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CHRISTOPHER MURRAY

Contemporary Drama

Contemporary Irish Drama

Seventy years ago, in December 1923, W.B. Yeats travelled to Stockholm to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. For a lecture to the Royal Academy of Sweden he chose as his theme the Irish Dramatic Movement to press home the points that it was the Abbey Theatre (founded 1904) which had created his fame internationally and that his own work was "in some degree the symbol of a movement" (Yeats 559). In this lecture Yeats celebrated the drama of Synge and Lady Gregory, and argued that the Irish theatre was only "in the middle or even, perhaps, at the beginning of the story" (Yeats 571). How right Yeats was, on several counts, subsequent history was to prove. For Sean O'Casey had only just appeared on the scene, and after O'Casey were to come Denis Johnston, Paul Vincent Carroll, Teresa Deevy, Louis D'Alton and many more playwrights of distinction, down to Behan and modern times. The bounty of Sweden thus served to crystallize the great tradition of modern Irish drama.

Because Ireland has undergone a series of far-reaching social and cultural changes in the past few decades (Brown, 1985); it would be folly to review the contemporary theatre using the measurements dating from the palmy days of Yeats. New themes have arisen in response to new conditions in Irish life. Emphases have shifted. New techniques and new modes of staging plays have resulted in forms of theatre which can transfer readily from Dublin to London or New York, as may be seen with the recent international successes of Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) and Frank McGuinness's *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* (1992). Yet it can still be credibly asserted that Irish drama has distinctive qualities and that Irish acting retains its own emphasis and accent. Something like a tradition still exists in Irish theatre.

Instead of land, nationalism and religious consciousness, which used to be the leading themes in Irish drama (Corkery 19), the themes most dominant in recent Irish drama are the Northern crisis and changing society. Of course, it is possible to consider the Northern crisis as spanning both 'land' and 'nationalism' thematically, thereby forming a link with the great plays of the past. In Irish drama there are always such continuities. Since 1970, at any rate, there have been many plays set in Northern Ireland and addressing the political conflict there, beginning with John Boyd's *The Flats* (1971). A

list of such plays would include Friel's *The Freedom of the City* (1973), Patrick Galvin's *We Do it For Love* (1975), Stewart Parker's *Pentecost* (1987) and Frank McGuinness's *Carthaginians* (1988). These plays directly confronted the violence in the North and traced its impact on ordinary people's lives, just as had St John Ervine long ago in *Mixed Marriage* (1911) and Sam Thompson more recently in *Over the Bridge* (1960). The problem nowadays is that television, whether through news broadcasting, documentaries, or plays written for television, is a more immediate and more spectacular medium for the presentation of the Northern conflict and its human tragedies. It must be significant that not one of the plays just cited has proven to be internationally successful. Friel's *The Freedom of the City*, which premiered at the Abbey, was damned soon after in both London and New York (Dantanus 140). Friel himself admitted that the play was too angry: "the experience of Bloody Sunday wasn't adequately distilled in me" (O'Toole 22). He is referring to the shooting by British paratroopers of thirteen unarmed participants in a civil rights march in Derry, 30 January 1972 (Pine 105-10). Frank McGuinness's *Carthaginians* also reflects upon Bloody Sunday, but from a remove in time, i.e., sixteen years after the event. While the play is a moving elegy for the thirteen dead it moves towards an attitude of transcendence of grief. Parker's *Pentecost* also had the benefit of a time lag. This play shifts the focus to the Protestant Workers' Strike of 1974, another watershed in the Northern conflict, since it spelled the end of political power-sharing and doomed Northern Ireland to twenty more years (at least) of suspended government and stand-off politics. Parker asks in this his last play (he was to die the following year from cancer, aged 47) that something like an evangelical spirit be mobilized to overcome the hatred and division in the North. Just as McGuinness's emphasis on resurrection is a beautiful way in which to end *Carthaginians*, Parker's emphasis on pentecostal fire and the gift of tongues marks a beautiful triumph over difference. Yet neither play is sufficiently detached from the all-absorbing 'troubles' to offer the kind of broad assessment or political analysis which foreign audiences probably require from a play about Northern Ireland.

On the other hand, those plays which have indirectly addressed the Northern crisis or found the means to distance it so as to stimulate within the audience a process of reflection and understanding as if through allegory, have been more successful dramatically than the plays which have directly intervened in the crisis. Friel's *Translations* (1980) and *Making History* (1988), McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1985), Thomas Kilroy's *Double Cross* (1986) and Parker's *Northern Star* (1985) are all versions of history plays with only an oblique reference to the current situation. It is significant that these plays have almost all been successful internationally. Several of them were staged by the Field Day Theatre Company, founded by Brian Friel and actor Stephen Rea

in 1980, and this factor was unquestionably a major one.

Field Day was a company with a mission. With its headquarters in Derry, Northern Ireland, it was established to tour all of Ireland, North and South, in an attempt to provide audiences with the kind of intellectual stimulation which might lead towards a greater debate on and a greater degree of understanding of the political issues underlying the conflict in the North (Deane 20). It may be that the Field Day project, which expanded in 1983 into the publication of fifteen pamphlets on aspects of culture, law, language and history relating to Ireland and Irish identity, and which culminated in the publication in 1991 of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, was over-ambitious and had the effect of subordinating drama to a possibly too ideological programme: at any rate, the drama was in time circumscribed and the mission to metamorphose the national consciousness (if one could be found) proved too demanding. Yet Field Day was a brave and important venture, which produced exciting and original work reminiscent of the heady days when Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory were all at full strength. The decision in June 1993 to suspend operations may well signal the end of the Field Day Theatre Company, especially since Friel's last two plays were staged by the Abbey, but it is likely that its epitaph cannot be written until Ireland, North and South, is at one.

When one turns to the second major theme of contemporary Irish drama, 'changing society,' the main consideration to be borne in mind is that Irish society has been shifting if not crumbling for several decades and that it is far from easy to descry the faultlines. The playwrights are responding like sensors, articulating the turbulence but by no means presenting assured indications of root causes. The claim can at least be made that in Ireland drama is not a cultural industry as it has developed in other countries. In a country as small and centralized as Ireland the theatre has the general function of engaging its people in dialogue rather than in offering exclusive cultural fodder for consumption. The expectation is that playwrights will have something to say about the state of the nation. This expectation is probably more acute than in Britain, for example, which is a multi-cultural society, with vast differences between classes, geographical locations, and population concentrations. In Ireland, the writer is still to a significant degree the voice of a community, and that community can have national status. The critic D.E.S. Maxwell concluded an early book on Friel with the perception that Friel was "recording tremors of a social mutation" (Maxwell 106).

The tremors are new. There is now an end to the stable society Ireland had known since the 1930s. High unemployment, a raging drugs problem, AIDS, seemingly uncontrollable petty crime, and an unprecedented expansion of towns and cities are but some of the problems Ireland now experiences. On the other hand, Ireland is to a far greater degree than before 1960 a participant in European and world affairs: a full member of the EC (since 1973) and a loyal supporter of the Maastricht Treaty, an active member of

the UN (with troops currently on peace-keeping missions in Lebanon and Somalia), and a vocal participant in the European Parliament. The fact is, Ireland has become a modern nation virtually overnight.

Of course, one is not saying that any single playwright has encapsulated the sense of crisis or the mood of transition which Ireland is undergoing. Certainly, Friel is not the playwright to reflect the new AIDS-ridden, drugs-related society. Indeed, writing in 1972 he strenuously objected to any such role for the playwright, and complained about those critics who, in his view, clamoured for topicality: "Show us the vodka-and-tonic society. Show us permissive Dublin. Forget about thatched cottages and soggy fields and emigration. We want the now Ireland" (Friel 1972: 305). Yet Friel had his own agenda for recording change. As his fellow-playwright Thomas Kilroy has said of *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964), Friel's first major success, it expresses a "sensitivity" which is "modern, alive to the dislocating perspectives of the mid-century" (Kilroy 136). Set in the fictional rural village of Ballybeg, this play articulated for the first time a sense of bewilderment and alienation deriving from the breakdown of traditional modes of emotional and spiritual support. Whereas the action is, indeed, set in a thatched cottage and does, indeed, appear to centre on the theme of emigration, the real core of the play has to do with loneliness and the need for love. The shell of tradition remains intact while its inhabitants are exposed as modernists struggling to come to terms with loss. Down to his latest play, *Wonderful Tennessee* (1993), Friel has been occupied with diagnosing, or "divining," to use his own term (Friel 1979: 17-26), the collapse of these traditional modes of support. One finds the foreboding of collapse in play after play, with or without political implications. In *Dancing at Lughnasa* (Friel 1990: 35) we get a representative speech from the eldest sister Kate:

You work hard at your job. You try to keep the home together. You perform your duties as best you can – because you believe in responsibilities and obligations and good order. And then suddenly, suddenly you realize that hair cracks are appearing everywhere; that control is slipping away; that the whole thing is so fragile it can't be held together much longer. It's all about to collapse, Maggie.

Although set in the year 1936 *Dancing at Lughnasa* can be related to Ireland in the 1990s inasmuch as Friel identifies an anxiety over a perceived upheaval in the social fabric. *Wonderful Tennessee* is set in present-day Ireland and diagnoses a severe case of spiritual inanition. It is as close to a sermon as Friel has ever come. He seems to be saying that unless people can recover some sense of the sacred, some means of making contact ritualistically with the immanent powers of the universe ("The inexpressible. The ineffable." Friel 1993: 52), they are lost, even doomed. It is accepted as premise that traditional forms of religion are defunct: the view from the disused pier

shows "Nothing from here to Boston except a derelict church – without a roof" (Friel 1993: 32). In the Irish landscape that ruined church is symbolic.

It is a coincidence but an instructive one that a far younger playwright, Paul Mercier, wrote in *Pilgrims* (1993) a play exploring a similar dilemma to that which Friel explores in *Wonderful Tennessee*. Mercier's play, staged by his own company Passion Machine, is set on a beach, where various characters meet and briefly inter-connect. It is plain that the younger characters are drifting, in search of some form of direction and permanence, while the older characters are facing up to loss and self-deception. They are all 'pilgrims' only in an ironic sense, because no spiritual destination is available. This condition defines the crossroads reached in contemporary, post-Vatican Ireland, with a young population (50% of which is under 25 years of age) very much in revolt against traditional values and narratives. Mercier's beach is the waste land of contemporary Ireland.

Tom Murphy's voice was raised more in anguish than in lament at this spiritual condition during the 1970s, in *The Sanctuary Lamp* (1975) and *The Morning after Optimism* (1971). Like Friel, Murphy belongs to the older generation (his *A Whistle in the Dark* was first staged in 1961), and yet his sense of the impasse Ireland has reached is very much in tune with the times. Thus *The Gigli Concert* (1983), *Bailegangaire* (1985) and *Conversations on a Homecoming* (1985) articulate with Murphy's brutal honesty the corruption of soul occasioned by the new affluence and the drive towards cosmopolitanism discernible in recent years (Murphy 1993: 57, 67). Murphy's voice is unique: angry, bitter, yet witty and powerfully eloquent. As a dramatic commentator on the new Ireland he has no equal. Perhaps the publication of his plays by Methuen will bring him the international fame which has so far eluded him.

Friel and Murphy would appear to locate the breakdown of community in the collapse of rural structures of spiritual support. Their attitude may look like conservatism, but is in fact radical because it is the conservative traditions themselves (of family, church and state) which they find deficient. Their looking back in anger may to some extent also explain the revival of interest in the plays of John B. Keane, whose work would appear to belong to a bygone age. Keane's last original play, *The Chastitute* (1981), however, revealed the critical, anti-clerical stance Keane is willing to take in addressing the question of rural depopulation. Based loosely on his *Letters of a Love-Hungry Farmer* (1974), *The Chastitute* attributes rural loneliness and sexual deprivation to the repressive influence of the Irish clergy. The argument is akin to Tom Murphy's notion of 'famine,' the legacy of demoralization which rural Ireland has suffered since the nineteenth century (Murphy 1992: ix-xvii). Since 1981 Keane has found new favour with such old plays as *Sive* (1959), *The Field* (1965), which was also filmed (1990), and *Big Maggie* (1969), all revived and revised for the Abbey Theatre during the 1980s. In revising *Big Maggie*, Keane appended a

monologue in which Maggie directly accuses herself, the clergy and the culture generally for failing to acknowledge and foster her sexuality and thereby for destroying her marriage. In a sense, this is to extend Maggie's feminist voice into the freer-speaking late 1980s.

In recent years Keane's plays have also been revived as summer shows at one of Dublin's big commercial theatres, the Gaiety, and have run with enormous success. This success has partly to do with the work of director Ben Barnes, who has so to speak re-discovered Keane and persuaded him to revise the plays. But the success has also to do with a mood of nostalgia in Ireland in recent times, related no doubt to the deep uncertainties already adverted to. Moreover, Keane's plays are very entertaining, a not inconsiderable matter. Yet the interesting thing is that huge audiences should now be taking an interest in the rural Ireland of thirty to forty years ago. This interest might explain the appearance recently of new plays by young authors on rural themes, such as Michael Harding's *Strawboys* (1987), written for the Peacock, the Abbey's annex, Sebastian Barry's *Boss Grady's Boys* (1988) and *Prayers at Sherkin* (1990), also written for the Peacock, Ken Bourke's *Wild Harvest* (1989) and Vincent Woods's *The Black Pig's Dyke* (1992), both written for the Druid Theatre, Galway. In such plays, as in the experimental work of Tom MacIntyre for the Peacock stage, for example *The Great Hunger* (1983, based on the poem by Patrick Kavanagh), there is an anthropological curiosity, a delving into and re-discovery of an Ireland long since past but containing fascinating traces of a ritualized, sometimes violent, sometimes peaceful people. Thus the revival of interest in John B. Keane marks a general revival of interest in a more stable, if more primitive society.

Other playwrights are focusing on the urban scene, and instead of lamenting the changes which are undermining old securities are describing with varying degrees of amusement and dismay the social changes which rapid urban expansion has brought in its train. After all, one-third of the total population of the Irish public now resides in the Dublin area. New audiences are demanding new narratives of their own lives. One well-established chronicler of the lower-middle, upwardly mobile class is Hugh Leonard (pseud. for John Keyes Byrne). Leonard is a great entertainer, who steadfastly refuses to take himself or his art as seriously as many of his fellow-playwrights take themselves and their work. His attitude is at once refreshing and dismaying. On the one hand it is a relief to encounter an Irish playwright who is not immersed in the agonies of national re-appraisal. Leonard sets up a laugh at pretentiousness and snobbery, particularly among the *nouveaux riches*, in such plays as *The Patrick Pearse Motel* (1970) and *Summer* (1974). Or he can exploit his own interesting biography with deft touches of sentimentality and charm, in *Da* (1973) and *A Life* (1979), both of which were subsequently staged on Broadway, to great acclaim. (*Da* was also filmed, in 1988.) Leonard's skill in such plays is be-

yond doubt, and has probably received insufficient credit from Irish critics. On the other hand, Leonard persistently asserts that the role of drama is primarily to entertain. He has said: "If you care to come in out of the rain for a couple of hours, I shall attempt to entertain you and send you out again feeling as if you have had a good meal . . . for I am not using the crutches of either the missionary or the Artist (capital 'a'), which, if they do not keep the play upright, at least excite our pity and indulgence" (Leonard 1987, 16). Leonard thus openly declares for culinary art. This has to some extent ostracized him from Dublin's artistic circles, such as they are. In particular, his omission from the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* caused some comment. The problem is, then, that Leonard refuses to go with the tide. Yet his work does, of course, reflect upon Irish society and the irony is that his latest play, *Moving* (1992), staged at the Abbey, is as topical as could be. This is a play which contrasts the attitudes of the same family thirty years on, without allowing actual time to pass. The result is some acute observations on changes in women's status and outlook, the place of homosexuals in Irish society, and the effects of the breakup of the nuclear family. Time will doubtless show that Leonard, in spite of his own protestations, is actually an agile commentator on Irish values, ambitions and achievements.

Bernard Farrell, whose first staged play dates from 1979, is often regarded as close to Leonard in style and attitude. Both write comedies of manners. But Farrell has a more consistent dedication to the serious issues underlying contemporary comic situations and types. In plays such as *Canaries* (1980), *All in Favour Said No!* (1981) and *Say Cheese!* (1987), all staged at the Abbey, Farrell has exposed the bogus side of the travel business, industrial relations and public relations respectively. His ambition is clearly enunciated in a comment he made about *All the Way Back* (1985): "Redundancy was already becoming the economic cancer in Ireland. It attacked rich and poor alike. Both suffered by it. But, in dramatic terms, I sought the greater fall from grace to allow me to examine not just the loss of income, but the unprecedented loss of status, reputation, respect and dignity" (Farrell 1988: 6). In this play Farrell tried, characteristically, to combine farce with social comment and the attempt proved technically intractable, given Ireland's not-so-funny statistics on unemployment (running at 22% nationally). In his more recent work, *The Last Apache Reunion* (1993), Farrell has edged away from direct social comment and has won success more in Leonard's vein by holding the mirror up to *arrivistes* in a society riddled with insecurities. Farrell is all the time developing, and already he is well on his way to being Ireland's answer to Alan Ayckbourn.

Dermot Bolger, however, is an urban writer of quite a different stamp. Bolger's landscape is the blighted and bleak world of Dublin's new working-class areas, about which he has written also in his fiction. He came to drama through involvement in community theatre, the Northside company

of *Wet Paint*, directed by David Byrne. He is not, as it were, a natural or a born playwright, and yet he is symptomatic of a new kind of writer in the Irish theatre, anti-establishment, streetwise, and appealing directly to the young and the disaffected (like Paul Mercier and Roddy Doyle). What he brings mainly to the theatre is a new voice, rhetorical, even shrill, but raised in bitterness at the appalling conditions of the poor and unemployed today. *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* (1989) and *One Last White Horse* (1991) confront the new Ireland uncompromisingly, and do not shirk from portraying how violence and drugs have infested Dublin's new housing estates built to clear the slums O'Casey knew and wrote about. Bolger's world is a long way from O'Casey's, but the difference between these two Dublin writers probably measures the huge shift in Irish society between 1923, the year of O'Casey's first Dublin play and the end of Ireland's civil war, and 1992, the year of Bolger's *A Dublin Quartet* (Penguin), with no end to rising unemployment, recession, emigration and the war in the North.

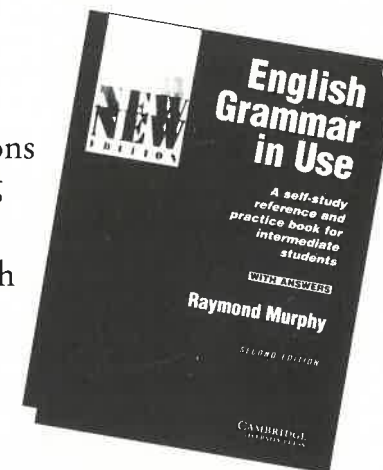
There is not space here to allow other new developments to be discussed: the tentative rise of feminist drama, the important growth of regional theatre in Galway, Waterford, Kilkenny and other towns, the ways in which the Dublin Theatre Festival has, since its foundation in 1957, encouraged new Irish writing. There is only space to emphasize that Irish theatre and drama are at present almost alarmingly alive and active. While the Irish drama is not a "movement" any more as in Yeats's day it is still occupied with extending the "story" of Ireland Yeats spoke about in Stockholm on that distant day in 1923.

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