



Martin McDonagh: A Staged Irishman

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Martin McDonagh: A Staged Irishman

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Martin McDonagh is one of the most important figures in the new generation of British playwrights that emerged in the 1990s. Born and bred in London but of Irish parentage, he is often held to represent a new form of 'Anglo-Irishness' that repudiates familiar constructions of nationality while remaining indebted to a tradition of Irish drama initiated by J. M. Synge, leading to suggestions that he is essentially a pasticheur. McDonagh himself claims little first-hand knowledge of this tradition, however, and he might more accurately be said to inhabit a postmodern world in which traditions are mediated by popular culture, especially television situation comedy and American cinema. He typifies a generation of dramatists for whom American influences are more pervasive than those of either England or Ireland, and whose ideas have been shaped less by theatre than by television, film and music. McDonagh's plays thereby retain an ironic distance from the Irish writers he is sometimes said to imitate; the challenge instead will be to avoid too great an immersion in the popular culture of a newly 'globalised' Britain in which America is the dominant economic and cultural superpower.

The new playwrights who emerged in Britain in the 1990s represent a decisive break from the past. Whatever the simplifications in the construction of a knowledge-free, value-free 'Generation X,' those born in the late 1960s and 1970s have grown up with VCRs, the commercialisation of the BBC, the advent of multi-channel satellite broadcasting, the internet, 'globalisation' and increasing cross-media convergence, all of which have had the effect of apparently subsuming history within a simultaneous present of illusory multiple choices. This generation is also one of the first to emerge from the changes in the teaching of the humanities in British secondary and higher education. Under pressure from both right and left, and with a funding model that obliges institutions to compete ever more desperately for students, the curriculum has increasingly shifted from literary to media studies, from the study of historical production to the theorisation of subjective reception.

Curiously, this paradigm shift, symptomatic as it is of some of the major changes within British culture as a whole, helps to explain the development of new writers, such as Jez Butterworth and Martin McDonagh, who have brought to the stage not a detailed knowledge of British theatre but the energy of contemporary popular music and independent American film. It is often noted that many of the new dramatists have been assisted by the influx of new theatrical management at London venues such as the Bush and the Royal Court, where director Ian Rickson championed the work of young writers, and the workshops and other practical help offered by the Royal National Theatre Studio.¹ These adjustments do not of themselves, however, explain the kinds of play that are being produced. In this context Martin McDonagh, who in 1996 won both the Evening Standard and the George Devine awards for Most Promising Playwright, is especially interesting. His work, generally held to demonstrate such an unfashionably detailed intertextual relationship with the plays of an Irish dramatic

¹ Michael Billington, "Fabulous Five", *Guardian* (13 March 1996), p. 10.

tradition that he is often regarded as essentially a writer of pastiche, in fact demonstrates both the possibilities unleashed by a comparative ignorance of the medium in which he has achieved success (he has even compared himself to Orson Welles in this respect),² and the dangers of the current obsession with American popular culture.

The terms in which cultural commentator Fintan O'Toole has championed McDonagh have been particularly influential. In his introduction to an edition of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West*,³ the plays that constitute the 'Leenane trilogy', O'Toole situates McDonagh's work within a redefinition of 'Anglo-Irishness.' Previously a term widely used to distinguish the writing of Irish Protestants from that of their Gaelic-Catholic compatriots, it now signals the contribution made by the English-born children of Irish parents, 'a new kind of fusion that arises, not from ascendancy but from exile' (p. x). McDonagh, then, 'was, and is, a citizen of an indefinite land that is neither Ireland nor England, but that shares borders with both' (p. ix). Alongside this redefinition of spatial borders comes a kind of temporal uncertainty, in which motifs redolent of Irish drama from Synge onwards are combined with 'an utterly 1990s sensibility, in which knowing and playful pastiche becomes indistinguishable from serious and sober intent', so that 'the country in which McDonagh's play, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, is set is pre-modern and postmodern at the same time. The 1950s is laid over the 1990s' (p. xi). Therefore, O'Toole finds in these plays 'the mental universe of people who live on the margins of a globalized culture' (pp. xiii–xiv).

A related, if less thoughtful, view of McDonagh is that of Dominic Dromgoole, a director at London's Bush Theatre who read McDonagh's early, unpublished pieces but turned them down for production. What Dromgoole found in these neophyte plays, not surprisingly, was an enormous but unfocused talent: 'There was a Pinterish play, a piece of absurdism and early signs of the Galway voice [...]. There was nothing remotely Irish about them, nor was there anything particular to say.' In the period between these early rejections and the writing of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, according to Dromgoole, two things in particular changed McDonagh's writing: he saw Tracy Letts's *Killer Joe*, a gruesome comedy by an English writer set in American trailer trash culture, and he began to explore Irish drama. Dromgoole detects the influence of 'Tom Murphy, Billy Roche, Beckett, Synge, O'Casey, even Wilde. Since his greatest talent is as a pasticheur, he is able to reproduce forgeries of any of these writers at will,' and Dromgoole sees as a weakness in *Beauty Queen* that 'There is too much quotation, it is too directly from other fiction,' the result being that the plays of the trilogy are little more than 'pot-boilers, 'pastiche soup, a blend of Irish greats, with a pinch of sick punk humour thrown in. Its greatest achievement is that it is entertaining.'⁴

The tenor of such observations seems largely appropriate, but some of the emphases are not. In presenting McDonagh as in some ways balancing or fusing Irishness and Englishness, 'knowing and playful pastiche' and 'serious and sober intent,' both writers over-emphasise, or at least mislocate, the element of pastiche in the plays, and in so doing imply a conscious attempt by the playwright to situate himself within a dramatic tradition of which he himself claims to be largely ignorant. In addition, while O'Toole quite properly locates McDonagh's plays within contemporary shifts in the conceptualisation of national and cultural identity, this can again tend to invest them with an inappropriate kind and level of seriousness. McDonagh's achievement is major; but instead of continuing a tradition of Irish drama, he

² Michael Coveney, 'He Compares Himself with the Young Orson Welles. Oh Dear...', *Observer*, review section 1 (December 1996), p. 13.

³ Fintan O'Toole, "Introduction", in Martin McDonagh, *Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1999), pp. ix–xvii.

⁴ Dominic Dromgoole, *The Full Room: An A-Z of Contemporary Playwriting* (London: Methuen, 2000) pp. 197–200.

exemplifies that sense of rootlessness in space and time, and the comparative unconcern with tradition, characteristic of postmodernity.

As O'Toole observes, McDonagh's plays make numerous references to Irish history: *The Cripple of Inishmaan* is set in 1934, and references range from the great potato famine of the 1840s to the Easter 1916 uprising, from De Valera to the present-day scandals involving Catholic priests and the false imprisonment of the Birmingham Six. But these are very familiar events, in no way challenging McDonagh's assertion that 'I believe completely in fiction and as little research as possible.'⁵ Within the plays history is — probably deliberately — confused. The run-down, rural interiors recall the familiar world of mid-century kitchen sink drama; in most respects the 1934 of *The Cripple of Inishmaan* and the mid-1990s of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* seem contemporaneous, and neither is far removed from the turn-of-the-century Aran of Synge. *Beauty Queen's* references to the emigration of local workers to England and America, a staple of Irish history and theatre, rings false at a time when the Irish economy was expanding rapidly and younger as well as older generations were choosing to stay in or return to Ireland. Conor McPherson's *The Weir*, premiered at the Royal Court in 1997, the year after *Beauty Queen*, is more rooted in a sense of place and more anchored in contemporary events, such as the obsession with property prices and the competing attractions of Dublin and rural Ireland.

That the temporal confusion of McDonagh's dramatic world is deliberate is suggested by the constant references to television shows in the plays. The Australian soaps mentioned in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* are not the then-current favourites *Home and Away* or *Neighbours*, but the earlier *The Sullivans* and *A Country Practice*, and the characters live in a world of repeats of *Quincy* and *Alias Smith and Jones*.

This near-ubiquitous obsession with popular culture in the post-Tarantino generation subverts the Irish literary intertexts of McDonagh's plays. O'Toole and Dromgoole suggest many such connections: the dialogue, as well as the remote Western Irish locations, are powerfully reminiscent of Synge; *A Skull in Connemara* takes its title from a line in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*; the sense of mythic foreboding that hangs over the plays is not so far removed from the plays of Yeats, and both critics suggest continuities with the work of more recent or lesser-known writers such as Tom Murphy and John B. Keane. The sense of deep-seated tradition such intertexts provide is enhanced by the mythic quality of many of the situations, redolent of much earlier works. O'Toole notes that the gravedigging scene in *A Skull in Connemara* is bound to recall *Hamlet*, and one might suggest that the whole of that play has something of the charnel-house atmosphere of John Webster, if only *The Duchess of Malfi* had been written for laughs. Coleman's murder of his father in *The Lonesome West* recalls *Oedipus Rex*, while his near-murderous relationship with his brother Valene plays like a contemporary version of the Cain and Abel story. This biblical, mythic quality is further deepened by the parodies of Catholicism. Visually, these are most immediately noticeable in *The Lonesome West*, with its stage set overlooked by a large crucifix, Valene's collection of plastic Catholic figurines, and Father Welsh, the comic priest. Structurally, the final scene of that play is a parody of the ritual of confession, while Mairtin's comic-miraculous return from the dead in *A Skull in Connemara*, which recalls the shock entrance of Christy's supposedly murdered father in *The Playboy of the Western World*, is, like Synge's *coup de théâtre*, a parody of the resurrection.

What is most readily apparent as one goes about compiling a list like this is what an easy game it is to play. It would be a major feat, for example, for a dramatist to construct a gravediggers' scene that didn't make one think of *Hamlet*. The interpretive communities in which O'Toole and Dromgoole work privilege such sources, but there is every likelihood that

⁵ Coveney, p. 13.

such traces are the effect, not of consciously exploited primary knowledge, but of the refraction of canonical sources through the lens of popular culture.

If one is to take McDonagh seriously as a writer, one might begin by taking seriously some of his own remarks on the extent of his knowledge of the theatre. 'I doubt I've seen 20 plays in my life. I prefer films. I only started writing for the theatre when all else failed. Basically, it was just a way of avoiding work and earning a bit of money.'⁶ He has spoken in interviews of his interest in Pinter, Mamet and Shepard, influences so pervasive on young English-language playwrights that to mention them is not to contradict his confessed dislike of the theatre as a medium. Director Richard Eyre suggests that it is precisely McDonagh's lack of theatre-going experience that enables him to write in the way he does.⁷ The playwright contradicts Dromgoole's assertion that it was only when he discovered the Irish dramatic tradition that he found his own voice, asserting that at the time he wrote *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* 'I hadn't read any Irish plays [...] so I just tried to think about how my uncles spoke'.⁸ There is some misleading self-fashioning in such remarks: in another interview he admitted to reading *The Playboy of the Western World*.⁹ But while there is surely some influence from Synge, there is no good reason to assume that he has an extensive first-hand knowledge of any of the writers mentioned by O'Toole and Dromgoole.

Given the repeated references to popular television shows in his plays, it is at least equally plausible to suggest a less elevated influence. His plays first made it onto the stages of Galway and London in 1996, the year after Channel 4 had a big hit with the first series of *Father Ted*, a situation comedy written by Graham Linehan and Arthur Mathews. In this show, which ran for three series, three incompetent priests — Father Ted, who has been implicated in a financial scandal, Father Jack, an alcoholic, and Father Dougal, an 'eejit' to rival any in McDonagh's *Leenane* — live together on remote Craggy Island, to which they have been banished by a Catholic Church bent on keeping them out of harm's way. The comically absurd plots, the flights of surrealistic fancy, the parodies of Irish literature, the stereotypical characters, the fondness for the linguistic mannerisms of Irish dialogue (notably the repeated use of the word 'feck' as a pleasing and more acceptable term than its Anglo-American equivalent): all recur in McDonagh's work. Even if his plays were completed before the screening of *Father Ted*, their coincidental emergence suggests more a common delight in familiar comic devices than a serious study of Irish drama.

McDonagh's career, in fact, may be said to depend on conceiving of theatre in terms of situation comedy: he has spoken of his intention to write no fewer than three trilogies, and is already exploiting the remote island setting to create a self-contained world in which new comic situations can arise *sui generis* rather than out of a more realistic interaction with the world beyond the island's borders. His startlingly ironic plot reversals should not obscure his willingness to suspend the plot in order to develop the kinds of redundant but entertaining comic dialogue frequently supplied to extend a sitcom episode to the requisite length. Coleman and Valene's attenuated series of confessions in the final scene of *The Lonesome West*, and the addition of the jokes about biscuits to the otherwise completed script of *Beauty Queen*,¹⁰ are particularly striking examples. The plots and situations also owe at least as much to the conventions of cinema, television and popular fiction as to those of the literary-dramatic canon. While *Beauty Queen* is routinely compared to Synge, for example, it has much in common with another British situation comedy: *Steptoe and Son*, a BBC series from the 1960s and 1970s about the proprietors of a rag-and-bone yard, in which the middle-aged son,

⁶ "Success comes in threes", *Evening Standard* (29 November 1996).

⁷ Coveney, p. 13.

⁸ Sarah Hemming, "Gift of the Gab", *Independent*, tabloid section (2 December 1996), p. 4.

⁹ Coveney, p. 13.

¹⁰ Hemming, p. 4.

Harold, is unable to develop a romance or otherwise escape from his aged father. Much of the humour comes from the daily cruelties the tragicomic pair inflict on each other. One might also compare *Beauty Queen* to the Hollywood melodrama *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942), in which the mother of Charlotte Vale (Bette Davis) has for decades thwarted her daughter's desire for escape and romance; when Charlotte finally rebels, her mother dies during a violent quarrel. The key moment in *Beauty Queen*'s plot is pure melodrama: Pato's letter to Maureen, in which he asks her to come to America with him, is intercepted by her mother Mag, who destroys it to ensure she will not leave. The letter to or from the female protagonist that fails to reach its destination is familiar from any number of creaky nineteenth-century plots, such as that of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. And the feuding brothers of *The Lonesome West* are as likely to have been prompted by Sam Shepard's *True West*, or even by the brothers Gallagher of rock-band-of-the-moment Oasis, as by a Biblical source. In contemporary popular culture the literary and dramatic past itself becomes myth, its forms and structures endlessly recycled, and so available even to those who have no direct knowledge of those putative origins that critical theory has in any case deconstructed out of existence.

McDonagh's Leenane combines a strong sense of reality with the grotesquely implausible violence of surrealism, and this double perception is at least in part an effect of the self-contained world he creates. For this reason also, too great an emphasis on the 'Irishness' of the plays invokes an inappropriate criterion of realistic representation. The problems are illustrated by the response of the audiences of *The Playboy of the Western World* when it was premiered in Dublin in January 1907. In his 'Preface' to the play Synge wrote that,

as in my other plays, I have used one or two words only that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland [...]. Anyone who has lived in real intimacy with the Irish peasantry will know that the wildest sayings and ideas in this play are tame indeed, compared with the fancies one may hear in any little hillside cabin in Geesala, or Carraroe, or Dingle Bay [...]. When I was writing *The Shadow of the Glen*, some years ago, I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said b

The riots that ensued when the play was first performed had multiple causes — the treatment of parricide as a jest, for example, and the burning of Christy's legs with a coal, situations recalled in McDonagh's trilogy — but the principal provocation was undoubtedly the suggestion, implicit in both play and preface, that Synge was claiming in some way to be giving an accurate representation of the people of Mayo.¹¹ Such naivete would be inconceivable today, and McDonagh's description of his dialogue provides multiple correctives both to the view that it is simple realism and to the suggestion that it is mere literary pastiche:

In Connemara and Galway, the natural dialogue style is to invert sentences and use strange inflections [...]. Of course, my stuff is a heightening of that, but there is a core strangeness of speech, certainly in Galway. So as soon as I started writing the Irish stuff, it seemed like I was writing something that nobody else was doing. I could do completely my own thing.¹²

If this suggests a greater degree of originality in the dialogue than was actually the case — McDonagh, McPherson, Linehan and Mathews all came to the fore more or less simultaneously, and many Irish dramatists had previously exploited the rhythmic and syntactic dislocations of the dialect — equally McDonagh's 'own thing' is inextricable from his love of American, or American-influenced, film. So, for example, 'I quite like some early

¹¹ For a range of documents relating to these matters see James Kilroy, *The 'Playboy' Riots* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1971).

¹² Hemming, p. 4.

Pinter stuff, but I admire film-makers such as Scorsese, Leone and Keaton. My aim is to get as much John Woo into the theatre as possible.’¹³

Moreover, if one were to nominate the playwright whose presence is most keenly felt in his work it would probably not be Pinter but Sam Shepard, particularly in the tension between the claustrophobic set and the appeal to a mythic American vastness that lies beyond, often represented in Shepard’s work by the desert. The characters in *House of America*, a play by McDonagh’s contemporary Edward Thomas, dream of escaping to America and leaving behind the miserable emptiness of the rain-swept South Walian landscape. Pato’s emigration to Boston in *Beauty Queen* and Billy’s trip to Hollywood in *The Cripple of Inishmaan* similarly express an understandable yearning for America as a catch-all cure to what McDonagh’s younger characters see the inwardness and small-mindedness of a community on the outermost fringe of Europe; Billy’s story might even be emblematic of the playwright’s own ambitions (he was soon commissioned to write a screenplay for an American studio). Also reminiscent of Shepard is the extravagantly visual use of the grotesque and stage violence, most obviously in the skull-shattering scene of *A Skull in Connemara*, a play whose story of a family seemingly cursed by the mysterious death and burial of a family member who is then disinterred may owe something to Shepard’s *Buried Child*.

That shattering of the skulls, perhaps the most powerful single scene of McDonagh’s short career, is emblematic of the course he has taken. Instead of being tied to the Irish dramatic tradition, his plays exercise upon it the casual, dark, comic violence of American independent cinema. The ‘regionalism’ one sometimes sees in British film and theatre almost invariably turns out to be something else; if it is not overly reliant on a too-easily parodied dialect on the one hand, it is compromised by the economic and cultural demands of London and the United States on the other. McDonagh is nothing if not eclectic: his knowledge of film and television is extensive, and as a teenager he seems to have treated his brother’s bookshelves as a Borgesian library, reportedly reading ‘anything from J. D. Salinger and Dos Passos to M. R. James and Cervantes’.¹⁴ True or not, the disconnected list is characteristic of a deracinated culture that refuses to be contained by boundaries of tradition, place, history or genre. There is the usual postmodern irony, of course: the apparent sense of freedom from constraint can too easily turn into a dependence on America, the cultural superpower. It is in this sense, and not in the apparent Irishness of his plays, that McDonagh risks becoming conventional. The new playwright proclaims his genius and raises two fingers to teachers, to critics and to the theatre: although they do not matter, one wonders if McDonagh realises how routine, how unshocking these gestures are. The real challenge will be to write outside the idiom he has established in his first four plays without being swallowed by the conventions of an America on which he seems to have his sights. ‘Everyone assumes I’m Irish but I don’t see myself as either English or Irish’,¹⁵ he has said; but on the British stage such a denial of outmoded national identities is now the norm. Escaping the grasp of America will prove much more difficult.

¹³ Guy Walters, “Great British Hope”, *Times* (5 October 1996).

¹⁴ Rupert Christiansen, “Eight Days that Changed a Couch Potato’s Life”, *Sunday Telegraph* (17 March 1996).

¹⁵ Lyn Gardner, “Fabulous Five”, *Guardian* (13 March 1996), p. 11.