

CONTEMPORARY IRISH THEATRE:
A DYNAMIC COLLECTION OF CRITICAL VOICES

The current issue of *Ilha do Desterro* explores aspects of contemporary Irish theatre, within the island of Ireland and in its international contexts, after 1950: this is the first publication in Brazil dedicated specifically to critical contribution in this field. The articles by scholars and theatre practitioners from various countries apart from Brazil and Ireland, such as The United States, France, Italy, Germany, and the Czech Republic, address the work of individual writers as well of theatre groups, considering textual and performance practices, most of them not confined to the areas of theatre and literature, but including considerations on other fields of knowledge such as politics, economics, history, philosophy, media and film studies, arts and psychology.

Carefully and passionately written, the texts feature a variety of theoretical frameworks and research methods. No attempt was made to organize the volume from the perspective of a coherent unifying argument. We preferred, instead, to group first the articles dealing with aspects of the work of individual authors in Ireland, then those dealing with textual and performance practices in the work of a diversity of dramatists, and finally those evaluating the activity of theatre groups dealing with Irish material in Northern Ireland, in the Republic of Ireland, and in Brazil.

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In the Introduction to an earlier publication in the field of Irish theatrical studies, *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*, Eamonn Jordan acknowledged the “privilege to be able to bring together . . . a range of critical and dynamic voices from many different countries and backgrounds” (xi). In the same spirit, here, too, we wish to express the equal privilege and enormous satisfaction of being able to organize and edit this similarly “dynamic” and rich collection of critical voices.

The first six articles pay tribute to the playwright Brian Friel in the year of his 80th birthday (2009), although not always and necessarily written with this intention, and appear following the chronology of the plays chosen and focused by each contributor.

Peter James Harris, in “Universal or Provincial?: Early Reception of Brian Friel’s *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*”, provides the reader with a detailed survey and evaluation of early reception of Friel’s first international success in Britain. Since emigration lies at the heart of the play, Harris also explores this question, considering the issue of prejudice towards Irish immigrants in Britain as well as British legislation on the matter, and how these, among other factors, may have influenced the various critical responses to the play. Part of a larger academic research work, Peter Harris’s text constitutes a comprehensive original contribution, precious for scholars and students dealing with reception theory and with the reception of Friel’s plays.

Equally superb is **Giovanna Tallone**’s reading of Friel’s next play in “The Old Lady Says ‘No’: The Language of Denial in Brian Friel’s *The Loves of Cass McGuire*.” Tallone explores the language of denial, absence, exclusion, refusal and negation, fusing an analysis of content and form, viewing *The Loves* as a metadramatic construction that culminates in the play’s self- denial. The title alludes to Denis Johnston’s first play, adding a new dimension to the paper, somehow indirectly placing Friel’s work within the gallery of Irish dramatists and earlier debates in the realm of theatre in Ireland. Giovanna Tallone surveys the dramatist’s intire canon and

alludes to previous criticism of his work in this remarkable study of one of Brian Friel's early plays.

A comparative approach is used by **Heinz Kosok** in "Doomed Volunteers: Two Great Political Plays from Ireland," which explores the political nature of Seamus Byrne's *Design for a Headstone* and Brian Friel's *Volunteers*. Kosok argues that "politics" can be understood as "the struggle for the acquisition of power in society and the conflicts between various social groups arising from such a pursuit." He analyses the two plays from this perspective and regards them as significant and representative texts of the genre "political play" in Ireland that have not received enough attention.

Nicholas Grene presents a comparative perception of Friel's *Three Sisters*, an adaptation of Chekhov's play. He explores the significance and importance of Chekhov for Brian Friel and his work, the relations between the Russian and the Irish play, and the debate around the choice of *Three Sisters* in the context of the first years of Field Day as the second play produced by the company. Moreover, he deals with another level of intertextuality in "Friel and His 'Sisters'". In Grene's view

plays come to look very different over time. . . . Our knowledge of *Dancing at Lughnasa* changes our sense of Friel's *Three Sisters*. . . . Where in 1981, the focus of *Three Sisters* might have been on the social situation of the characters, and the novelty of its use of an Irish idiom for its version of Chekhov, after *Lughnasa* we are likely to be aware of it as a play specifically about the lives of women. (XX)

Anna Stegh Camati's article foregrounds a contemporary theoretical frame in theatre studies. "Landscapes of The Mind: Postdramatic Features in Brian Friel's *Molly Sweeney*" deals with the debate regarding the new languages of the stage which, according to the author, "fail, completely or in part, to meet the requirements of the

Aristotelian matrix". She explores the terms used in some of the most recent trends in the study of contemporary theatre aesthetics, among them "rhapsodic theatre-texts" (Sarrazac), "no longer dramatic theatre-texts" (Poschmann), and "postdramatic theatre" (Lehmann) to explain "the landscapes of the mind" that emerge from Friel's juxtaposition of monologues and combination of conventional and post-dramatic features in *Molly Sweeney*.

"Brian Friel: The Master Playwright", by **Martine Pelletier**, very appropriately closes the section dedicated to the dramatist with a survey of Brian Friel's remarkable career and an assessment of his overall contribution to Irish theatre, concentrating on his adaptations. Pelletier focuses particularly on *Hedda Gabler*, Friel's last play, its place and relevance in the author's canon.

The next group of articles features readings of the work of representative writers in the gallery of Irish playwrights, in Northern Ireland and in the Republic, such as Stewart Parker, Sam Thompson, Tim Loane, Tom Murphy, Martin McDonagh, Thomas Kilroy, Marina Carr, Billy Roche, Paul Meade, Enda Walsh, Samuel Beckett, and Conor McPherson, among others. The articles consider both text and performance and are organized following geographical and chronological criteria, advancing from the twentieth century into the twenty-first.

Clare Wallace's "'A Sceptic in a Credulous World': Re-evaluating the Work of Stewart Parker on the Twentieth Anniversary of his Death" is a re-assessment of the playwright's work in the context of Northern Ireland. Wallace makes good use of previous scholarly texts with which she establishes a dialogue that pays tribute to one of the most gifted and inventive Northerner dramatists, on a celebratory date: "The 2nd of November 2008 marked the twentieth anniversary of Parker's death and activities commemorating his life and work throughout the year have begun to generate increased awareness of his importance as a writer and dramatist," says Wallace. For her, this is a sign of a perhaps enduring transformation towards a long over-due re-evaluation of Parker's achievements.

Marilynn Richtarik keeps a precise focus on the lineage of Northern Irish drama. In “Sam Thompson, Stewart Parker, and the Lineage of Northern Irish Drama”, she examines the early influence of Sam Thompson in Stewart Parker’s work and argues that, in spite of the differences found in both writers’ texts, the socialist affinities in their plays place them as founding figures of a lineage of politically engaged Northern Irish drama. “Sam Thompson squarely confronted Northern Irish sectarianism in his plays, and his sense of the political purpose and potential of drama left an enduring mark on Parker. The younger man organized and edited Thompson’s manuscripts several years after his untimely death and became an outspoken advocate of his work”, Richtarik argues.

The tradition of politically engaged theatre in the North is also the subject of **Mark Phelan’s** article, “(Un)Settlement: Political Parody and the Northern Irish Peace Process.” Phelan’s text engages with two comedies by Tim Loane seen as political parodies that have received considerably small attention: *Caught Red-Handed*, and *To Be Sure*. His intention is to examine “how Loane’s satires explore and expose the political cynicism of the peace process whilst raising broader questions in relation to the political efficacy of comedy and its canonical relegation below ‘higher forms’ in Irish theatre historiography.” Phelan starts his argument rescuing the first play to engage with the nascent peace process in the North in the 1990s – Seamus Heaney’s *The Cure at Troy* – as well as Gary Mitchell’s “loyalist thriller-tragedies”, and then proceeds to his analysis of Loane’s comedies, since both Mitchell and Loane, in his view, deal with the “political fallout from the often faltering peace process.”

Paul Murphy also challenges accepted crystallized views of Irish history in his politically informed reading of *Bailegangaire* and *A Thief of a Christmas*, by Tom Murphy, one of the most acclaimed contemporary playwrights in Ireland. For Murphy, the author “brushes Irish history against the grain by representing those discourses which the modernist storm of progress has consigned to the margins of Irish

history." Thus, in parallel with the analysis of the plays, Paul Murphy proposes a debate on Irish historiography, particularly as it is manifest in the antagonistic relationship between nationalism and revisionism. His aim—"Poor Banished Children of Eve': Tom Murphy and the Syntax of History"—is "to move beyond a reading of Irish theatre grounded in identitarian paradigms of nation and nationalism, towards an engagement with ethical issues of class and gender subordination which are as much a part of Irish cultural politics as the nation is or ever was."

The debate around the centrality of nationalism in Ireland is also implied in the article by **Magda V. F. de Tolentino** and **Raimundo E. Santos Sousa**: "A Constituição, a Família, a Tradição e a Desconstituição da Família Tradicional em *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*" ("The Constitution, the Family, Tradition and the De-constitution of the Traditional Family in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*"). The authors start from theoretical considerations on nationalism, Modernism and Post-Modernism, drawing on a vast background of sources, and aim to identify ways in which a "post-modern text"—*The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, by Martin McDonagh—re-elaborates, in dialogue with tradition, the cultural memory constructed in the period of nationalistic exacerbation. They analyse how McDonagh's play destabilizes not only a traditional representation of women in cultural nationalism, but also the values proposed by nationalistic discourse, mainly concerning the family, in a post-modern context.

José Lanthers's arguments are less focused on questions of nation and nationalism and more on the field of psychology. "Impossible Promise: The Child and the Androgyne in Thomas Kilroy's *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* and *My Scandalous Life*" starts from the playwright's reconstruction of the psychological motivations of the characters in the plays, who gravitate around the life and legend of Oscar Wilde. Lanthers develops arguments about and reflections upon the concept and existence of children and androgynes, the incompatibility between the existence of the ideal in

the real world, and the tension between art and life. Lanter's text is a careful and sensitive study of two plays, pointing out the significance and the role of art and the healing power of drama as central in Kilroy's work.

To a certain extent, "the healing power of drama" is also **Zoraide Mesquita's** main focus in "Violence and Hope in *Ariel*, by Marina Carr." In a comparative approach, she examines how the playwright depicts the contemporary world by confronting it with another kind of society, suggesting that there is still hope for a better future. Mesquita questions the capacity of younger generations to reinvigorate human values in the contemporary world and in the future, and she debates this issue in her paper. First, she studies the similarities and the differences between *Ariel* and the Greek plays employed by Carr as "pretexts" (*Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Agamemnon* and *Choëphoroe*), aiming at discussing the aspects of contemporary society that are highlighted through this confrontation; then she draws attention to the title of the play in question, supporting the discussion with José Enrique Rodó's ideas about Shakespeare's *Ariel*. As detailed in her analysis, she recognizes in *Ariel* a message for the necessity of renewal.

Perhaps one of the most innovative critical voices in the field of Irish theatre, **Patrick Lonergan** offers us a paper drawing on arguments regarding the issue of globalization: "From Mass Media to New Media in Contemporary Irish Drama: Billy Roche's *On Such As We* and Paul Meade's *Skin Deep*." He explores how a contemporary situation of an increased commoditization of culture has become evident in contemporary Irish drama by considering two plays: Billy Roche's *On Such As We*, produced at the Peacock Theatre in 2001, and Paul Meade's *Skin Deep*, premiered by his company *Gúna Nua* at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin in 2003. Lonergan's argument is that "the impact of both mass media and new media has radically altered the way in which Irish audiences receive new plays like those by Roche and Meade." He also considers the extent to which Irish dramatists are aware of and responsive to these changes.

Eamonn Jordan's most interesting "'Stuff from Back Home:' Enda Walsh's *The Walworth Farce*" deals with the concept and function of farce in performance. "The play, in the words of Walsh himself, is 'a Druid-type play that is . . . done in the rhythm of farce' thus merging in the one performance something that has a traditional Irish emigrant dramatic sensibility and farce, which is a more broadly European style than an indigenously Irish theatrical form", affirms Jordan. Based on numerous interviews given by the playwright himself, Jordan plays with the concepts of history, farce, reality, fiction, and performance, reminding us of Walsh's comment that "Theatre does not come from a real place." For Jordan, Walsh challenges conventional theatrical representations of history delivering "a radical variation on the traditional Irish diasporic play, as farce or enforced farce becomes the ironic and contestational frame to misalign and misappropriate sensibilities and pieties often long associated by some with the Irish communities in metropolitan cities like London."

A concern with tradition is also part of **Roberto da Rocha's** argument in "Conor McPherson's *The Seafarer*: Tinkering with Tradition". Da Rocha re-assesses Conor McPherson's dramatic work taking his last published play—*The Seafarer*—as starting point. He examines ways in which *The Seafarer* differs from the author's previous work, considering, for example, the use of narrative devices, a remarkable trait of McPherson's texts. He also considers where *The Seafarer* stands in relation not only to Irish but also to Western traditions – theatrical, musical and folkloric -, what genres McPherson challenges, continues or renovates, considering particularly the relation of the play to tinker tradition in Irish society and literature, as it appears, for example, in Synge's work.

Maria Rita Köster approaches Conor McPherson's work from another perspective. Her article—"Conor McPherson's View of *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett"—is a comparative study of different media: Beckett's play, *Endgame*, and Conor McPherson's film, *Endgame*. Her inter-media perspective, taking into account the concept, function and effect

of stage directions, sheds new light on Beckett's work, apart from offering a good analysis of McPherson's, for new media alters our understanding of previous works. Her paper, then, points towards a new contemporary concept of intertextual analysis, considering not only texts, or text and stage, but also text and other media, such as film, arts, or even the Web.

As with Köster's and other articles already presented in this introduction, dealing with the work of one or more individual authors and weaving a rich often complex web of intertextual relations, other contributions also focus on the question of intertextuality, considering, however, a larger group of theatrical works, this time in Irish or belonging to various national literatures.

Maureen Murphy examines three plays translated or adapted from Irish into English by the authors themselves: Brendan Behan's *An Giall (The Hostage)*, Máiréad Ní Ghráda's *An Triail (The Trial: A Play)* and Antoine Ó Flatharta's *Grásta i Meiriceá (Grace in America)*. Murphy's "'Estranging Exteriority': Translation and Adaptation in Irish Drama" rescues fairly unknown plays in an interestingly unusual approach. She aims to test Nicholas Grene's thesis concerning the "estranging exteriority" of Irish theatre and verify whether it also holds for twentieth-century Irish language theatre when translated into English. In Grene's view, "Irish drama is outward-directed, created as much to be viewed from outside as well as inside Ireland. Even where the plays are produced wholly within an Irish theatrical milieu, the otherness of Ireland as a subject is so assumed by the playwrights as to create the effect of estranging exteriority" (3).

Munira Mutran also starts from the sole realm of Irish drama written in English in "Different Appropriations of Greek Tragedy in Contemporary Drama: Irish and otherwise." Although not indicated in the title, Mutran analyses contemporary Irish adaptations of Greek tragedy, now a relatively common trait of Irish drama, in relation to other translations in international traditions. With the support of some versions which take Sophocles's *Antigone* as a point of departure, her

essay reflects on the process of rewriting a classic. In a comparative approach, two European and three South-American plays are examined before a discussion of the methods and purposes Irish playwrights used when reworking myth in *Antigone* and other Greek tragedies.

This volume was designed to feature articles considering not only textual and performance practices in the work or related to the work of dramatists, but also the history, contribution and activity of theatre groups working with Irish material. Thus, the last three articles are dedicated to this subject matter.

Brenda Winter, in "Charabanc, Cultural Capital and the Men of Recognised Credit," examines the cultural legacy of Charabanc and Field Day, two of the most significant theatre companies to emerge on the island of Ireland in the 1980s. Her article considers

why one company, Field Day, has published all of its work, received considerable scholarly and critical attention and achieved canonical status for at least three of its productions, while the other, Charabanc, has only recently managed to publish its plays, is fast becoming in danger of being occluded from the history of Irish Theatre and is usually only considered within the ghetto of women's theatre. (XX)

Winter admits that such a comparative approach is not novel. Her argument, however, increments previous evaluations by suggesting that "an application of Pierre Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital to the historical discrepancy in the critical legacies of Field Day and Charabanc throws further light upon the subject." Moreover, she positions herself as a founder member of Charabanc Theatre, which adds a new and interesting perspective to her text.

Meanwhile, **Shelley Troupe** presents the results of her research on "The Internationalization of Irish Drama – 1975-2005", part of "The Irish Theatrical Diaspora" project: "Druid Theatre's Economics: The First Decade." Her article proposes an answer to the question of how

Druid grew “from a company that presented theatrical entertainments for Galway’s local audiences and visiting tourists into an international touring organisation presenting productions in Scotland and England, which were followed by invitations to tour to America and Australia.” Shelley Troupe contends that this success arises from the strong relationship between Druid’s productions and its administration and provides evidence to support her argument. Original and inventive, her article is the result of careful and committed research.

Equally fresh in perspective is **Domingos Nunez’s** account of his own work as a theatre director: “A Brief History of Cia Ludens and its Productions of Irish Plays in Brazil.” Founded in 2003 with the sole purpose of translating and producing Irish plays in Brazil, explains Nunez, Cia Ludens has so far produced four plays by outstanding Irish dramatists. According to the author, in spite of its non-comical approach, the company introduces a strong element of “play” throughout the creative process. This balance between seriousness and playfulness is the premise of an important study of the “play” element in culture undertaken by the Dutch historical philosopher Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*, and it is also the impulse that has stimulated the activities of the company. Domingos Nunez presents and evaluates his own and the company’s work in a text that adds to contemporary study of and research on the Irish theatrical diaspora.

The two articles that close the collection, therefore, point to and reaffirm the orientation of this issue of *Ilha do Desterro*: to survey and present the practice of, research on and hold debate around contemporary Irish theatre from an international perspective that looks inwards and outwards, from within and from outside the geographical boundaries of Ireland, offering contributions from a wide and diverse group of critical voices, in the spirit of global cultural democracy that ought properly, perhaps, to preside over the dynamics of twenty-first century academic interaction.

References

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