

Leeney, Cathy and Deirdre McFeely, eds. *The Plays of Maura Laverty: Liffey Lane, Tolka Row, A Tree in the Crescent*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2023. 274 pp. ISBN 978-1-80207-791-9

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In traditional histories of Irish theatre the playwriting that started concurrently with the foundation of the Irish Literary Theatre (1899) and then the Abbey Theatre (1904), the work of male authors, W. B. Yeats, George Moore, Edward Martyn, John Millington Synge, and Sean O'Casey were discussed, at times including Lady Augusta Gregory's too, yet she continued to hold a marginal place in the critical literature until not long ago. In general, women's work was either ignored or just briefly mentioned in assessments of Irish drama and, as a rule, the canon remained male-based for also the reason that even if a female author's play earned some success on the stage, it was quickly forgotten because the script remained unpublished. The massive anthology, *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* I-III (1991), contained only a very limited account of women authors, let alone playwrights, apart from providing some information about Lady Gregory's work for the Abbey. Second wave feminism had been present in Ireland since the late 1960s, enabling an Irish feminist scholarship to develop. In the wake of the publication of *The Field Day Anthology* several female scholars raised their voices against the gross lack of gender balance the three volumes displayed, leading to a decade-long project which resulted in publishing volumes IV and V of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (2002) with appropriate recognition of centuries of Irish women's writing, its diversity and merits in all genres. An inspiring and energizing outcome of this massive undertaking was the notable expansion of the Irish literary canon with inclusion of a wider range of voices. To make women playwrights more known and facilitate their recognition and the possible revival of their plays, there followed the publication of works by several of them, in collections or anthologies.

Maura Laverty (1907-1966) had been one of the once successful, then unduly forgotten women playwrights whose contribution to Irish theatre became re-visited and her plays were published quite recently. Initially a novelist, she started to write plays for the stage, successfully produced by the Gate Theatre Company, the alleged rival of the Abbey, in the 1950s. The volume under review here contains three of her plays, *Liffey Lane*, *Tolka Row*, and *A Tree in the Crescent* together labelled, because of their thematic links and shared motifs, as her Dublin Trilogy. In want of critical assessments of Laverty's dramatic oeuvre, in a substantial and long introduction, the editors of the collection contextualize and discuss the plays with regard to their themes

and dramaturgical characteristics. Laverty's debut, they claim, was facilitated by the artistic creed of the directors of the Gate Theatre, Hilton Edwards and Micheál Mac Liammóir, who encouraged her "writing candid dialogues on taboo topics such as sexuality, illegitimacy, contraception and women's attitudes to men" (19). Considering Irish theatre in the 1950s and before as background, the editors state that on account of her deep interest in the social, cultural, and political life of the city as a journalist and author of realistic novels, the writer herself was "very well placed to portray and comment on urban living" in the dramatic genre too (11). They underscore the novelty of Laverty's trilogy as the representation of life in the unfashionable parts of the city, which certainly differed from the rural or small-town settings of most earlier and contemporary Irish plays. In this regard, the spatial reference in the three titles is revealing. For Leeney and McFeely, Laverty sensitively captured a range of problems and tensions looming under the relatively complacent surface of the postcolonial Irish society in plays which "delved into neglected moments of national change in social relations, family, gender, class, and opportunity" (5).

The introduction analyzes the three plays considering their dramaturgies along with their performative aspects and theatrical potential thanks to the expertise of Leeney and McFeely, both theoretical and practical. *Liffey Lane* is treated as a drama presenting an "episodic storyline," manifest in shifting scenes between interior and outdoor spaces, which enabled its production in "expressionist style" (20-21). Actualizing Marvin Carlson's idea about the haunted nature of virtually all dramatic texts, the editors refer to Sean O'Casey's portrayal of the life of the poorest Dubliners in dilapidated tenement houses as a haunting antecedent of a similarly acute social awareness in *Liffey Lane* (21). However, it is to be remembered that O'Casey dramatized the poverty of war-torn Dublin in the 1920s, whereas the plot of *Liffey Lane* is set in time of peace, in a country which even remained neutral during World War II. It is revealing, the editors stress, that three decades later Laverty portrays almost the same kind of poverty and discrimination, but, importantly, she also calls attention to the hypocrisy of the government, which gave lip-service to social protection for all while "positively supporting policies to protect gender inequality and social injustices" (18). The direction of the play's premiere by Hilton Edwards in 1951 is also found haunted, namely by Brecht and his theory of *gestus*, that is, the visual manifestation of social and cultural attitudes or phenomena often carrying political critique. "Additionally," the editors continue their analysis of the play, "the space of performance is not realist, but performative and plastic - the play's opening is entirely presentational with Billy [a pedlar] as a metatheatrical figure who mediates the action (and his direct appeal to the audience is repeated in the closing scene)" (25). His role suggests a parallel with that of the Conjure Man in Tennessee Williams's *Orpheus Descending*, rewritten from a juvenile text around 1950 but not performed until 1957.

The second piece of Laverty's Dublin trilogy is *Tolka Row*, in the discussion of which Leeney and McFeely underscore the technique of spatializing the intersecting constraints of working-class life. In the drama a family, the Nolans have a uniform-looking home in a new housing estate in Dublin. Staging its effect on the dwellers, the editors argue, can best be achieved by emphasizing "the lack of interior space in the home [which] compromises individual privacy and the right to personal space"

(29). In spite of the social progression that having moved there means for the Nolans, “[e]motional tensions arise from the conflict of limited space, the house’s occupants and their possessions, and intergenerational loyalties”, the editors sum up the problems the production can enhance. In addition, they discuss the joint role of furniture pieces in the house, which have the gestic function of exposing the characters’, especially the central one, Rita’s meeting the day-to-day challenges of not having enough space for three generations in the house (30). The play was popular with audiences partly because, the editors claim, it touched upon taboo subjects in the highly conservative, Church-dominated Irish society: Rita and her neighbour discuss issues of contraception and one of the male characters is gay (35). Similarly to *Liffey Lane*, there is a Brechtian element in *Tolka Row* too, as it is framed by the appearance of a woman selling flowers for used clothes and the deal she makes at the beginning by buying up Rita’s father’s no longer needed clothes is proleptic of the act of suicide the old man commits later in the play, presented in a surrealist style.

A Tree in the Crescent, the third play in the collection has a subtitle, *A Play of Married Life*, which “signals that theatrically and thematically it is a more spacious work, posed between the social and the personal” in the description of Leeney and McFeely (38). Set in various locations, the plot spans twenty-seven years during which time the characters themselves change along with the socio-economic developments taking place in the country. The play dramatizes the rise and pursuit of personal ambitions yet also the social impediments on the way to self-realization with a married man, Fintan Farrell in the center as “a kind of anti-protagonist” in the editors’ interpretation because of his unusual navigation “between changing modes of Irish masculinity” (39) shown, for instance, by his “refusal of sexual guilt” after dating a former girl-friend (42) in a society of very strict mores. A period of transition in both the Irish nation’s and Irish peoples’ individual lives is captured by this drama through surveying a married couple’s experiences and their having to cope with the external and internal challenges they face during almost three decades. Leeney and McFeely stress that in the postcolonial period the conservative social norms created separate realities for men and women, thus Farrell and his wife “embody the tensions arising from this model” (42). In 1951, the Gate season included Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949) too and Laverty’s work shares some of its features, being a drama of social critique and performed on a divided stage. As a kind of framing device, on one side of the stage a single tree is placed, with its “strange living presence, showing exaggerated changes in the cycle of nature [which] is rather echoed, in modernist reduced and ironic form, by Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*” (1953) (40), the editors argue. In this respect, like its protagonist, *A Tree in the Crescent* navigates between dramatic modes and styles.

All in all, the importance of publishing this book is (at least) twofold. On the one hand, the texts it now makes available for the wider public secures the recognition of the writer and her work as part of the national canon while it facilitates their revival on the Irish, British, and perhaps other stages. On the other hand, the detailed introduction to the plays by editors Leeney and McFeely functions as an important step forward in the potentially developing research of Laverty’s drama in the context

of international developments in the theatre and views on the theatre in the 1950s. The writer's contribution to Irish theatre can also be considered as a prelude to what is called the Second Renaissance of Irish Drama hallmarked by Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Tom Kilroy, and Hugh Leonard.