

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, and contends that it has more to it than its traditional reading as an example of colonial domination. Armand gives a deconstructive reading of the relevant episode in which he finds an ironic subtext and also the suggestion how decentering the origin of the English language “raises doubts about asserting any straightforward relationship of a ‘subject’ to language, in which his subject is considered a ‘colonial subject’” (28). According to him, as soon as the subject becomes part of the discourse, the “assumption of cultural or linguistic sovereignty” (30) exhausts itself.

By carefully selecting individual articles that analyze such diverse concerns of Irish culture and literature, Ondrej Pilný, the executive editor of *Litteraria Pragensia*, whose words introduce the publication, and his co-editors have presented the readers with a plurality of new and illuminating perspectives on Irish cultural studies. Their special issue is indeed a valuable source for anyone with an interest in things Irish.

Challenging Stereotypes, Lacking Alternatives?: Mapping the Irish Theatre of the Last Twenty Years. Bolger, Dermot, ed. *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens: The Changing Face of Irish Theatre*. Dublin: New Island, 2001. 302 pp.

Ondrej Pilný

After *Theatre Stuff* (edited by Eamonn Jordan, 2000), this is another important collection of essays focused on the variegated nature of contemporary theatre in Ireland in a relatively short time. One of the reasons why *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens* surpasses (never mind its tacky title) its predecessor is that it brings together not only academics and theatre critics but also a large number of theatre practitioners and observers, in order to facilitate different perspectives on the theatre and to cater for all its aspects—literary, practical and social, domestic and international.

One of the highlights of the volume is the analysis of the recent elevation of playwrights Martin McDonagh and Marina Carr to the status of major stars of the Irish stage. In a brilliant article on McDonagh’s Leenane trilogy, *The Irish Times*’ John Waters offers a poignant examination of what he calls an “Irish neurosis”: Irish audiences may be roaring with laughter at the sight of McDonagh’s absurd caricatures; however, their guffaws are always accompanied by a profound sense of unease, as the plays really deal—according to Waters—with the traumatic, grim past of material and spiritual poverty of rural Ireland. Waters claims that McDonagh’s mastery rests in being able to “deal in the things which a society seeks to conceal or avoid, while not alienating that society entirely” (53). In other words, McDonagh manages to coat a bitter pill with enough humour or entertainment to avoid a violent reception of his work. Moreover, as a contributing factor to the playwright’s popularity Waters enlists also the fact that many Irish people admire McDonagh because they wish to “maintain their sense of oppression by the disturbing forces of an Ireland which no longer exists,” such as the secular influence of the Church, the mechanisms of a patriarchal society or the vision of Ireland as a pastoral rural country (37).

Vic Merriman takes an opposite view in his article on the “excess and success” of McDonagh and Carr. According to Merriman, these playwrights “stage Ireland as a benighted dystopia,” while the performances of violence are “calibrated to the tastes of

an aggressive bourgeois palate” (59). What he views as facile parody and gratuitous cruelty in these plays only reinforces the ideological position of a Celtic Tiger elite; genuine Irish drama should rather be political and oppositional, and wield its transformative power to the full: it should talk about subjects as emergent racism, the plight of the refugees in Ireland, or the heedless materialism of contemporary Ireland.

I am far from wishing to deny the beneficial aspects of overtly political theatre. However, it is curious that Merriman embraces in the name of eradicating social intolerance a similar intolerance in aesthetic terms: it seems that the only kind of theatre (and art in general) which—in Merriman’s view—has a right to exist is that serving a particular kind of public cause, while other artistic modes are to be dismissed as complacent. Whatever the merits of McDonagh, surely we’ve heard this one before. And, characteristically enough, the interpretation of McDonagh’s and Carr’s plays which accompanies Merriman’s claim is fundamentally one-sided: both playwrights are perceived to deal solely with the condition of Ireland, while the satirical aspects of McDonagh are ignored and the plays of Marina Carr get reduced to depictions of degeneration and incest. I wonder how Beckett would fare within this interpretative framework. (By way of a footnote, there is an interesting parallel between the ambivalent reception of especially McDonagh and that of an earlier popular playwright, Sean O’Casey: O’Casey’s early plays also brought the playwright immediate fame and a place in the Irish literary canon. While saving the Abbey Theatre from bankruptcy; on the other hand, O’Casey has been accused of complacency with the Free State elite, most recently by Declan Kiberd who has called the characters of the three Dublin plays “urban leprechauns” in *Inventing Ireland*).

The opposing perspectives on the success of McDonagh and Carr indeed raise a question of no little importance: to what extent, and in what sense need one view these plays as representations of Irish reality? Their setting *is* unquestionably Ireland—but is this what the plays are really about? Both the opponents and the admirers of McDonagh tend to agree that his plays do not laugh at any real backwardness and stupidity of the Irish. McDonagh is rather seen to mock particular stereotypes of Irishness. In addition, however, it may be quite plausible to argue that his plays laugh at the same time at all those who are still concerned with the issue of Irishness at all—by offering an absurd, degenerated version of it. On the other hand, Carr’s “domestic Greek tragedies” seem more convincingly read as dealing with the individual plight of their protagonists in the face of an inevitable iteration of fate, rather than as realistic depictions of life on the Irish bog (significantly, most detractors of Carr tend to ignore in their discussion *The Mai*, her best play up to date, which is, indeed, hard to read as promoting and/or caricaturing stereotypes of the “bog-Irish”).

A number of contributors to the volume call not only for a movement away from the constant revision of or ironic reaction to the Revivalist concern with the Irishness of Yeats and Lady Gregory (as Colm Tóibín does), but also point out the necessity to adopt new theatrical modes in order to cater for the rapidly changing nature of today’s Ireland. In Karen Fricker’s words, “In a rapidly modernising, diversifying and internationalising Ireland, there is a need for a multiplicity of modes through which Irish theatre can communicate” (105). This feeling is shared explicitly by Merriman and Anna McMullan, while it can be sensed behind almost all the articles in the collection. How has Ireland fared in this respect?

To start with Northern Ireland, as the recent call for a diversity of theatrical

modes—perhaps incidentally—echoes a similar claim issued by the late Stewart Parker in the 1980s, Ronan McDonald follows a trajectory that the “drama of the Troubles” has taken from social realism to experiment, a new focus on the history play, and the development of an innovative theatre of ideas by Field Day. However, with Field Day coming to a standstill, and with the death of Stewart Parker, what ensued in the nineties was, according to McDonald, a general return to social realism. An interesting development in itself—at least from a sociological point of view—, yet it seems to threaten with a constant elaboration of similar theatrical patterns such as we have witnessed in the late 1970s, despite McDonald’s hopeful assertion that realism is “the dramatic form natural to a functioning society” (105).

The development and its chronology appear to be slightly different in the Republic. Karen Fricker analyzes in her essay the influential 1994 production *True Lines*, a collective effort by director John Crowley and four actors of the Bickerstaffe Theatre Company, which she perceives as a major breakthrough in theatrical innovation, one that employed elements of physical theatre, conveyed its plot partially through visual means, and consistently foregrounded its own theatricality. Nonetheless, she claims that the challenge of *True Lines* has not been taken up by other theatre groups and writers; Irish drama still “continues to hew to the traditions of plot-and-character-driven storytelling, and to preoccupy itself with issues of history and national identity” (118). According to Fricker, the early 1990s accumulated an enormous potential for experimentation and development of original theatre; nevertheless, this momentum has been lost. Fricker attributes this chiefly to the paradoxical effects of the new economic boom: she asserts that “the ‘Celtic Tiger’ could well be the worst possible thing to have happened to Ireland at this particular point in its artistic life” (118). The rising prices and rents have made it almost impossible for young theatre groups to stage their productions, while arts organisations cannot compete with the salaries offered to promising authors, actors and theatre personnel in other industries. Fricker argues that the rapid changes offer a plethora of urgent new themes to be dealt with by the theatre—if only someone took care to actually do it. Whereas Fricker portrays the situation in terms of a unique paradox, an interesting analogy offers itself—though, arguably, not a solution to the problem—in the recent experience of other countries: the social and cultural change in Central and Eastern Europe has been equally momentous at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, both in terms of its speed and scope. Similar grievances have been voiced in these countries as to the quality and originality of new drama: fresh subject matter appeared to be there in abundance but nothing exciting seemed to be happening. While financial constraints have also been recognized as an important factor, the scarcity of original artistic achievement has been attributed chiefly to a certain disorientation in a swiftly changing environment. Difficulties connected with a lack of critical distance from a rapidly evolving present should perhaps be taken into account in the Irish context as well.

Another point of convergence between several essays is the discussion of the popularity of recent Irish plays with international audiences. Mic Moroney remarks on the taste of European spectators for parody, dark humour and verbal and physical violence—a phenomenon which surely does not pertain exclusively to Irish drama but also to new trends in Britain, Scandinavia, or Germany. Moroney also praises recent manifestations of regional Irish identities and accents in a number of plays (although it remains to be asked what happens to e.g. the Cork dialect when a play like *Disco Pigs*

gets performed in a foreign-language translation). Waters identifies two other causes for the popularity of a particular type of an Irish parody: plays of the McDonagh kind exploit “the kitschification of Ireland and its meanings in the modern world.” On the other hand, they also make the most of the exotic nature of Ireland, something which is possible only due to the fact that this particular exotic world and its language are still easily accessible to audiences abroad. (48) Mária Kurdi and Csilla Bertha provide in their essay on the reception and production history of Brian Friel’s plays in Hungary a more general reason for the esteem given to Irish drama in Europe—many plays have clearly been perceived as offering parallels to the historical and/or individual experience in several other countries. Correspondences of such nature account, for instance, for the high resonance that Brian Friel’s *Translations* had for the Hungarians who had gone through a period of totalitarianism and colonization in Transylvania.

Perspectives on Irish theatre from outside the island generally make for an extremely valuable addition to the maps and sketches provided from the within. Kurdi and Bertha not only point out the historical reasons for the success of a number of plays by Friel, but they also provide invaluable knowledge of the context of Hungarian theatre in which these plays would have been staged—this kind of information is rarely available to theatre critics and practitioners in Ireland (as in many other countries, for that matter). Emile Jean Dumay offers a unique—albeit a rather idiosyncratic—view of a French scholar and translator on the various “terrae incognitae” of recent Irish drama. Owen Dudley Edwards charts a history of Irish stage productions at the Edinburgh Festival, which includes descriptions of the interaction between the plays and their Scottish and London critics respectively, again priceless to those who did not have a chance to be there at the time and all the time.

Irish language theatre tends to get largely ignored in the English language context: it is laudable that the editor has solicited a piece on the subject by Breandán Delap, theatre reviewer and editor of the Irish language newspaper, *Foinse*. Delap unravels the enormous potential of the vernacular scene; however, he laments the fact that the playwrights and theatre companies currently seem to be “hopelessly out of sync with the needs of the audience.” What gets produced are often the plays of “Beckett wannabes” (215), hardly comprehensible to the average theatre-goer due to their intellectual complexity. In addition, many productions suffer from casting actors whose Irish is not up to the mark which makes understanding virtually impossible. The Irish language scene still seems to be waiting for playwrights who would balance artistic merit with sufficient accessibility.

Apart from the analyses of current trends in Irish drama, the volume is really helpful in providing accounts of individual plays and their productions in Ireland. The surveys offered by Fricker, Moroney and Edwards are complemented by Anna McMullan’s valuable appraisal of recent plays by women, and the playwright Johnny Hanrahan’s view of the effort of the Meridian and Corcadorca companies to draft a figurative map of Cork. The contributions of theatre practitioners include, on the one hand, a glimpse in the 2000 diary of the artistic director of the National Theatre, Ben Barnes (which features notes on a visit with Friel to Russia), and on the other personal views of the members of Glasshouse on the mechanics of and impulses behind the remarkable 1990s amateur company. Indisputably, *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens* is a book to have.