

Modern Irish Drama in Perspective

Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan and Shakir Mustafa (ed.): *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2000)

The birth of modern Irish drama well deserves multiple celebrations, all the more so as it was actually taking place in a number of significant steps. Christopher Murray's plenary lecture delivered at the 1997 ESSE Conference in Debrecen under the title "The Foundation of the Modern Irish Theatre: A Centenary Assessment" commemorated the fact, as the published version of the talk words it, that the modern Irish theatre was "initiated by Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn exactly one hundred years ago this year."¹ On a wet, late summer afternoon in a picturesque spot of County Galway in 1897, those three made plans for the anticolonial project of the Irish Literary Theatre, which had its first performance, staging Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* and Martyn's *The Heather Field*, in May 1899.

1999 was, then, another year offering due cause for centennial celebrations. The volume surveyed by the present review contains an impressive

selection from the papers delivered at a conference hosted by Indiana University in Bloomington in May that year, under the straightforward title "Nationalism and National Theatre: 100 Years of Irish Drama." Providing the book that stemmed from the event with the subtitle *Widening the Stage* alludes to at least two of its important qualities. On the one hand, that the essays give credit to the diversity of the modern Irish theatre, discussing its heterogeneous manifestations in the light of recent scholarship. The subtitle, on the other hand, also suggests that modern Irish drama has undergone considerable thematic as well as technical enrichment during its century-long existence. Bearing in mind that in 1997 Christopher Murray published *Twentieth-century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation*, which constitutes a detailed historical overview of the subject, to be followed by Nicholas Grene's *The Politics of Irish Drama* in 1999, a book scrutinising the interplay of drama and political context through the comparative analyses of a selection of texts by playwrights from the 19th century Dion Boucicault to our contemporaries, the new collection seems to employ yet another set of perspectives to widen the discourse about modern Irish drama. At the same time, undeniably, it dis-

plays both the advantages and the disadvantages of being a multi-authored venture, colourful and kaleidoscopic though not without certain constraints imposed on by the sweep of the material initially available.

Part I of the book presents essays under the title "Challenging the Received View of Early-Twentieth-Century Irish Theatre." The three authors are involved in persuading the reader that the movement we have become accustomed to identifying as the Irish dramatic renaissance was broader both in scope and strategy than the concepts and politics associated with the Abbey Theatre. John P. Harrington's "The Founding Years and the Irish National Theatre That Was Not" highlights the contradiction that Irish drama proved to be international from its origins, despite the founders' repeated claim, first laid down in their famous manifesto, that it was strictly national. The opposition of "cosmopolitan influence and the ambition for singularity that was intrinsically local" culminated in the inevitable tension between "goals and practices" (6, 15) when Yeats considered Ibsen then Shakespeare to be a model, the Irish plays were taken for tours in Britain and America, and Gregory translated Molière into "Kiltartanese." Thus a

"provocative tradition" emerged, concludes Harrington (16), pointing toward the complexities of the present. In short, the Irish national theatre, represented by the early Abbey, was conceived as decidedly anticolonial but saved itself from turning essentialist. The essays by Nelson Ó Ceallaigh Ritschel and Laura E. Lyons draw attention to the existence of alternative theatrical ventures. Focusing on urban playwriting which hallmarked the activity of the Theatre of Ireland in contrast with the mostly rural settings of the Abbey, and the representation of regional nationalism in Ulster drama, both authors redeem some important works of the period for the interested reader. These achievements had, without doubt, their value in being consciously different from and even satirical of the rivals, yet it is probably the lack of the international element, so conspicuously fertilising the choices and decisions of the Abbey, that rendered them dated too soon.

Called "Theorizing and Historicizing Theatre Controversies" Part II includes theoretically grounded approaches to early twentieth century theatre polemics which, in their own ways, address the question of how competing versions of nationalism affected the writing, staging policy and reception of plays. One crucial

aspect of the Irish Literary Revival was that texts often responded to texts. Lucy McDiarmid extends the notion and practice of intertextuality to theatre controversies in her essay "The Abbey and the Theatrics of Controversy, 1909–1915," contending that the production career of some plays tended to be constructed in view of that of others. Her convincing example is G. B. Shaw's *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet*, a play that was banned in England but welcomed by the Abbey, which, two years after the *Playboy* riots of 1907, was happy to "advertise itself to the world as defying the authority of English law and thereby win back its nationalist supporters" (60). Nationalism Abbey style aside, hardboiled nationalist politics was, of course, underpinning the original scandal over Synge's *Playboy*, the motives of which are reinterpreted here by Susan Cannon Harris's essay titled "More Than a Morbid, Unhealthy Mind: Public Health and the *Playboy* Riots" in the context of the eugenist movement. The argument details English scientific ideas about health and the predictable Irish resistance to their influence attributing, concomitantly, "the anti-*Playboy* hysteria" to the anxieties "which referred to the health and purity of the *male* body" (73) rather than to the concern with

the irreverent representation of Irish womanhood, as it was formerly believed. Contemporary comments on the play are quoted from in support of the new interpretation, yet it remains hardly questionable that the elusive complexity and multiple ironies of Synge's work must have provoked nationalist feeling for several different reasons, of which the anxiety about males being shown as degenerate could well have been one, but just one. Once the scandalous reception of *Playboy* has been revisited, a reconsideration of Sean O'Casey's, in its own time similarly provocative, *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) cannot be far behind. "Saying 'No' to Politics: Sean O'Casey's *Dublin Trilogy*" by Shakir Mustafa, however, limits its approach to a narrowly understood political perspective. The author repeatedly states that O'Casey denies narrativity to Irish nationalism (96, 107), and criticises the playwright for his "insistence that nationalism is synonymous with its retrograde elements," with which he facilitated the growth of revisionism (103). While elsewhere Mustafa argues that "the cultural nationalism of the Gaelic Revival may be read as a benevolent component of the colonial experience,"² paying attention to several factors, he fails to analyse O'Casey's

critique of nationalism in context and in view of its particular aesthetic here.

A widely held assumption about the development of Irish drama is that the period between the 1930s and the early 1960s constituted a kind of impasse, paralleling the conservatism and isolationism of the postcolonial nation state. However, Part III of the book, under the title "Reconstructing Drama During the 'Fatal Fifties'" dedicates itself to demonstrating that Irish drama did not go dormant even at that time. Not accidentally, the choice of the essayists falls on authors who spent most of their life in self-imposed exile from Ireland or, in Brendan Behan's case, could not accept the country's political direction.³ References to "theatre business," as Yeats put it, abound at the beginning of the section; in his "O'Casey's *The Drums of Father Ned* in Context" Christopher Murray analyses the troubled history of the play set against the contemporary decline of the Abbey, a telling sign of a cultural crisis. According to the discussion that says "no" to any reductionist view of the playwright, "the wider drama the text establishes is the story of Ireland in the 1950s, a story of secrecy, pretence, acquiescence, and oppression" (127). An intriguing focus of the other two

essays is the issue of self-construction and identity. Stephen Watt's "Love and Death: A Reconsideration of Behan and Genet" deploys the concerns and terminology of cultural studies, a discipline unarguably international in its goals and strategies. Supported by the study of the two playwrights' respective autobiographies, it is the "performative dimension" (133) of their juxtaposed dramatic works that Watt compares here, stressing, as he does, Behan's inquiry into post-war English-Irish relations at the same time. Last in the chapter comes Judith Roof's paper titled "Playing Outside with Samuel Beckett." Selecting plays that are justifiably regarded as masterpieces of the international memory theatre,⁴ the author interrogates how they perform "the relation of self to self through time" (150). It is especially in the case of *That Time* (1974) that Roof highlights how, through its patterned references to place, the play posits Ireland "as an unrecoverable past" (154), which is apparently connected with the Irish Protestant Beckett's oscillating, exiled identity.

While the discussion of some of Beckett's later drama obviously steps out of the targeted time span of Part III, Part IV, under the strangely narrow title "Contemporary Theatre Companies and Revivals," reaches

further back in time than the 1950s. The first three pieces address women playwrights' works, registering the widening of the Irish stage toward gender issues and alternative forms of dramatisation. All three contributors imply, as part of their argument, what Mary Trotter (in the essay "Translating Women Into Irish Theatre History") directly posits concerning the use of "the familiar feminist strategy of placing female characters and their stories in the subject position of the drama, reclaiming an aspect of the Irish experience – women's – which has been alternately idealised and ignored in the Irish mainstream tradition" (164). It is a highly welcome fact that in "Neither Here nor There: The Liminal Position of Teresa Deevy and Her Female Characters" Christie Fox contributes to the revaluation of an Abbey playwright's work which, despite its psychological complexities, has been a noticeable casualty of the gender bias in the Irish theatre until quite recently. Fox's main interest lies in tracing how Deevy portrays "a profound ambivalence about the position of women in the Irish society of the 1930s" (197). However, the analysis of the drama *Katie Roche* (1936), while intending to offer an alternative interpretation of Katie's puzzling final submission to move to

Dublin with her husband at his demand, does not probe into the inherent ambiguity of this conventional gesture which will probably advance the young woman's achievement of freedom and selfhood. In a measure comparably, I believe, to Grania's famously shocking choice to rejoin the old king at the end of Lady Gregory's play about her. On the other hand, the "attraction for the glamorous" and the "deeply serious striving after identity and fulfilment" that another critic recognises in the character of Katie Roche⁵ resurface in most female protagonists of Marina Carr in the 1990s. Trotter's paper and Carla J. McDonough's "I've never been just me': Rethinking Women's Positions in the Plays of Christina Reid" focus on the characteristic matrilineal narratives and the stories of generations of women in the respective Southern and Northern visions of Carr and Reid. Deploying feminist criticism, the interconnected analyses become the vehicle of pointing out some differences between these two prominent figures of contemporary Irish women's playwriting. While Carr's work appears to be more sophisticated in technique, it is Reid who, most radically in *Tea in a China Cup* (1983), emphasises women's questioning of social and family traditions from within.

Still in Part IV, the contributors' interest in experimentation as well as in the work of alternative theatre enterprises continues. Under the title "Playwrights of the Western World: Synge, Murphy, McDonagh" José Lanteris compares the representation of the West, once considered to be the heart of the nation and national identity, in the plays of three authors. What ties them together, according to Lanteris, is the use of storytelling as a characteristically "Western" device, "but through that device, each dramatist reflects the concerns and anxieties of his age" (221). In Synge the need for transformation gains expression, in Murphy speaking out proves to be the way to personal healing, while for McDonagh language and identity are both in crisis. The essay also contains some insightful diagnostic remarks about the latter's postmodernism with its spotlight on the deceptiveness of words, which might evoke Tom Stoppard and especially his *After Magritte* (1970) as yet another parallel for the reader to help locate the allegedly controversial McDonagh phenomenon. Lauren Onkey's "The Passion Machine Theatre Company's Everyday Life" sets out to document the ex-centric existence and socially committed operation of one of the "small theatres" proliferating in contemporary Ireland, which started in

1983. The description of the company's goals refers to the construction of "the everyday" (225), a fairly loose term to invite the author to look at its interpretation in some Passion Machine plays. One of the examples, *Brownbread* (1986) by the novelist Roddy Doyle is found to have a story hilariously funny and frightening at the same time.

Part V of the book, "Irish History on the Contemporary Stage," presents essays that interrogate the dramatisation of an issue of absolutely paramount importance for the postcolonial nation's understanding of itself, which keeps on challenging writers down to our time. In "The End of History: The Millennial Urge in the Plays of Sebastian Barry" Scott T. Cummings quotes Fintan O'Toole on the already widely noticed literary phenomenon that in Ireland, because past and present are so intricately overlapping, there are no history plays only plays about history, that is historiographical plays (291). It is not the facts of history primarily, but the questions of its perception and representation that these works raise, as attested by the contributions. Kathleen Hohenleitner's "The Book at the Centre of the Stage: Friel's *Making History* and *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*" reads Brian Friel's historiographical play and the highly

controversial anthology, both products of the Derry-based Field Day, side by side, to foreground the power of the written record to negotiate identity in its relation to history. Coincidentally in a telling way, a self-conscious interest in the reading and writing of texts has been found a significant element in some of the best contemporary poetry of Northern Ireland as well.⁶

Dealing with three outstanding playwrights the rest of the essays is best surveyed for new insights regarding the strategies of dramatising experience steeped in history, while they also recycle some of what has been pointed out by other scholars in the literature. Marilynn Richtarik, in "Ireland, the Continuous Past: Stewart Parker's Belfast History Plays" underscores the "multiplicity of voices" with their simultaneous comments on the interaction of past and present (267) in the writer's best work. The essay "Frank McGuinness and the Ruins of Irish History" by James Hurt turns to Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" for its theoretical underpinning to identify McGuinness' treatment of the past in a form called "the history of moments" (275). The view of settings as spatial metonyms is another addition of the author to the bulk of criticism on McGuinness, stating that

places related to death and incarceration (like the cemetery in *Carthaginians* or the prison cell in *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*) are associated with the destructiveness of history and the ruins it has left behind (283). In the essay concerned with Barry, already cited above, the author registers some devices of the kind of memory play under scrutiny (294); a more thorough investigation here might have led to a better understanding of the form so current on the Irish and postcolonial stage, but usually too vaguely described in its technical realisation. Nevertheless, it becomes obvious that Barry is a playwright who inspires much further critical comment on his dramaturgical choices. For instance, in another collection by international scholars, Csilla Bertha provides an appropriate frame of reference for the analysis of how the protagonist of the play *Our Lady of Sligo* (1998) has been defeated by history, when tracing in her desolate character ironic echoes of "the one-time goddesses and queens."⁷

Modern Irish drama and theatre forming one complex body, the links between parts of the book establish themselves in several ways; suffice it to mention how national and international, traditional and experimental, mainstream and alternative, political and aesthetic, central and

marginal emerge as key-concepts that structure the essays both individually and together. The volume does not define itself as an assessment, yet it is clearly a landmark in the informed critical investigation and interpretation of a century of Irish drama by telling a seamless narrative which relies on, interlocks with, challenges, as well as inspires others. Since the Irish National Theatre Society was founded in 1903, and 1904 was the year when the Abbey Theatre opened, the ongoing series of celebrations will by no means end here.

MÁRIA KURDI

NOTES

1 Christopher Murray, "The Foundation of the Modern Irish Theatre: A Centenary As-

essment," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 4.1-2 (1998), pp. 40-41.

2 Shakir Mustafa, "Revisionism and Revival: A Postcolonial Approach to Irish Cultural Nationalism," *New Hibernia Review* 2.3 (1998), p. 53.

3 Cf. Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997), p. 149.

4 Analysed in a chapter of Jeanette R. Malkin, *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999) 37-69.

5 Cathy Leeney, "Themes of Ritual and Myth in Three Plays by Teresa Deevy," *Irish University Review* 25.1 (1995), p. 100.

6 Neil Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland: Text, Context, Intertext* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), p. 79.

7 Csilla Bertha, "'A Haunted Group of Plays': The Drama of Sebastian Barry," in: *Twentieth-Century Theatre and Drama in English: Festschrift for Heinz Kosok on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Jürgen Kamm (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1999), p. 540.