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Menace and Play

Dissipating and Emerging Dramaturgies in Irish Theatre in the 1990s

Irish Drama has changed radically over the last century, and especially during the last decade of the twentieth century. Globally, the state of Irish theatre has never seemed healthier. The vibrancy and recent accomplishments, in terms of box office and awards, of Martin McDonagh, Conor McPherson, Frank McGuinness, Marina Carr, Marie Jones, and of course Brian Friel bear this out. Just as clearly, there has been a dissolution of a dramatic practice that goes back to J.M. Synge and Sean O'Casey, that consolidated in the late 1950s and early 60s, and that later matured and modified, while retaining reasonably consistent artistic aspirations and fundamentals. I map this transition by portraying what seems to me to be shared dramaturgical conventions of an older male generation and the demise or depreciation of those practices (there is still residual evidence of it) in a younger one. I will argue that it is a shift from a post-colonial to a postmodern consciousness that accounts for much of the changes. To make my case, I will work primarily with Brian Friel, Tom Murphy and Frank McGuinness and offset them against Sebastian Barry, Conor McPherson, Martin McDonagh and Mark O'Rowe.

I

From the late 1980s until the end of the millennium and after, Irish society altered racially at a pace previously unknown, thanks to the impact of European Union membership and the structural funding that ensued from it, direct foreign inward investment mainly provided by American multinationals, benefits from the Peace Process in Northern Ireland through the Good Friday Agreement (1994), a progressively more liberal agenda informing legislation, significant increases in prosperity per capita, declining unemployment, and substantially decreased emigration figures.

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Indeed the rise in immigration and multiculturalism, and the decline in the influence of the Catholic Church in part due to scandals, increasing acceptance of same sex couples, the election of two women Presidents, a slackening of the propensity to include Britain in the evaluation of Irish identities and cheaper travel internationally, have all led to different types of mobility, individually, economically and socially. During this period Irish Theatre transformed its dramaturgy as well, and I stress this without ever claiming a direct relationship between society and text. Arts funding altered significantly, the quality of training and educational opportunities for the sector strengthened, there was a greater alertness to what was happening internationally in terms of form and content, and also, Irish production companies took their work abroad more frequently to events like the Edinburgh Festival, and some Irish directors trained abroad and also allowed their work to be informed by international best practice. The Dublin Theatre and the Galway Arts Festivals, amongst others, were further opportunities for companies to engage different experiences and knowledge. Most substantially, international companies were increasingly willing to perform Irish plays, either in the language/context as written, as adaptations or in translation. (It could be argued that written texts were more exportable than individual performers, designers or directors.)

So, globally, since the mid-1990s in particular, the state of Irish theatre has never seemed healthier and a great deal of scholarship has followed the impact of this body of work across the globe. The vibrancy and recent accomplishments, in terms of box office and awards for Sebastian Barry, Conor McPherson, Billy Roche, Frank McGuinness, Tom Kilroy, Anne Devlin, Marina Carr, Martin McDonagh (London-Irish), Enda Walsh, and of course Brian Friel bear this out. The late twentieth century dramaturgy of Irish theatre must be traced back through Samuel Beckett to William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, and, in particular, John Millington Synge and Sean O'Casey. These writers collectively shaped the dramaturgy of the century in very different but considerable ways. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, new and different types of writing emerged; Tom Murphy's *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961) and Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964) were the plays that most pronounce the emergence of a new approach to writing and performing for Irish Theatre. Many argue that these plays were a reaction against the conventional conformism of the writing from the 1930s forward, but current scholarship on this period argues that this was not necessarily a period of stagnation and traditionalism, but one of vitality and experimentalism, if one looks beyond the activities of the more conservative producing houses. But the plays of this new era from the late 1950s forward were cognisant of developments in Europe and America, were intent on addressing sub-

jects that had long remained undiscussed, were focused on confronting repression, injustice and the historical and contemporaneous implications of colonialism.

In fact, it was not until the mid-1980s/early 1990s that such a dominant approach to theatre writing began to shift and modify noticeably. This says as much about the relative stagnancy of Irish society during this period, as it does about the rich seam of concerns that were available to these writers. Of course the emergence of the Northern Irish "Troubles" in the late 1960s obliged an additional type of additional focus.[1] Here in this article I map this transition from the late 1980s/early 1990s into a period of contemporary writing towards the end of the millennium, by portraying what seems to me to be shared dramaturgical conventions of an older generation and the demise or depreciation of those practices (there is obviously still residual evidence of it). I will also identify the distinctive components of the newer generation of writing.

Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* (1979) and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), Frank McGuinness' *Observe The Marching Towards The Somme* (1985) and Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire* (1985) are four transition plays which exemplify the conclusion of this era and point to the emergence of a new era in writing. However, it is within the framework of metatheatre/play that I specifically wish to focus the transitions in this article, how each group, the first and second post-war generation and the contemporary cohort of playwrights, deploys the notion of play or performativity in very different ways, the former utilising play as a subversive strategy, the latter using play either to heighten violence, to make strange character interaction or to utilise play through a framework of naivety and innocence. I argue that the dislocation of play, even its disempowerment, is the key to the demise of an older dramatic practice and the emergence of a new one, signalled in part by a loss of context. By metatheatre, I mean play as it is present in play-within-a-play, storytelling, role-play, re-enactment, pretence, disguise and self-conscious performativity. Specifically, for the first and second generation post-war playwrights, play often provides the external framework, where difference is accentuated, possibilities experienced, and where identities and fears can be processed. For Richard Schechner "Playing, like ritual, is at the heart of performance. . . . Play is looser, more permissive – forgiving in precisely those areas where ritual is enforcing, flexible where ritual is rigid. To put it another way: re-

1. As early as 1992 Tom Kilroy had identified the demise of the traditional Irish play, subdividing them into four categories, The Irish Peasant Play, The Irish Religious Play, The Irish Family Play, The Irish History Play. See Thomas Kilroy, "A Generation of Playwrights," *Irish University Review* 22 (Spring/Summer 1992), p. 141.

stored behaviour is playful: it has a quality of not being entirely 'real' or 'serious.' "[2] Schechner outlines how play is both "indispensable and untrustworthy," "anarchic" and in need of control, especially by those versed in official culture.

Such play is about the acknowledgement of roles, about the comprehension of pretence, and about the expansiveness of identities that are neither fixed nor completely groundless, but are in process. As a disruptive and elastic force, play acknowledges boundaries and demarcations by the very act of transgression that is crucial to so many theatre texts. For it is at the borderlands of play, both an intermediate and intermediary space – where visibility is not good, where depravation unsettles responses, and where dynamism evades reflexes and where performativity or role-playing can unsettle the spectator. By ironising cultural and political assumptions, by aping inappropriate behaviour, by tinkering with prejudice, or by highlighting the inadequacy of certain perceptions, play can distort binary oppositions and undermine stereotypical expectations. Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964) and Kilroy's *Double Cross* (1986) are useful examples of dialogical disruption, where play is a space of exchange and disguise, where co-habiting, surrogate or antithetical realities can feasibly exist. Richard Pine, prompted by the writings of Victor Turner, notes that play is "both innocent and dangerous, both a revel and a risk."[3] Pine identifies this as the "if-ness in Friel's work,"[4] which is about reflection, scenario imagining, re-configuring the past, anticipating the future.

Marina Jenkyns uses Robert Landy's ideas that at the core of performance is the paradox of the "actor living simultaneously in two realities."[5] She goes on to say that for Landy, "taking on a role and taking off a role is a kind of living and dying," one of striving and surrendering, of catalysing and crystallising, of display and disguising, of status altering and of lowering, of revelation and duplicity, and one of being and not being. Of course when an actor assumes another role within a script, then an additional layer of complication is added. Foregrounding the performativity of their characters brings an alertness to the given circumstances, a reflexivity to power, domination, and licence, and, of course, tilts towards the viability of difference. Performing emerges as a mode of being, of knowing, of imagining, and of embodying

2. Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd Edition (Routledge: London and New York, 2002), p. 89.

3. Richard Pine, *The Diviner*: *the Art of Brian Friel* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998), p. 269.

4. Pine, p. 269.

5. Marina Jenkyns, *The Play's The Thing: Exploring Text in Drama and Therapy* (Routledge, London and New York, 1996), p. 10.

creativity, confidence, or engagement. Performance can also function as intransigence, conservativism and stagnation. Performance may be a reciprocal exchange with other, embracing other or a rejection of it. Terry Eagleton argues that Oscar Wilde adopts "a performative rather than a representational epistemology,"[6] so it is that sense of a performative epistemology that I wish to pursue.

II

In order to trace this post-war dramaturgy, I first need to outline the templates provided by an even earlier generation of writers, and in particular how they speculated on confinement, poverty, power, subjectivity, and agency. The basic expectation of drama, deploying Augosto Boal's summary of Lope De Vega's definition, must be "two human beings, a passion and a platform."[7] Under this model, there must be between these characters passion, celebration, disharmony, discord, revelry, conviction, and danger; circumstances where the characters invest heavily in relationships and/or are provoked on unwanted journeys, leading to clashes of perspective, vision and disposition. Such acute engagement must therefore be hazardous, festive, even relentless, driven by competing passions, with serious loss the ultimate consequence of failure. Great plays more often than not tend to locate themselves at moments of severe transition, disintegration or dismantlement, when the overlap between the individual, society, history and mythology is again crucial. The characters might invest in difference, yet there is still a sense of access to received and shared, or, if not shared, then aspirational moral codes or modes of being. The incisive loss of perceived core values and the emergence of new awarenesss, which are often unwanted, even unwarranted, generate circumstances that help build the dramatic situation. Drama in this instance becomes at times mythic or ritualistic, or at least sharing the imperatives and inclinations of both. These substantial texts are layered ones, marked by differences in scale, and are dominated ultimately as much by chaos as destiny. The clarity of great drama is possible, having exposed, pursued and validated severely restricted choices. A completely pared down, elemental survival is often the key, with the notion of the performative self, facing down chaos, inventing worlds and strategies with which to prevail, rather than prosper.

6. Quoted by Margaret Llewellyn Jones, *Contemporary Irish Drama and Cultural Identity* (Bristol: Intellect, 2002), p. 115.

7. Augosto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 38.

European dramatic realism, as one of the basic embryonic models for twentieth century Irish Theatre, has relied on severely confined stage spaces and the restricted, repressive, including class and gender consequences of its very form, in order to exacerbate a sense of cultural or political entrapment and to intensify the claustrophobic quality of the scenography. Irish theatrical stage spaces are often not only singular but also multiple, with off-stage space vital in establishing the existence of huge pressures elsewhere – in particular, repressive, oppressive, other worldly, even surreal forces. There is often a sense of someone looking on, voyeuristic on the one hand and dominating on the other. Absent characters or the absent feminine can exert a powerful influence on such scenarios. More substantially, the presence off-stage points to another consciousness, another alienating reality.[8] Calling attention to the world offstage and never sealing the plays away from the real world ensures that many of the best Irish plays resist rigorous formal experimentation in favour of layered, detailed and hugely combative dramatic texts which often strive after a tangible, tangential connection between text and context.

Henrik Ibsen's early work, driven by a strong sense of Protestant independence, placed at times a great deal of trust in individual action. In the later Ibsen texts, we get a notion of character not just character as disposable, but more importantly character as something dispersed across a continuum of characterisation. Characters mimic one another and mischievously repeat lines once said by another; characters in some ways are energised by the dilemmas faced by others. Character identities are not singular, but are duplicate or replicate, splitting and feeding off one another. In a similar fashion, split characters, doubles, twins, etc., recur across the range of Irish Dramas, and from Synge forward. Irish Theatre has tended to resist notions of coherent subjectivity and has been even complacent about the absence of singular subjectivity thanks, in part, to imperialistic oppression, a repressive education system, religious doctrines and a circulating over determined masculinity.

Play has therefore been central to the discovery of limitations and to the meshing of identities and has been a way of generating ruptures and discontinuities. Christy Mahon's transformation in *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) is driven by a carnivalesque disruptive force, Winnie in Beckett's *Happy Days* (1961) finds her only solace in the illusion of play, or Krapp in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) playfully renegotiates with an older version of self, and who can ignore the unsettling nature of fabricated identity as is found in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895).

8. This may be war zones, isolated spaces, voids, the Fifth Province of the Field Day plays or the mystical Camelot at the core of Billy Roche's work, especially in *The Cavalcaders* (1993).

Consistently, imitatively and successfully, Irish playwrights have relied upon dismal social situations in order to energise their realities. In selecting such circumstances, existential choices, primordial struggles and sibling rivalries were accentuated. This struggle is to be seen most painfully in the temporary illusion (carnivalesque inversion) of riches in O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), where the Boyles, believing to have inherited a fortune, surround themselves with the trappings of wealth and mimic the perceived behaviour of the wealthy. Captain Boyle's behaviour exemplifies all of this. The gap between the new desperate roles they play and their behaviour (desperate in a different way) of the First Act strikes home superbly. In the older generation of writers – Lady Gregory, Synge, and O'Casey – comedy redeemed the destitution in some ways and at the same time legitimised the resistance of play. Verbal dexterity in the hands of the poor was therefore acceptable, particularly in a historic frame – depravation and theatricality were once the hallmarks of acceptance. Conversely, the traditional overplay of comedy at the expense of dire social circumstances was one of the motivating factors behind Garry Hynes's brilliant 1991 production of *The Plough and the Stars* (1926). Here the social devastation could not be any more visible, yet there was valid opposition to the essential obliteration of the blatant counter-pointing comic rhythm in the play text; increasingly in the contemporary situation verbal richness is not only aligned with arrogance but also perceived as a luxury.[9] Certainly, plays like John B. Keane's *Sive* (1959) and *Big Maggie* (1969) and Hugh Leonard's *Da* (1973) evaluate how deprivation shapes consciousness. Christina Reid in *Joyriders* (1986) goes a step further by emphasising the additional political apathy that sponsors her dramatic reality.[10]

9. In contrast, three of Friel's more recent plays – *Wonderful Tennessee*, (1993) *Molly Sweeney* (1994) and *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* (1997) – coupled with Murphy's *Too Late for Logic* (1989) and McGuinness's *The Bird Sanctuary* (1994) are all set in the contemporary world, all have bourgeois settings, all try to debunk a middle-class rationale, all attempt to do something with choice, and all endeavour to do something with time and space. Murphy deploys the dream play format in *Too Late for Logic*, Friel uses monologue and interiority in *Molly Sweeney* and McGuinness flirts with a kind of magic realism in *The Bird Sanctuary*. The most effective scenes in *Give me Your Answer, Do!* are between the father and his sick, hospital-bound daughter – he twice plays the role of enthusiastic and carefree visitor, but his pain and anxiety are apparent. (These two scenes frame the play, yet the variations on performance within the text do not have a similar impact.) Declan Hughes's *Digging for Fire* (1991) may be one of the last Irish examples of a drama that is successfully set in a middle class situation. I am sure that Bernard Farrell and Hugh Leonard would vehemently oppose this idea.

10. More recently Dermot Bolger's attempts to map socio/economic disadvantage in a modern setting have been striking and unsettling in *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* (1989),

In the past, choice, or, more accurately, limited choice was one of the keys to most standard dramatic models. We see this also in the early work of Friel and Murphy. Gar O'Donnell in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* enacts memories, orchestrates fantasies and stage manages events all to no avail, locked as he is within a cycle that is unbearably restrictive. Within this model, freedom is hard earned and opportunities are not a recurring phenomenon but are a one-off gamble – the odds of victory are extremely low and postponement means the loss of all possibility.[11] The crossover from society to the dramatic frame is of course extremely complicated and I make this point again. Here I only wish to deal with the perception of choice (even where illusion might be the most important variable). The dilemma ultimately is how to frame choice, frame opposition and frame confrontation. Defiance might provide a feasible and inarticulate option. Thus, for example, Ibsen could blur distinctions – Hedda Gabler is victim and aggressor, bound and yet free to choose and she is a playmaker (she manufactures the scenarios, orchestrates the setting), yet is totally fettered to some unknowable and unnameable text. Such drama is therefore structured so that no motivation can be attributed with any great certainty: choice is not seen as an authoritative selection but as something deficient in conviction and lacking in justification. If choice is absent, the manner in which the characters conjure the illusion of choice, as in *Waiting for Godot* (1953) or McGuinness' *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* (1992), can prove to be just as dramatic.

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one of the great plays of the last decades, and *One Last White Horse* (1991). Paula Meehan's *Mrs Sweeney* (1997) is set in an inner city flat complex in a world of unemployment, drug dealing and broken homes, and AIDS. When Mr Sweeney's pigeons are slaughtered, he finds sanctuary in madness. The play's women characters find some resolution in a very conscious, exorbitant theatricality, as if this is the only way to promote serious social defiance. These same writers, along with Paul Mercier, tackle poverty and all that accompanies it, but I believe there is in this an underlying assumption, that such specifically issue-led drama is more within the remit of community drama.

11. Such scenarios are less available to today's writers. Less investment in the present, more opportunities to procrastinate and more scope to evade or to at least postpone action means that dramas are losing one of their key ingredients: possibility has become a key cultural resource and brings in its wake the near elimination of single opportunity (the last chance saloon upon which Irish drama has in some ways relied). There is now easier access to a second chance, in terms of employment, education, and, more appropriately, second chance relationships. In addition, in today's world of choice, decisions are to an increasing degree, institutionalised, perversely downgrading individuality in a world that prioritises it. The absence of choice or a disinterest in choice is a striking recurrence in many plays of the latest generation.

So both individuality and collective circumstances are complicated, even before we introduce the notion of power. Synge, O'Casey and Beckett, in his early work, manipulated quite brilliantly the power dynamic, capturing simultaneously the perversity and the theatricality of power, offsetting it by a huge emphasis on the performative self. In earlier forms of drama the notion of the enemy or oppositional force was clear-cut. Power was apparent and more often than not blatant. The inversion and confrontation of power often took place within the framework of play, with an obvious relationship to the context from which texts emerge. Society and text interfaced in very complex ways. The capacity of texts to query ideology or to be agent for an ideological position remains.

III

All of the four transition plays named earlier have inherited this dramaturgy as part of its gene pool. All four plays validate that society/text interface, as they are history/memory plays; they are state of the nation plays, concerned with identity, place, repression, confinement, exile, mobility, home, and authority. Most importantly, all four texts have metatheatre/play as their propelling impetus. In *Bailegangaire*, story-telling and the laughing competition – both story-within-a-story and carnivalesque underworld – are central to the liberating, enabling consciousness that Murphy structures into the work, with three different time frames, past, present and future jostling for space. Mommo's story as to how the town called Boctán, acquired its new appellation Bailegangaire (town without laughter) implicates both characters and nation in a tale of defiance, suffering and complicity, that is in need of purgation.

McGuinness's *Observe The Sons Of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* blends monologue, basic realism, cross-cutting and simultaneous scenes to prepare an audience for the layered, saturated reality of its final section, Part Four, where the spectator witnesses the soldiers in the trenches before they go into battle at the Somme during WW1. As the soldiers re-enact the Battle of the Boyne as a confidence boost – "something to make the blood boil"[12] – the result does not stay the same as historical precedents require; King William loses and James triumphs, and thus, the inevitable continuities of destiny and certainty are unsettled through the awareness that the consciousness of play brings. History is over-rehearsed, tribal conventions are subverted, and the noise of myth obliterates almost all illusions for these soldiers.

12. Frank McGuinness' *Observe The Marching Towards The Somme*, in *Plays One* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 181.

Faith Healer, which relies on four monologues, offers contradictory and overlapping versions of the lives of its three main characters, Frank Hardy, his partner, Grace and his business manager, Teddy as they tour with an event that showcases Frank's faith healing abilities. Each character offers an alternative account of his/her life on the road. Even the central incidents to their stories are heavily disputed. The central themes are that of failed relationships, faith healing, with the faith healer (or artist) as performer or conjurer and that of memory as both a sustained and deliberate failed performance and a poor rehearsal for the future.[13] Memory is more faith than fact.

The most successful Irish play internationally during the period under discussion, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, is set primarily in the 1930s. It is a memory play of sorts, framed by the narration of Michael, who remembers the key incidents from one summer in the life of his family when he was a child. The play deflects that reality through ritualism, through the inventiveness, fabrication and licence, while relying on the energetic exuberance of dance or dance-play to destabilise all sorts of conventions – dramatic, political, religious and social.[14] No matter how hard Friel attempts to destabilise nostalgia through his description of the grotesque and celebratory dance by the Mundy sisters in the stage directions, the response of productions and audiences is to reject Friel's particular subversive framing and instead celebrate their energy and sense of communality. This play was the high point of a generation of writers, but also the one that signalled its demise, as it seemed to have spawned few imitations.

Play is the dialectical force that energises all four plays by the substantiation of firm, conflicting oppositions and by the establishment of divergent points of view; all of these plays are alert to the overlap between memory, history, fantasy, and narrative and use play for a "seditious purpose."[15] The four named transitional plays constantly rely on, to use Homi Bhabha's phrase "the menace of mimicry" to challenge power and authority.[16] Impersonation undermines and questions the status of power structures, suggesting either a challenge to these modes of authority or that power is

13. Meanwhile, in Murphy's *The Gigli Concert* (1983), JPW King, prompted by drugs and alcohol, manages to sing like Gigli.

14. Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), pp. 3–22.

15. Joanne Gilbert and Helen Thompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 1.

16. Homi Bhabha, quoted by Jenny Sharpe in "Figures of Colonial Resistance" in *Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds., Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 100.

transitory, reversible, and can be made obsolete. The notion of fixed and immutable structures are destabilised by the concept of play.

The McGuinness play is deeply political, the other three less immediately so, but they still set up realities that must be contested, from within through their "seditious" dramaturgies, and from without, by the engagement of the spectator with certain templates and expectations of Irishness, the latent subjugations and possibilities therein. *Faith Healer* kick-started a tradition of monologues, but all the work that followed was less capable of shape changing in the way that this play does. *Bailegangaire* attested to a bleakness that needed to be overcome in the Irish psyche. The topics for the laughing competition included a roll call of the dead, children found in shoe boxes, crop failure and famine. It is laughter of defiance at despair, and it is a longing for difference and possibility. In many ways it is an example of what Richard Schechner calls dark play. So we can link play to notions of challenging oppression, destabilising politics and to the challenging of authority, with alertnesses to instability, insubstantiability and incompleteness.

IV

When it comes to the newer generation of writers, it is obvious that they are not only writing from within a tradition and against it, but also even more than the previous generation, they seem more open to a range of additional influences, like pop culture and cinema. (Two writers that seem to buck this trend are Marina Carr and Sebastian Barry, writers that while younger in age, their dramaturgies seem to be easier to categorise as part of the older generation of writers.)

Firstly, it is the over-reliance dramaturgically on a metatheatricalized innocence and/or a childlike consciousness (or adult children) which is an attempt to get round the nastiness and undramatic qualities of adult living.[17] Secondly, there is evidence of a strange attitude to violence having performative, ironic and fantasy components. This facet has something to do with the spate of exceptionally violent plays on British stages during this same period. Ultimately, I believe there is a way of interconnecting innocence and violence and I will do so towards the end of my argument.

Both the younger and older generation of writers use the concept of innocence in their work, and both link up innocence with play. While playwrights have always used the figure of the dead child to emotionally heighten dramas, Friel, Murphy and

17. I cannot deal here with the fixation on monologues in Irish writing practices, only to say that I have argued that such forms have play as a substantial feature of the work.

especially McGuinness do so across a range of plays.[18] For the contemporary generation it is increasingly almost a dramaturgical consistent or staple ingredient. Dermot Bolger in *The Passion of Jerome* (1999) sources the demise of the relationship between the two main characters back to a child who died just after childbirth. Marina Carr, for her part, allows *Portia Coughlan* (1996) to be haunted by the death of a male twin, which left his surviving female sibling, fixated on death. The only other example I will mention is the celebrated and multi-award winning *The Weir* (1997) which is set in a pub in the West of Ireland. On one level this play is without the contemporary sensibility of earlier monologues because it looks like a 1970s play full of characters that are burdened by the past or by restraints placed on them in the present due to family responsibilities. Three of the male characters deliver a ghostly/supernatural narrative that attests as much to their own sensibilities and fears as it does to the environment in which they live. Each of these tales is challenged by Valerie's story of her dead child, Niamh. Niamh's absence haunts the end of the play and puts an end to the male one-up-man-ship that the play's events opened with. Indeed it prompts Jack to tell a story that is far closer to the bone than his previous story about fairy forts. However, I have argued elsewhere that Valerie's story can be seen as more of a trumping than anything else.[19] She turns, perhaps, innocence into trickery, Mamet-like.

There is in all of this a sense as if only the dead can motivate the living. The death of children suggests the elimination of innocence, but innocence cannot be the singular response to the complication and corruption of the adult world. There is nothing much in terms of dead children to differentiate the older generation from the newer one. Where the two generations differ however is the over-reliance on the presence of adult-children in the dramaturgy of the younger writers.[20] This takes a

18. Hugh Leonard in his complicatedly structured play, *Love in the Title* (1999), also uses the device, where three generations of a family imaginatively meet. The audience and two of the characters know the future of a third, whose children drown. The secret is central to attempts at empathy.

19. See "Pastoral Exhibits: Narrating Authenticity in Conor McPherson's *The Weir*," *Irish University Review* (Autumn 2004) 351–368.

20. The opening part of Paul Mercier's *Kitchen Sink* (1996) is also a return, in part, to a childlike innocence while plays like Owen McCafferty's award winning *Mojo Mickybo* (1998), and a lot of the work of Barabbas . . . the company, especially *Hupnouse* (1999), written for the company by Charlie O'Neill, are sorties into childhood, where poetic innocence is used to express occasional profundities, where the complexity of the adult world is not so much pushed to one side as an insistence of a different, playful type of reality, where an alternative set of values is countenanced.

variety of forms, the aged/child-like adult, or the thirty-something and older males with teenage at best, child-like at worst, thinking. Perhaps the most successful of all in this area is Sebastian Barry with *The Steward of Christendom* (1995) whose central character, Thomas Dunne, lives his final years in a mental hospital as he resorts time and time again to a childlike state. (He is, in addition, haunted by the spirit of his dead son in particular.) Within this framework of childlike innocence a strange eloquence of language is available. Indeed, a lyrical eloquence has been appropriated as part of a new poetic drama (poetry at the expense of play).[21] Barry's poetic interiority in *The Steward of Christendom* places the burden not on the individual but on history, thereby accommodating frailty in a pastoral sense.

The most obvious use of innocence occurs when play and innocence conspire. Over the last number of years Barabbas . . . the company produced a number of plays, most notably a new production in 1997 of Lennox Robinson's *The Whiteheaded Boy* (1916),[22] where clowning, performativity and actors playing multiple roles, sometimes two characters in the one scene, seemed to be one of the plays that shaped this development.[23] Two further examples are worth noting.[24] The traditional victory against the odds is taken out of the political arena and re-imagined on the rugby pitch in the case of John Breen's *Alone it Stands* (1999) a drama that marks Munster's famous victory over the New Zealand All-Blacks in 1978, when amateur minnows toppled what was regarded as the greatest team in the world at that time. Six actors play over thirty parts, sometimes across gender. This is revived regularly to this very day, drawing huge audiences. Breen's work along with Marie Jones' *Stones in his Pockets* (1999), are two brilliant examples of the new emphasis on

21. This scenario was put forward as both a development and solution by Fintan O'Toole who has described the plays of Sebastian Barry as dramas of evocation, where the intensity of the language at least displaces or has come at the expense of conflict. See, "Lament in a Hushed Voice," *Irish Times*, 13 June 1992, p. 5.

22. See also Corn Exchange, prompted by the American born director Annie Ryan, offered contaminated, hybrid Commedia Dell'Arte versions of *A Street Car Named Desire* in 1996 (*Streetcar*), *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in 1997 (*Big Bad Woolf*) and a new version by Michael West of Chekhov's *The Seagull* in 1999. This work is in part about play but also about the dark components of play that stretch away from innocence.

23. *True Lines* (1993) and *Double Helix* (1995), both devised metatheatrical shows, shaped by John Crowley for Bickerstaffe Theatre Company and which had a substantial impact on devising theatre practices.

24. Donal O'Kelly's *Catalpa* could also be included as part of this discussion.

metatheatricality. The Jones play is set in a small Co. Kerry village, where a film crew is on location, making *Quiet Valley*.

This movie in the making is a typical Hollywood attempt to do the usual Irish shtick, interweaving a tale of romance, political victimisation, and victory against the odds found in the relationship between the young man (Rory) who falls in love with and marries the woman (Maeve) from the Big House. Maeve has been asking her father to give the land back to the peasants, but the marriage of Rory and Maeve will seal its return. In Jones's play two male actors perform multiple characters, from a Scottish bouncer to a female Hollywood star, from a young and over-eager third assistant director to a drunken local. The two main characters Jake and Charlie are energised by their acts of resistance towards the insensitivities of the movie industry, particularly in the face of the needs of the film to run within budget and on schedule versus the need and right of the local villagers to grieve and wake one of its own who dies during the making of the movie. They write a script in response to their ordeal, where the extras become the stars and the stars the extras. Jones generates an innocence of revolt. In the performance of the play, the conceit is that the theatre audience is in a cinema watching their film, before which there is an advertisement for the forthcoming Hollywood movie, *Quiet Valley*. The extras beat Hollywood to the release as well.

The play's title is derived from the suicide of Sean Quin who after his first unsuccessful attempt to kill himself, re-enters a river laden down with stones in his pockets. The spectator has no real feel for Sean, despite how he is introduced into the play and despite the testimonies about him from others. Sean's suicide is well integrated in the Second Act, but as a plot device it is thin, as an audience has no real opportunity to generate empathy for him, really he never moves beyond the cliché of a disgruntled, angst-ridden, disillusioned, drug-taking seventeen year old male. Sean makes but a few brief and abrupt appearances during the First Act. The cast will not be released for the funeral as fresh flowers are to be shipped from Holland and three catering companies are booked in for the wedding feast scene. The extras threaten to withdraw their services, if they are not allowed to go to the funeral. Given that they are paid by the day, and given that many of the scenes have already been filmed, it would be necessary to re-shoot the scenes again, so if the extras were to withdraw their services, a new power dynamic would come into play. The insensitive film producers are forced to relent to their demands, as a compromise is reached. Of the four productions of the play I have seen, one got the balance exactly right between mimicry, poignancy and an inclusivity of an audience in the metatheatricality of the piece. Yet the fact that most of the metatheatrical style plays rely on male characters

and male actors is worth noting. The success of the masculine within the limits of the play contrasts with the increasing ineffectualness of the masculine socially.

For the older generation, innocence functioned as a calibrated differentiation that was infectious, appropriate and anomalous simultaneously. The contemporary writer operates within an innocence paradox. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines innocence as a "freedom from cunning or artifice; guilelessness, artlessness, simplicity: hence, want of knowledge or sense." Ultimately it is the crossover from innocence to artifice, which the dictionary's explanation cannot accommodate, is where we find contemporary writing in the main. Innocence is an alternative, pastoral space, independent of the real. Innocence has been courted and then subsumed into something else by metatheatricality. The lost resonance of play is displaced by a regimented, performative innocence. The disposition towards an uncontaminated, unblemished, irreproachable, innocence is indeed problematic, particularly in relation to violence, violation and destructiveness. Marina Carr's *On Raftery's Hill* (2000) confronts the issues of an innocent young woman violated by incestuous rape and family destroyed by intergenerational sexual abuse. Carr seems to be bucking the trend outlined above. Sorrel Raftery is a young woman living with her sister (Dinah), grandmother (Shalome), brother (Ded), and her father (Red). The young girl is engaged to Dara Mood. Towards the end of the First Act, and, just prior to her wedding, her father rapes her on the kitchen table. Nobody intervenes, even though the other family members are all aware of the assault taking place. As the play progresses, Sorrel discovers that Dinah is not only her sister, but also her mother. Father and daughter, at the age of twelve, were forced together by Dinah's own mother. Carr deals with issues of sexuality, power, violation, shame, secrecy, deception, inferiority, and indignity. She also confronts the issues of power, gratification, and addiction at the core of sexual abuse.

Red is the child of an incestuous relationship between his mother and his grandfather. The fact that Red is conceived in that way is not brought in to diminish his moral responsibility, but does so to complicate simplistic responses to the evil/victim binary structure that often exists in discussions on such issues. The persistence of a sexual relationship between Dinah and Red into the present is the most dramaturgically ambitious and disturbing feature of the play. Carr brilliantly captures Dinah's ambivalence. The play ends in stalemate, but the fact that the female lead does not kill herself[25] as has happened in all of Carr's other Midlands'

25. This links Michael Harding's *Una Pooka* (1989), Murphy's *Too Late for Logic*, Carr's *The Mai* (1994) and *Portia Coughlan* (1996) (and earlier in Keane's *Sive* and Friel's *Living*

plays, might be regarded as a strained optimism in its own right. Carr's interrogation of violation and innocence puts her at odds with her contemporary male counterparts.

While danger, violence, madness and murder have always prevailed in Irish plays, something very different is happening with violence currently and thus conflict is treated in a very different way.[26] Of all work by the contemporary generation, the work of Martin McDonagh in particular has been berated because of its inability to challenge the imperatives and inclinations of violence. McDonagh's first three plays *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), *A Skull in Connemara* (1997), and *The Lonesome West* (1997), collectively known as The Leenane Trilogy, all contain scenes of extreme violence, Maureen murders her mother in *Beauty Queen*, in *The Lonesome West*, Girleen has a strong streak of violence, and Coleman kills his father for insulting his hair. In *Skull in Connemara* murder and violence are frequent occurrences. In *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001) Padraic is sadism personified and Mairead is his match. This play contains scenes that some find carnivalesque and that others find gruesome in the extreme. Towards the end of the play, the stage is covered in blood as Donny and Davey, under close supervision, hack up the bodies of dead paramilitaries. Of course, the body parts are fake, and in performance, there is no attempt at authenticity; yet people found such scenes offensive. *The Pillowman* (2003) contains scenes of murder, torture and suggest at all kinds of other violations through the lens of Grand Guignol. For Shaun Richards: "what is most striking about *The Leenane Trilogy*'s violence and depravity is the absence of any informing moral structure on which authority itself rests."[27] John Lahr is alert to an alternative reading arguing that the characters are gargoyle-like representations.[28] Mary Luckhurst believes that the characters in *Inishmore* are "all psychopathic morons."[29] She is not

Quarters (1977). Frank Hardy's death in *Faith Healer* is a sacrificial suicide of sorts and in Johnston's *Melonfarmer* there is a failed suicide attempt. Across these plays protest is interiorised. Suicide is both the elimination of possibility and the eradication of play: self-annihilation becomes the final performance of sorts.

26. Brian Friel's *Translations* (1980), *Observe The Sons Of Ulster*, Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* (1958) spring to mind as plays that use violence for specific and varied dramatic effects.

27. Shaun Richards, "'The Outpouring of a Morbid, Unhealthy Mind': The Critical Condition of Synge and McDonagh," *Irish University Review* 33 (2003), 201–14, p. 211.

28. John Lahr, "Blood Simple" *New Yorker*, 13 March 2006, p. 92.

29. Mary Luckhurst, "Martin McDonagh's *Lieutenant of Inishmore*: Selling (-Out) to the English," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 14.4 (2004) 34–41, p. 36.

alone in these accusations. Clearly, McDonagh's critics are divided and his own comments on violence in his plays are often contradictory, or self-congratulatory. However, McDonagh is not alone as being perceived in sensationalising violence and mayhem. O'Rowe *Made in China* (2001)[30] is set in gangland Dublin and Stella Feehily's female characters in *Duck* (2003) have their run ins with gangland as well. In Declan Hughes' *Twenty Grand* (1998) the nature of the family business has changed, from small time village shopkeeper of traditional Irish theatre to big time Drug Dealer. Horror comes cheap, especially if it is set within an underclass.

Mark O'Rowe's *Howie The Rookie* (1999) is made up of two monologues, delivered by unrelated The Howie and The Rookie Lee, falls into this category. The violence is prompted by one of the The Howie Lee's friends, Ollie**,** picking up scabies from a mattress. The source of the contagious disease is The Rookie Lee. Later The Howie, on The Rookie's behalf, faces down in a scene of extreme violence, an intersex character called, Ladyboy. Towards the end The Howie is flung from a window, impaled on a railing and then smashed to pieces by a van which crashes into him as he lies there. It is a play full of spoken violence, implicit and explicit. The details of the fights take on a surreal context, yet the general devastations of poverty extort a different form of social violence. Scarcity or subsistence living is that disease. It is the indifference to health, love, and family that come across most strongly. The connection between the two Lees is Bruce Lee, actor and martial arts expert. Bruce Lee is the heroic figure who licences a macho culture of retributional violence. The Howie is broken by the death of his young brother The Mousey Lee. (Again, another dead child is the spring board for action.) Nothing seems to bring either pleasure or pain. The characters are also in a trance, where little registers beyond a very confined range of reference. The larger issues that impact on the characters are closed down in a most casual, indifferent fashion. For the characters there is no escape route. The language and tone of the piece thus becomes equally bravado and a form of entrapment, while there is no confidence in one's ability to articulate rage and compassion beyond this limitation of a playful, exaggerated hyper fiction, with violence as its basis, as if irony has lost its articulacy, and has become entrapment. This is of course in line with postmodernism.[31] Somewhat differently, Gary Mitchell's *A Little World*

30. Mark O'Rowe's *Crestfall* (2003) contains scenes of great depravity and violence; heroin abuse (the scourge), bestiality, forced abortions, animal mutilation, incest, paedophilia, human violation, and six murders are documented by the three narratives delivered by the three female characters.

31. Mark O'Rowe's *From Both Hips* (1997) does something similar.

of Our Own (1997)[32] deals with a loyalist working class community, and the macho, deluded, self-destructiveness therein. Most of his other work considers the same terrain of violence. Mark Ravenhill's play *Shopping and F***ing* (1996)[33] and David Cronenberg's film *Crash*, based on the novel by J.G. Ballard, offer additional, alternative perspectives and point to other emerging patterns. In both, re-enactment, mutilation, internalisation and an almost complete blurring of pleasure and pain are dramatised, with little or no enabling energy in operation.[34] So from these two texts, one can see how Irish playwrights are engaged with similar scenarios.

V

McGuinness's *Carthaginians* (1988) is about magic, resurrection and the recuperation of memory. In *Carthaginians* the presence of guns is indicated throughout and kept off-stage, but the play includes plastic guns for the mock gunfight in the play-within-a-play (*The Burning Balaclava,* which assists in the release of parodic annihilatory energy). In the mock play, the carnivalesque and parodic version of the Bloody Sunday incident allow the characters distance but also access to their individual and collective memories of the event. The inappropriateness, distastefulness and irreverence of play paradoxically liberate horrific memories and wounds of Bloody Sunday; whereas, Declan Hughes in *Twenty Grand* breaches one of the significant codes of Irish comic drama, that of death and resurrection, where the pretence of death is

32. McPherson's *This Lime Tree Bower (1995)*, Alex Johnston's *Deep Space* (1998) and the Mitchell play use the rape of a woman offstage.

33. Sarah Kane's work is just as dark as that of Ravenhill's, where relationships are substantially dysfunctional, with the odd exception. British plays like Kevin Elyot's *My Night With Reg* (1994) and Patrick Marber's *Closer* (1996) are examples of plays which offset this trend.

34. In *Crash,* after a fatal accident, the characters re-enact (as part of their sexual fantasy) the gruesome details of a fatal car crash. Others re-stage, for an audience, the car crash which killed James Dean; while attempting to replicate the death of the actress Jayne Mansfield, they die in the process, fulfilling in part some underlying death wish and in part some post-modernistic impulse, by essentially refusing to distinguish between the world of play and the real. In effect, there is no overlap from one world to the next, there is no sense of retrieval; play has lost its purpose. At one point the performance artist/stunt man comes across the crash scene where his friends have been injured or just died and he proceeds to take photographs. Cronenberg's desire may have been to insist that increasingly there is no distinction between fact and fiction and that the characters are locked into a cycle of re-enactment.

nearly always one of the dominant tropes in operation. Instead Hughes, in a manner akin to *The Revenger's Tragedy,* litters the stage with dead bodies. There is little or nothing to offset the carnage.

Because of cultural and dramaturgical changes, increasingly violence seems to be the only mode of articulation. It is a violence of the margins of the dispossessed, or the mad or insane. Their stories remain untold and a shock value – a voyeurism – is garnered from that which is archaic, marginal, exotic and eccentric.[35] If confinement, as mentioned earlier, was one of the main features of the older writing practice, it is now replaced by cordoned off stages and imaginatively sanctioned cocoons, often understandably beyond the world of politics, morality and justice. On offer now from the younger generation is therefore a new strain of realism, a new age or virtual realism that is often shrivelled and bled dry of social forces. It is a chemically induced realism; achieved by spawning synthetic, de-hydrated, mechanically extracted, imitative copies or replicas, that while properly hostile to the illusion of the real, still maintains a conservative alliance with the real. Today, the self-dramatising impulse is most evident in seedy scenarios, set in the world of decayed squats and bedsits, in locations that were previously taboo. Increasingly the worlds of sexual deviance, violence, drugs, organised crime, money laundering and contract killing are the staple diet, where dramatic momentum is propelled by the forces of danger and illicitness. At its worst, this amounts to little more than the eroticisation of violence (beyond a queasy if easy voyeurism); at its best, such violence can distort and disturb.

For an older generation violence is viewed in terms of wantonness and revenge, release and retribution; what is new, however, is that the distinction between pleasure and pain has been blurred, so neither pain nor pleasure proves to be any provisional point of reference. The dialectical tensions of truth and deception, freedom and constraint, tyrant and justice cannot be played out easily. A distinction between pain and pleasure seems to be the more realisable mode. Yet, pain is rightly decontextualised in many modern texts, given a spectator's immunity to it, but it also tends to be sanitised, whereas previously play offered a deliberate and dialogical process, that subtly underlined the pain and at times saw it as enabling – Patricia Burke Brogan's play *Eclipsed* (1992) does something like this. It is the decontextualistion of pain and how pleasure has been commodified that are the mainstay of the contem-

35. This is to keep to one side the horrendous statistic of the prevalence of suicide amongst young males. But it is easier to be younger, given that one's anxieties have been articulated and accepted to a greater extent. All one needs to do is to look at the newspaper columns given over to teenagers, teenage magazines and an emphasis on parenting, which ensures that "not knowing," can no longer be an excuse.

porary dramaturgy, which has as much to do with irony as it has for the lack of empathy available to an audience when it comes to contemporary work. Pain is alienated to such an extent that its impact is utterly devoid of meaning beyond the frame of performance.

Historically, the trauma of identity was associated with imperial rule and the need to confront oppression.[36] The pain aligned with both generated empathy for the disposed. It is no wonder that the successes of Irish theatre is dominated by history/memory plays. Declan Kiberd notes that colonial rule operates through patterned cycles of "coercion and conciliation."[37] He attaches to this the notion of the imperial power using the host country as a form of laboratory. Conspiracy, plotting and stage-managed violence must be added as other ingredients, from the side of imperialism and the host country. This explains in part the experimental conspiracy of play which haunts an Irish consciousness. In the early post-war Irish drama the sentiment strung from the dramatisation of weakness or ineffectual characters, usually male, is difficult to grasp fully outside of the post-colonial frame (and now its perpetuation must be seen within a postmodernist one). Today hierarchies are no longer so discernible and obvious; jurisdictions are fluid and definite demarcations are not so evident. The capacity of institutions to adjust, anticipate and absorb criticisms or oppositions is striking. Power has become very problematic, to such an extent that one cannot immediately name it, and if one can, one cannot dramatise it with any sense of persuasion. Discernible power in a dramatic frame becomes, ironically by the very nature of its usual subtle reality, stereotypical, primarily because it loses its invisibility, diluting in most instances the dramatic effect.[38]

Consequently, the notion of play can be or veers towards that of a mere imitative, simulated and ungrounded activity, which is marked by a complete disacknowlegement of presence and by a dangerous refusal to champion any value system or prioritise any judgements. In effect, the post-modern emotion can be fetishistically

36. Vincent Woods with *At the Black Pig's Dyke* (1993) represent other superb attempts to bring together the linguistic richness and a vicious, hostile dramatic situation, energised by the distance and rawness of history and by the dynamics of play. Anne Hartigan's *Jersey Lillies* (1996) is another example of this; a drama trapped inside a recurring linguistic and social nightmare, where memory, violence and defiance are all woven into the unsettling dramatic reality. Christina Reid's *Tea in a China Cup* plays with history and memory (1983).

37. Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 43.

38. Likewise the dominant parent figure, once one of the most potent expressions of power, has lost its power base as it slides into caricature with incredible ease, and now functions best in a surreal or grotesque sense, with the exception in the instance of sexual abuse.

internal and graphically demonstrative only in terms of performance, really play for play's sake. Bertolt Brecht's phrase "Acting in quotation marks" is applicable now, for within the post-modern frame it is quoting in acting marks that is appropriate, with performance the key; a performance that is not derivative of anything else, a performance that is blatant simulation, with the virtual absence of a referent, in a world without sufficient boundaries and more tellingly without the significant disorientating effects of an older notion of excess, even when excess is one of its most visible or blatant features.

Increasingly, complicity not a quest for justice, complacency not the terror before possibility are the values revered. If parody, pastiche and the postmodernist impulse to perform dominate at the expense of all else then Bond's comment that "modern society does not own imagination, it only exploits it,"[39] serves as a serious warning, especially if the increasingly artificial bonds of culture ensure that theatre has lost its collectively ritualistic ambition, spectacle is increasingly the governing reality. Under this new dispensation, the imagination does not point towards alternatives – it is not available as a position of difference or dissent, for it takes the shape of deviance and aberration only. But we cannot just take a single perspective on this. It needs to be made more complicated. While it is true that governing patriarchal ideologies have been active in the silencing or in the elimination of difference, something which the feminist movement has confronted, nowadays cultures operate within a very different, more subtle, frame, being more likely to assert the right to be plural, inclusive and accumulative. However, it has resulted in difference being bleached of its possible radical aggression.[40]

McGuinness's characters are alert to the implications of their own performance in *Carthaginians* or *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, the Mundy sisters are also alert to their defiance through performance of the dance in *Lughnasa*. Although they

39. Edward Bond "Modern and Postmodern Theatres" in an interview with Ulrich Koppen, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 50, May 1997, 103.

40. Between the old and the new, a blatant model of contrast would compare the wild dancing in Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* to the beat of the traditional *Mason's Apron* to the sound of *Bullet with Butterfly Wings* by the Smashing Pumpkins used in Declan Hughes's *Halloween Night* (1997) (both dances were performed on top of tables), would oppose the operatic influence on the structure of Murphy's *The Gigli Concert* (1983) with the effect of the television soap opera format on McDonagh's work and would differentiate between the significances of the King James Bible, William Shakespeare or Mikhail Bakhtin's underworld of the carnival on McGuinness's writings to the influences of Quentin Tarantino, Irvine Welsh and *The Simpsons* on the work of Alex Johnston.

are marked by the performance, and tainted by the sensibility of play, when the characters returned to the notionally real world of the drama, they bring with them a different type of acuteness. In *Double Cross*, awareness is of a different order, it is the alertness to how performance had in a way dehumanised, how the alternative identities of both William Joyce and Brendan Bracken were not liberating as they had hoped, but prison houses, a hall of mirrors where not even a provisional sense of identity could be found, both being tricksters and traitors. The characters are brought to an awareness of their own performances in *Double Cross*, without admitting to the source of such needs. The history play could be seen to have died a death if Friel's most recent play *The Home Place* (2005) is anything to go by.

In McDonagh, the characters seem to have internalised a sense of self that is without awareness, un-alert to their own performances, unwilling to acknowledge that they are acting out of sibling rivalry in *The Lonesome West*, and spurious republican propaganda in *Lieutenant of Inishmore*. Empathy is in abeyance. Donny and Davey hack bodies, with the playfulness of boys playing in a sandbox, there is nothing with which to contest their hermetically sealed worlds. That type of infringement is down to the spectator. It of course is dependent on the willingness of the spectator to engage. The dramaturgy does not oblige the characters to bring that mode of reflection to their performances. Contrast the implications of the carnage that grows out of *The Burning Balaclava* in *Carthaginians* with that of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. *The Lieutenant* shares the sensibility of that play-within-a-play, with its cartoon, carnivalesque world, where characters die needlessly over a missing cat. The triggering incident in the McGuinness piece is the death of a dog.

In Richard Schechner's words "Performances mark identities, bend time, reshape, and adorn the body, and tell stories. Performances – of art, rituals, or ordinary life – are 'restored behaviours,' 'twice-behaved behaviours,' performed actions that people train for and rehearse."[41] The notion of "Restored behaviours" also invites the idea of acquired or anticipative behaviours, and this is the acquisitive skill that play can offer. The characters in *The Lonesome West* are locked into patterns of engagement that are not easily moved. When the brothers decide to mend their ways, the confessions to each other quickly follow the pattern of one-up-manship that has dominated their interactions previously. They restore the patterns of previous encounters. Indeed they are imprisoned by their pattern of "restored behaviours." One might suggest that the temporary ceasefire at the end of the play offers a degree of hope, but it is minimal. Compare this to Gar in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*. Above all

41. Schechner, p. 28.

else Gar wishes to challenge the "restored behaviours" of those around him. He wishes for the script to change. While he mocks his father's predictable patterns, his desire is for these to be cast to one side and audiences align themselves with the desire for difference. McDonagh's characters do not share the same desire, but perhaps an audience might. That way the onus shifts from character to spectator. With an older generation, I think one can talk about the fusion of the real and play, with the contemporary one, a fissure between the real and play, where often real is merely play.

To account for the attraction of this new work I would argue that it maintains implicitly and explicitly a link with the post-colonial model, while at the same time it crosses over into the irony and transgression, the depthlessness of a post-modern one. It is both national and international simultaneously, less state of the nation, and more state of a global generation. (The idea of nation has been displaced and replaced by the idea of a fragmented nation, a hinterland or splinterland consciousness, which in total adds up to a complex notion of contemporary culture.) For me writers are still flirting with the energetic possibilities of such postmodernist thinking without embracing it completely; they are simultaneously persisting and letting go of post-colonial awarenesses and actualities without fully grasping either the substance or significance of them.

VI

The productivity of global economies alongside labour and technological alienation, new concerns about ownership and belonging, a growing redundancy of faith, an increasingly assertive intercultural penetration and a previously unknown dynamic economy have all led to a society in serious transition. Effectively the confusions and confidences delivered by a period of social liberalism, the collapse of political difference with the demise of left-wing alternatives, the apparent confluence of political thinking and the influence of politically correct ideology have ensured that difference has been submerged and the impact of oppositional energies diluted. From a contemporary perspective it is easy to see the decline of one writing style and the emergence of another. The difficulty of course is not so much to compare one against another but also to measure one against another. For most commentators, the older generation is way ahead in terms of quality, having generated plays that will be performed again and become part of the repertoire. The more contemporary writers are enjoying unprecedented international successes and their work is anticipated not just nationally, but internationally. It is my suspicion that it says as much about the quality of the work as it does about the paucity of good writing for the theatre inter-

nationally. Judgment on this work seems premature, other than to say I do not expect most of it to have a long shelf life. There are exceptions in the work of Carr, McPherson, and McDonagh.

Under postmodernism, subjectivity supposedly has mutated into commodified individuality or into something which is not fixed but circulating and volatile and the concept of the real has been textualised to a high degree. But to be seduced by such a scenario is erroneous, principally because it tends to casually obliterate history, deny difference in the proper sense of the word, and more importantly to refuse either to value or validate change. In the past, of course, play was, in part, ritualised. Ritual is often associated with fertility, yet the contemporary notion of play is about its opposite sterility and barrenness, play has little call on otherness and no specific relationship to myth. It is almost without symbolic resonance, as irony is its dominant validator. It may well be that even though fantasy was once the liberating feature – indulgent under its own terms, elaborate and escapist, wish fulfilling and aspirational – it might become the thing that limits, the simulation, even the convention. As Garry Hynes notes, "If we in the theatre are about anything we are about invention. We are about imagining."[42] Play leads the way often transgressively, suspiciously, fractiously, duplicitiously, and imaginatively.

Incompleteness, rather than overview, drives the contemporary dramaturgy, stories partially tell what is, characters display partial awareness to the worlds in which they live and construct. In the work of an older generation, there is an anxiety or concern in the writing to be inclusive, to provide the overview, the critical frameworks necessary to engage with the work, hard work that shapes the journey of the characters, the arc as Hollywood screenwriting manuals call it. There is a sense of explanation, even if it is privileged and prejudiced. The contemporary writing seems confident in its incompleteness. The real dilemma lies within the dramaturgy itself, it is not necessarily one of articulation, but one of dramatisation; the increasing inability to find dramatic situations or circumstances into which to pitch characters in a collective space, where there is something substantial and uncertain at stake.

42. Garry Hynes, "Accepting the Fiction of Being 'National,' " *Irish Times*, 3 May 1993.