cost had tripled. By the time its handsome new building opened in 2011, the final bill was £18.1 million.

Although ghosts of the past stubbornly haunt the Lyric, the boost provided by its new, twin-space home has seen it reassert its status as Northern Ireland's flagship theatre company. Under the stewardship of executive producer Jimmy Fay since 2014, it has broadened its reach with co-productions, touring, an active outreach and education department and a commitment to training actors and technical staff.

Though it no longer stages an annual Yeats production, the Lyric remains rooted in its community. Mary O'Malley, who died in 2006, would have approved.

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Essay: “Irish Theatre since 1950: what we remember – and what we have forgotten.”

by Patrick Lonergan

Picture the following scene. The Abbey Theatre is under attack for not producing enough plays by women. Detractors say that it's out of touch with Irish life, that it's not doing enough to bring new talent onto its stages, that change is long overdue. The theatre responds by reviving a neglected Irish classic, Teresa Deevy's *Katie Roche* – a 1936 play that explores the relationship between social class and gender in rural Ireland, and which feels as relevant to the present as the past. The critical reaction is positive: the Abbey has found a new way forward at last, it seems.

Readers familiar with recent Irish theatre will most likely identify this scenario as referring to the Abbey's 2017 production of Deevy's play. Programmed by its then new (but now under-fire) Artistic Directors Graham McLaren and Neil Murray, that version of *Katie Roche* was greeted with enthusiasm. Not only was the Abbey producing work by an Irish woman on its mainstage (something that had happened too rarely during the preceding decades), it was giving audiences the chance to see work by Caroline Byrne, an exciting young Irish director who had been successful at Shakespeare's Globe in London but who was less well-known in Dublin. Her production seemed an imaginative attempt to start addressing the inequalities in Irish theatre that had been identified when the #wakingthefeminists campaign began in 2015.

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But, perhaps surprisingly, the above description of *Katie Roche* could just as easily apply to two other productions in the Abbey's history, one from the 1990s and the other from the 1970s.

On both occasions, *Katie Roche* had been revived in response to criticism, and its production was seen as a signal of the Abbey's intention to do things differently. In 1975, the success of Deevy's play prompted the Abbey to draw up a shortlist of nineteen other women whose plays might merit production. And a 1994 revival coincided with a special edition of *Irish University Review* that was dedicated to Deevy and other female dramatists from Ireland – the implication being that past inequalities were being set to rights, especially in the wake of the 1991 controversy about the omission of women from the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature*.

But the transformative potential of those versions of the play was ultimately unrealized. The nineteen playwrights on the 1975 shortlist never made it into production: indeed, only two plays by women appeared on the Abbey's mainstage during the subsequent twenty-five years (these were Jean Binnie's *Colours* in 1988 and Marina Carr's *By the bog of Cats* in 1998). And although much was achieved in the 1990s, the fact that the #wakingthefeminists movement was considered necessary tells its own story. In 1993, for example, Caroline Williams and Katy Hayes had staged a festival of plays called *There are No Irish Women Playwrights*. The title was ironic, their aim being to raise awareness of both classic and contemporary plays by Irish women – and they succeeded brilliantly in disproving their own assertion. Yet two decades later, the problem of neglect and discrimination persisted. 'We thought we would change the world,' said Hayes in 2014. 'But the world went back to its old tricks'.

When I began writing a book about Irish Drama and Theatre since 1950, it quickly became apparent to me that these kinds of patterns are ubiquitous. Irish theatre, I knew, had played a transformative role in our society – fighting inequality, combatting abuses of power, and creating space to imagine the possibility of peace in Northern Ireland, among many other achievements. But what also became obvious was that, as Hayes had put it, the world often “went back to its old tricks”, that advances made by one generation frequently had to be fought for again by their successors. When viewed over a seventy-year span, Irish theatre seemed to progress not in a straight line but in a series of waves – pushing Irish society to change for the better, only to be pushed back.

There were many examples of this phenomenon. Nowadays we rightly celebrate the role of Irish theatre in exposing how members of the clergy had subjected people in their care to physical, emotional and sexual abuse – something that has been bravely explored in work such as Anu Productions’ 2011 play *Laundry*. But we could do more to remember the work that came earlier. There was Patricia Burke Brogan’s 1992 play *Eclipsed*, which focused on the Magdalene Laundries at a time when they were still in operation in Ireland. And in the 1960s there were plays such as Richard Johnson’s *The Evidence I Shall Give* and Mairead Ní Ghráda’s *An Triail*, both of which were well received when they demanded that Irish society do more to protect its most vulnerable citizens. Irish artists spent decades demanding that their country should acknowledge what was happening in such institutions – until they were finally listened to.

Other patterns persist. We tend to think that Irish theatre’s openness to international influences is a recent phenomenon – but our dramatic tradition has always been at its strongest when it’s been in conversation with developments abroad. The plays of Chekhov, for instance, were introduced to Ireland in a theatre run by Thomas MacDonagh and Joseph Plunkett, two leaders of the Easter Rising who saw no contradiction between patriotism and respect for international culture. And in the 1950s, the theories and politics of Bertolt Brecht were regularly debated in the pages of the *Irish Times* – with the influence of those debates later discernible in the ‘second renaissance’ of Irish drama that emerged in the 1960s with Brian Friel and Tom Murphy. For decades, Irish theatre has been enriched by people from other countries – by Deirdre O’Connell, who set up the Focus Theatre in 1967; by Patrick Mason, who won a Tony Award for directing Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa*; and by countless others. In such a context, Robert Ballagh’s recent suggestion that the Abbey’s problems arise from the nationality of its directors seems all the more objectionable.

This is not to suggest that the history of Irish theatre is like *Waiting for Godot* writ large, with the same things happening repeatedly, *ad nauseam*. But paying attention to the patterns can point us towards ways of breaking them – or, when necessary, preserving them too.

A case in point is the recent debate about the Abbey’s role in hiring Ireland-based actors, a controversy that provokes undeniably serious questions. How can Irish art flourish if Irish artists are impoverished? How can the Abbey protect its legacy as a literary theatre of world importance? And what is the Abbey’s place in the wider ecosystems of Irish and world theatre?

But it’s apparent that the Abbey’s current woes are, at least in part, a result of trying to make too severe a break from the past – particularly in the theatre’s treatment of the Irish dramatic canon. While no-one wants the Abbey to be run as a museum, the current directors have taken an unprecedented step in programming three seasons without staging plays by Sheridan, Goldsmith, Boucicault, Wilde, Shaw, Yeats, Synge, Gregory, O’Casey, Friel, Murphy, and most of the other dramatists who have made Irish theatre internationally significant.

This programming is the equivalent of running the Royal Shakespeare Company without ever staging *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet* or *Macbeth*: it might look like a bold statement at first but it ultimately risks devaluing the plays that made the theatre great in the first place. History shows that the Abbey has thrived when it's blended an imaginative attitude to Irish classics with an openness to new work (including plays from other countries) – and there are good models from previous artistic directorates that could be re-imagined for our times. Of course, it's also worth noting that if the Abbey were staging more classic Irish plays, they'd have to hire more Irish actors. So it's important to be reminded that some elements of our past are worth preserving.

But before we can preserve the past, we need to become aware of it – and as more information is found in the archives, it is becoming obvious that many stories from our theatrical past remain untold, that there is more work to be done by in understanding and celebrating the ways in which Irish theatre has made our country more tolerant, more peaceful, and more interesting. Many exciting discoveries lie ahead.

With that in mind, it seems appropriate to conclude by reproducing the Abbey's list of playwrights from 1975 (and to thank my colleague Barry Houlihan for telling me about it). The names were Alice Milligan, Lady Gregory, Mrs Bart Kennedy, Rose McKenna, Dorothy Macardle, Sadie Casey, Elizabeth Harte, Susan Glaspell, Cathleen M. O'Brennan, Margaret O'Leary, Maura Molloy, Maeve O'Callaghan, Mary Rynne, Elizabeth Connor, Nora McAdam, Olga Fielden, Margaret O'Leary, Mairead Ní Ghráda and Eibhlin Ni Shuilleabhainn.

Many of those writers were unknown in 1975; most remain unknown now. But our lack of knowledge of them is one more pattern that we have the power to break.

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Patrick Lonergan is Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies at NUI Galway and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has published several books on Irish theatre including the recent volumes *The Gate Theatre Dublin: Inspiration and Craft* (2018, co-edited with David Clare and Des Lally), and *Irish Drama and Theatre Since 1950* (Bloomsbury, 2019). His next book is an anthology of plays and adaptations by Rough Magic Theatre Company, due from Methuen Drama in January 2020.



Photo courtesy of Bobbie Hanvey. With thanks to the Lyric Theatre, Belfast for permission to photograph the theatre.

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