

Russell, Richard Rankin, ed. *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. 187 pp.

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Although Martin McDonagh has not published a new play since 2003, in terms of scholarship critics and scholars exploring his plays have been prolific. In 2006 *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories* was published—edited by Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort)—with two Hungarian contributions: Mária Kurdi’s “The Helen of Inishmaan Pegging Eggs: Gender, Sexuality and Violence,” and Péter P. Müller’s “Domesticating a Theatre of Cruelty: The Plays of Martin McDonagh on the Hungarian Stage.” A year later this collection was followed by a volume appearing in the *A Casebook* series. A *Casebook* is one of the series published by Routledge, which gathers essays focusing on the work of a particular playwright. Brian Friel, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, Joe Orton, and other remarkable dramatists have hallmarked this series so far and now Martin McDonagh has found his way into it.

The essays in the collection, written by Irish and American authors, demonstrate a wide range of critical and theoretical approaches comprising an introduction, nine essays, and a chronology of Martin McDonagh’s life and works. The introductory essay by the editor, Richard Rankin Russel, not only provides an excellent overview of McDonagh’s career but also delineates some relevant critical terrains, such as representations of “Irishness,” the artistic merit of McDonagh’s plays, his roots in Irish dramatic antecedents as well as his strategies presenting cruelty and violence alongside the ethical functions the plays enact. “[. . .] by holding a mirror up to his audience and showing us the lack of limits to our breathless fascination with violence and cruelty, McDonagh shows us that we desire to watch others’ discomfort and even laugh at it, a point made by several of the essays collected here” (4).

Besides raising questions about audience perception, the essays have other common features: the authors consistently detail or cite the previous contributors to their topic, either opening new dimensions or questioning some former interpretations, and in doing so they allow a dialogue between different discourses and serve as an excellent scholarly resource. They also quote from different press interviews by McDonagh, although Patrick Lonergan draws our attention to “the existence of so many apparently contradictory statements by McDonagh” (153). Meanwhile the critic points out that the problem is caused by the present condition of theatre journalism: “[. . .] the writers seem to know little about the drama” (153).

The opening and closing essays seem to form the two centers of the volume’s theoretical core. In the opening essay José Lanter highlights the very nature of post-modern satire, brilliantly analyzing all the significant postmodern concepts relating

to this issue. She interprets McDonagh's plays and articulates a new way of reading them, suggesting that they should be read as postmodern satires which undermine and destabilize any established category, any form of identity (personal, national and gender), and even "the very foundational elements of Irish nationalism" (17).

Joan FitzPatrick Dean presents McDonagh's stagecraft in an extremely thorough essay, examining all the tropes, dramaturgical and rhetorical features, time-honored strategies, and representational techniques both in a historical context and in the context of all McDonagh's published plays. The characters' sudden reappearances, storytelling, the comic anti-avant-garde dramaturgy, the tight structuring of scenes, and the dramatic clichés are seen as manipulating audience expectations and subverting Irish stereotypes.

Marion Castleberry, who is also a playwright, focuses on McDonagh's first staged play: *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. She assesses all the factors that make up the play: the genre (she uses the term "Black Pastoral"), the influences, the comic ingredients, the characters, and techniques with which McDonagh quickly shifts the plot "blending the mundane with the shocking" (46). She seems to continue the dialogue about postmodern discourses referring to the destabilization of language, for instance, in the play.

Stephanie Pocock analyzes *The Leenane Trilogy*, mainly *The Lonesome West*, in a different context which has been rather dismissed by critics and scholars so far. She suggests considering the presence of Catholic beliefs (rejected or accepted) in the world that McDonagh has created. Father Welsh, she argues, can be regarded as a moral centre, the heart of the play with his "melodramatic self-sacrifice" (75). Furthermore, searching for similar Irish literary examples, she refers to writers like George Moore and James Joyce, "who, despite rejecting Catholicism, have found themselves repeatedly drawn to its narratives" (75).

No wonder that Karen Vandeveld's essay follows the ones discussed above: *The Leenane Trilogy* is viewed again, but from a performative aspect. Comparing it with the original Garry Hynes direction, Vandeveld describes a Dutch-Flemish production by Johan Simons. In this adaptation the dramaturges have restructured the trilogy, rearranging its multi-layeredness and creating a four-hour performance enacted in minimalist graveyard settings. The theatricalized style of this production highlighted such latent concerns in the trilogy as the celebration of life and questions about life and existence.

From *The Aran Trilogy*, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* receives particular attention in Maria Doyle's essay. She poses the question, "What does violence mean in McDonagh's theatre, and particularly what does it mean if it is funny?" (93) She discusses how the playwright manipulates audience expectations about violence, evoking simultaneous feelings of pleasure and disgust.

The audience desires blood, violence, and gore but in the meantime they think that the world of the plays is something strange and monstrous, something foreign, they distance themselves, they want to move away from it, they define them-

selves against it. In addition, sometimes the audience can sympathize with McDonagh's monsters—the whole horror genre is subverted. Laura Eldred in her exciting contribution not only explains the influence of the horror films on McDonagh's drama but also shows the operation of the genre. In his essay, "*The Pillowman*: a new story to tell" Brian Cliff introduces the play's performance history and its critical reception showing some misinterpretations as well. Referring to the title he suggests a new interpretation of the play: an unexpected moment of grace as the policeman Ariel salvages the writer Katurian's stories.

In the closing paper Patrick Lonergan seeks answers to the question of whether the following categories can be used by critics discussing McDonagh: influence, intention, intertextuality outside or inside the parameters of the Irish dramatic tradition, and boundaries between high and low cultural forms. Nationalized discourses, he argues, may complicate the understanding of such a globalized writer. He does not suggest a new paradigm, but a new framework: "[. . .] a globalized framework, grounded in Ireland but engaged with ideas from other cultures" (155). After surveying the Irish qualities of the plays, he details the low culture influences (especially the soap operas) upon McDonagh and the impact of 1990s cinema. He finds a relationship between McDonagh, Australian soap opera and Tarantino. "All three draw on cultural forms that are geographically peripheral [. . .] and can achieve an international success" (172). This essay with its implications and conclusions is absolutely essential to the critical tradition dealing with McDonagh.

Considering both the performative and the textual nature of the dramatic genre, the reader is presented with valuable and significant responses here to the challenges set by one of the most celebrated young playwrights today. Nearly the full range of McDonagh's work is revisited, allowing for fruitful dialogues among the essays. It is definitely worth reading by everyone who is involved in the production or reception of his plays, Hungarian directors and theatre people included.