

In Memoriam Tom Murphy

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HJEAS

Only three years ago we said farewell to Brian Friel (1929-2015), one of the giants of Irish drama and theatre, and now another huge loss follows: Tom Murphy (1935-2018), who died in May. The two were the core of the great generation of playwrights, arbitrators of what is often called the “second renaissance” of Irish drama, beginning in the early 1960s that, in the following decades, brought an enormous blossoming to Irish theatre at home and abroad.

Complementing each other—less dramatically than several of Murphy’s complementary-contrasting pairs of characters—both playwrights reflected in their plays the historical, moral, intellectual, and emotional dilemmas of Irish society in the second half of the twentieth and at the beginning of the twenty-first centuries; Friel in a rather contemplative, subdued voice, and Murphy in a much more raw, furious one as an angry young—and, then, not so young—man. Both revived and renewed drama in many ways, experimented with forms, and kept turning in unexpected directions. Also, both were members of *Aosdána*, the Irish Association of Artists, and were awarded the exclusive title of “Saoi,” meaning “wise one”—a title given to only seven outstanding artists elected at any one time. Each highly appreciated the other’s work, as, among others, Friel’s words testify: “The most distinctive, the most restless, the most obsessive imagination at work in the Irish theatre today is Tom Murphy’s.”

A restless, passionate truth-sayer, a fearless explorer of the distortions of the Irish psyche under various historical circumstances, an always ready-to-risk searcher for adequate dramatic forms to suit what he wanted to say, success came to Murphy in violent jumps and abrupt halts. His career went from theatrical triumph to deep failure, and then to triumph again. In the last decades, however, he was highly celebrated at home; for instance, in 2001, a symposium was held on his work at Trinity College Dublin, while a series of six of his plays were performed by the Abbey (Ireland’s National Theatre). In addition to several occasions when his individual plays were presented at the annual Dublin Theatre Festival, in 2012, the Galway-based Druid Theatre produced three Murphy plays as “DruidMurphy”—*A Whistle in the Dark* (1961), *Conversations on a Homecoming* (1985), and *Famine* (1968)—to great acclaim as a well-composed triad of plays talking to each other, while, parallel with that, the Abbey was playing his *The House* (2000). This success of the

“DruidMurphy” at home was preceded by a London premier and followed by a triumphal US tour.

Ironically, Murphy’s first theatrical success happened not in Ireland but in England, when *A Whistle in the Dark* premiered in London, after being rejected by the Abbey, whose director deemed it too violent, too brutal, and its characters entirely unrealistic. The London production did contribute to confirming the stereotypical view of the savage Irish, as the then-leading English theatre critic, Kenneth Tynan demonstrates, saying about the author of this “most uninhibited display of brutality the London theatre has ever witnessed” that he “is the kind of playwright one would hate to meet in a dark theatre.” Confronting the long-standing Irish misery of emigration—which hit Murphy’s own family, sending his father and all his brothers to work in England from his childhood on—*A Whistle* paints a horrifying picture of an Irish family in England, who are unable to abandon old grievances, or forget old tribal laws that lead to self-destruction.

Murphy’s main concerns—social issues and spiritual quests—can already be detected in his earliest plays. The former is indicated as early as in the title of his very first, *On the Outside* (1959, co-authored with Noel O’Donoghue and originally presented by amateur players). Alexandra Poulain points out that this play prefigures the location of almost all the later plays: “with a few (significant) exceptions, all Murphy plays take place ‘on the outside’ of the social sphere, in the marginal space of the dispossessed” (41). In *A Whistle*, the issue of emigration and its psychological consequence is rendered in a naturalistic form, in a raw voice sizzling with anger. Murphy himself admitted that “there is a rage in me. . . . Rage not against the unfairness of life . . . but against the inequalities, the arrogance of power” (qtd. in O’Mahony). He handles this theme most directly and relentlessly in this well-made play, but it will recur in diverse forms and modes, as in the epic theatre of *Famine* (1968), pointing to the nineteenth-century historical trauma that initiated the social tragedy of more than a century of huge involuntary emigration, or in the partly expressionistic *A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer’s Assistant* (1969), with its protagonist’s nightmares of being stifled at home and deprived of his soul abroad. In several later plays, such as *Conversations on a Homecoming* (1985), *The Wake* (1998), and *The House*, the returning emigrant appears as disillusioned, as desperate as those who stayed behind. The emigrants are nearly always shown as psychologically distorted, often prone to violence, destruction, and self-destruction, owing to their dislocation and dispossession. In the early *Crucial Week* we hear that the emigrants are only “half-men” both abroad and at home, and the protagonist of *The House*, thirty years later, clearly distinguishes his life and moral standards “over there,” in

England, where he is (presumably) a pimp, from “here,” at home in Ireland, where he welcomes the survival of a set of different moral rules.

The other chief trend in Murphy’s work, the pursuit of spiritual, metaphysical questions, emerges parallel with that of social issues. *The Morning After Optimism* (1963, first performed in 1971), a strange but intriguing fantasy-play with a surrealistic, fairy tale-like plot and characters, dramatizes the longing for the ideal, the escape into dream world and nostalgia, and the waking up to despair. Two pairs of archetypal opposites, a lowly, fallen, elderly pimp and his prostitute, and a beautiful, innocent, virginal pair of lovers—the fairy-doubles of the all-too-human couple—wander in the fairy-tale forest like Shakespeare’s young people in the woods of Arden. Longing for the unattainable ideal of regaining innocence in futile attempts to seduce and unite with the innocent lovers, the fallen couple has nothing left to do but to murder them, which forces them to come to terms with the evil in themselves and in the world. By killing the ideal, they will not be ashamed of their fallen, corrupted present selves. Murphy, here, uses the fantastic mode, which is able—as Rosemary Jackson claims—to express desire in both meanings of the verb “express”: “it can *tell of*, manifest or show desire . . . or it *can expel* desire . . . (. . . in the sense of pressing out, squeezing . . .). In many cases, fantastic literature fulfills both functions at once, for desire can be ‘expelled’ through having been ‘told of’” (3-4). In *Optimism*, the frustration over unfulfilled desires leads to violence and only then to their expulsion. Admitting and expelling them might result in accepting an unattractive reality and initiate a new start.

In this “vision at once passionately religious and mockingly disillusioned,” these “painfully orphaned” people, “dispossessed of not only paradisaal inheritance but of all those absolutes which childhood experience intimates” (Murray, “Introduction: The Rough and Holy” 13-14), seem to arrive at a point when they can begin to grow up to become adults. The title suggests the excruciating sobering up the morning after living in a world of illusions that also allegorizes the Irish nation’s awaking—in the 1960s—from the self-delusion that the Golden Age of the distant past was about to return.

These two main concerns of the social and the spiritual already combine and overlap in the early plays in varying proportions, but the later ones show Murphy’s extraordinary blending together of the personal and the public, as well as the social, psychological, and metaphysical. Similarly, violence, angry protest, defiance, rebellion, and despair unexpectedly bring about the possibility of liberation or redemption. In Fintan O’Toole’s succinct summary valid even today, thirty years on: “Murphy’s work has cleaved to the contours of a society’s intellectual and emotional struggles, making the

metaphysical and psychological elements of his work always firmly grounded in a specific reality” (16). O’Toole equally emphasizes the universality of Murphy’s plays that present “an entire society at a time when the theatre has been forced to retreat into the dramatization of individual lives or of the lives of confined strata of society. In confronting Ireland, Murphy has been able to confront an entire universe” (17).

Most of Murphy’s characters share the identity problems arising out of dispossession and dislocation (the wounds of history), the loss of values and spiritual guidance—of the modern world—as well as some hidden or pronounced longing for beauty, for wholeness, and a desire to belong, which often becomes obsessive and turns even the warmest emotions destructive, yet can also lead, at times, to a redemptive moment. Christy, the homecoming émigré protagonist of *The House*—which Murphy considered his best play—epitomizes many of his characters when he shouts his attachment to the home place: “I would kill for here!” (43)—which he does literally, albeit unintentionally—and “I would die for here” (112)—which he almost does, at least emotionally, spiritually. His liminality—like that of the protagonists of the first play, *On the Outside*—is made visible physically on the stage from his first appearance, when he is received in the garden of the house and, except for one scene—when he finally destroys his remaining hope for becoming part of the family—he is always shown outside. His obsession with the house and with getting inside has nothing to do with the desire for possession, but everything to do with the longing to belong, and that causes his downfall. His tragedy is that his crime comes about from his best intentions, trying to help those he loves the most: to save his surrogate mother and her family from having to sell the eponymous house and feeling dispossessed, similarly to the emigrants, “being sent into exile” (79) and “being sent to hell” (81). In that desperate longing, he himself ruins his chances to belong and falls out of grace just when he is closest to it. Thus, the uneducated, rough, sometimes violent young man also becomes a tragic hero, as much a victim as a villain. As in Greek tragedies, the hero falls due to his own hubris. His redemption may come, if it comes at all, from his last decision to give up possible happiness, to forego his chance of marrying the daughter of the family he loves, and accept his loneliness, his isolation. His figure may be shaped by his author’s “rage at social inequalities,” but also by his compassionate understanding of despair, darkness, and hope.

Although *The House* is set in the 1950s, the play also speaks about and to the time when it was written: the last years of the twentieth century, the peak of the Celtic Tiger, when Irish society underwent huge changes. But, at the same time, the protagonist’s physical and social uprootedness also

corresponds to an ontological state of homelessness epitomized by the question set to an emigrant in the play: “do you have any anchor at all at all?” (13). This seemingly naturalistic play takes on mythical qualities, without overtly relying on any specific myth, and the individual’s plight, while reflecting the nation’s struggle with postcolonial dislocation and threatening neocolonial displacement in the mid-twentieth century, also becomes the archetypal human quest for home.

Among the plays of spiritual quest, *The Sanctuary Lamp* (1975) most directly explores the human relation to the sacred in Murphy’s usual irreverent way: set in a church where two miserable men, the “self-destructive” ex-Jesuit Francisco and the “half-lapsed Jew” Harry, and an equally miserable young woman, Maudie, find shelter—a sanctuary—for a night. There, from the pulpit, Francisco gives vent to his fury against clerics, the “coonics,” the Pharisees, and the whole institution of the church. Murphy’s most elaborate, passionate church-bashing play caused serious protests in Dublin at its first performances. Yet, the revolt of Murphy’s rebels against the church has little to do with faith itself. Yes, they are upset because of institutional abuse but, more often, their anger is caused by the failure of the church to answer people’s spiritual needs. The playwright himself acknowledges that “the church certainly gave me and people of my generation a very positive background. . . . But . . . the church has got between man and the divine. . . . I think everybody has some form of apprehension of the spirit within himself. . . . The church has stopped what could possibly be the personal conversion to one’s own spirit” (Murphy qtd. in Waters 27).

Murphy’s deviation from conventional Catholicism emerges clearly in all his work, as does his dramatic world’s rootedness in Christianity however unorthodox and undogmatic it may be. He starts by violently rebelling against—not so much the spirit as—the institution of Christianity and, in many of his plays, his characters are “painfully orphaned,” suffering from metaphysical homelessness. In this “post-religious” age, Murphy, however, not only operates with religious imagery and vocabulary, but also radiates a religious sensibility clearly rooted in Catholicism but pointing towards a transformed understanding of Christianity, closest to the one formulated by several contemporary philosophers as “a quest for life through which God can be found in the innermost humanity of man” (Maignant 104). The inseparability of the question of God from the sphere of the human (Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas) and the metaphysical dimension of interpersonal relationships (Karl Barth) are in assonance with Murphy’s characters going through their long, arduous journeys towards accepting their own sinful selves and that of the others, their achieving forgiveness and reconciliation.¹

The three characters in *The Sanctuary Lamp* may defy God, may fume against the clerics, commit all sorts of sacrilege, and may even have murderous intentions, yet, in the end, they do arrive at forgiveness under the “Presence,” the Sanctuary lamp, as they partake in the sacraments through drinking the altar wine and sharing bread and fish. The mystery of the play lies in the manner in which Murphy uses the sacred place and objects, together with scraps of the liturgical structure and language, so that everything lends itself to a reading renouncing Christianity but, at the same time, also to that of an embracing of a faith in divinely animated interhuman relations. Murphy’s blasphemers are fully aware of their being sinful. Yet, the author says about *The Sanctuary Lamp* that “it is a religious play, in the sense of personal religion, as against institutionalized religion. . . . I believe the blasphemer is perhaps closer to God than someone who is observing all the duties that the Catholic or Protestant or Christian or any form is obliged to uphold” (Murphy qtd. in Waters 27).

The moments of forgiveness prove to be points where the divine shines through the human. Human beings’ capability for forgiving those who sinned against them belongs to the categories of good and evil, instead of the simple social morality of right and wrong. Murphy’s dramatizing acts of asking for, gaining, and granting forgiveness, with a deliberate lack of psychological preparation and as unexpected and undeserved gifts, distinguishes those moments from ordinary humanism. In *Sanctuary Lamp*, Maudie, whose thoughts revolve around her dead mother, lost child, and forgiveness, asserts the existence of forgiveness in the world several times, once to Francisco, then to Harry, significantly under the sanctuary lamp—to which/whom Harry attributes this gift:

HARRY. And what did your gran say?

MAUDIE. She said it were forgiveness. (*Maudie smiles her persona triumph and Harry complements.*)

HARRY. (*to sanctuary lamp*) That was very successful. (22)

At the point when the two men confront each other and recognize that both contributed to the death of Harry’s wife, they move towards reconciliation as Harry, the strong man, regains his strength and lifts the pulpit on his shoulder with Francisco in it. A memorable image—open to various interpretations, including as a sign of renewal after admitting a sin, or elevating the human and sinful (Francisco) off the ground to a higher level. This miracle, then, becomes complete with the reconciliation of the three, shown

by them sleeping together in the confessional box and planning to leave together in the morning.

Love, sin, repentance, forgiveness, and redemption lie at the core of Christianity—and Murphy is preoccupied with (the often deeply hidden) love, sin, guilt, repentance, forgiveness, and redemption. His characters—not only those in *The Sanctuary Lamp*, but many others—are conscious of their own sinfulness. James, the pimp in *Optimism*, objects to the permissive society, about which, when it became the norm, he complained and “uttered a prayer, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, where is the sin anymore. . . . Irretrievably—irretrievably lost” (19). If God is absent, “there’s no one to bless you. And, worse, no one to curse you” (*Sanctuary* 60). Without sin, innocence is meaningless. Without acknowledging sin, there can be no salvation. Murphy’s characters endure the consequences of their sins and complain about their suffering like Job (see Mercier), but they also yearn for the spiritual and seek forgiveness which may come from another person or, rather, *through* the other person. Redemption, when it occurs, is preceded by a descent to the darkest recesses of the soul, to hell—as is consistent with St. John of the Cross’s “Dark night of the soul” and, of course, with Jesus Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection. It is also a necessary personal journey for each creative artist and their common condition: “He who wants to become a piper must go down to hell to learn how to pipe”—as a Hungarian folksong suggests.

The most spectacular rise from the darkest, deepest spheres of existence is dramatized in *The Gigli Concert* (1983). On one level, the play attacks the business-spirit of the Ireland of the 1980s, through the figure of a rich entrepreneur simply called Irish Man, whose life, love, and family are destroyed—surprisingly, not directly by his pursuing his booming business but by its consequence—by his passionate, obsessive desire to rise above his ordinary life via art. He is desperate to sing like the famous tenor, Beniamino Gigli. Murphy creates a kind of Jungian shadow, a double for him, in J. P. W. King, a quack psychologist, a “dynamatologist,” an Englishman, together with whom he forms a sort of a Faust-Mephistopheles pair.² In the course of their sessions, King takes over Irish Man’s obsessive desire, thus liberating him to return to his normal life, while the dynamatologist himself, sinking into deepening despair, facing the death of loved ones and considering suicide, unexpectedly experiences a miracle when he can and does sing like Gigli.

The dynamatologist, pondering on God’s nature, comes to the conclusion that, instead of saying “I am who am,” he should have said, “I am who may be . . . which means I am the possible, or if you prefer, I am the impossible” (51). The difference between the two announcements—which are, actually, two different possible translations of the original Hebrew text in

Exodus—happens to be a cornerstone of understanding the nature of God in philosophy and theology, and is a central issue in Murphy's drama, not only in its themes but also in its dramaturgy. Richard Kearney, the contemporary Irish philosopher, who once meditated together with Murphy on how "to convey the meaning of th[e] 'logic of the dynamizing possible'" (6), in his book on religious hermeneutics, *The God Who May Be*, interprets this phrase as "God transfigures and exceeds being. . . . God . . . seems to say something like this [in the 'I-am-who-may-be' annunciation]: *I am who may be if you continue to keep my word and struggle for the coming of justice*" (37-38).³ With that interpretation, Kearney emphasizes not only God's possibilizing power but also human responsibility in bringing about "the kingdom of justice and love" (38). Murphy engages with making the impossible happen on the stage in his creation of dramatic reality—co-creating with the God of possibility. Such a co-creation occurs in the last scene of *Gigli*, with the dynamatologist visibly and audibly facing hell, then making a sudden leap into the unknown—and singing an aria in Gigli's voice.

This miracle is one of Murphy's greatest theatrical triumphs. Music, particularly vocal music, has always been an almost obsessive preoccupation with him. In an interview with Michael Billington, he said: "I had an unbearable envy of singers. I thought it was the only possible thing to do in life; it was the only possible way to express oneself" (105). This last statement is repeated almost verbatim by Irish Man in *Gigli*. Music helped Murphy, in his own description, to transcend the linearity of literature and achieve "a simultaneity of things happening, . . . to get the richness of music," which can convey or inspire a whole range of emotions at the same time (Billington 108). Therefore, he longed "to write the aria which isn't an aria that stops the action of a play" (Billington 110), and, according to Harry White, Murphy managed to do so in this play. In his analysis of the role of music in Murphy's plays, White claims that they, and "*The Gigli Concert* in particular, . . . draw . . . dangerously close to music itself," and, with that, "Irish theatre in the twentieth century revisits the power of nineteenth-century opera" (145). White further argues that Murphy's spoken drama not only integrates music throughout but is moving towards the final triumphant singing of an aria, where "music alone can answer the demands of the plot" when words are surrendered to music (147-48). That can only be achieved, however, through the play-long preparation with spoken words, just as Friel's surrender of words to dance in *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) and to music in *Performances* (2003) would not have their effect without the verbal brilliance of the written-spoken plays.

Music proves essential in many other Murphy plays as well, if not so central as in *Gigli*. Often, a sudden burst into song changes the atmosphere of the play and, by articulating emotions that are impossible to verbalize, offers a redeeming moment. In *Conversations on a Homecoming*, the abandoned, neglected, desperate Peggy's—the ten-year fiancée of a disillusioned local teacher—unexpected singing of a religious song miraculously beautifies her figure, and lends the audience a glimpse of a different sphere of reality. Similarly, in *The Wake*, the warring family members, forced to sing by the command of the returning emigrant, the prostitute Vera, gradually begin to warm towards one another and regain some of the human feelings they had all but lost in their pursuit of money; while in *The House*, Christy transforms for a moment when gently singing of his love to Marie in the pub. In *Too Late for Logic* (1990), in addition to the songs from Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice* and Dvořák's *Russalka* that highlight the play's theme, the protagonist's son himself composes songs that lead to his becoming “the re-born Orpheus, with a banjo or guitar instead of a lyre, singing his own psychedelic lyrics” (O'Toole, Rev. ed. 264) in the closing scene of the father-son reconciliation at the borderline of death and life, where “the nightmare ends, the magic begins” (Murphy, *Too Late* 51). The nature of such scenes, the underpsychologized turns of plot, single out those moments attesting to the sovereignty of music and its ability to transcend reality—and realism. Singing elevates the characters or, at times, the whole play—one of the ways in which violence, brutality, and raw feelings become contrasted by gentle and deep feelings. This is confirmed by Murphy himself, who confesses that he often uses music as

a counterpoint to what is actually being said on stage. I often write characters who are harsh: the harshness is there because they feel they have been betrayed by something or they have betrayed or lost something, and the music that I use is like a cry, an echo within them, for what has been lost. . . . I have often found or suspected that the harshest people are those who were originally the most idealistic or romantic. Behind the surface appearance the melody lingers on, faintly, longingly. (qtd. in Kurdi 238)

Murphy's love of music is also apparent in the very language of his plays. He forms his characters with great attention to the diverse pitches and registers in their way of speaking: “I try to write . . . combining words in a certain way, varying rhythms, or seeking to continue a certain rhythm, or repeat a certain rhythm, as a composer would a phrase of music to get what I think is a better form of drama” (Billington 108). Music is, thus, all pervasive,

present everywhere in the verbal utterances. Language probably comes closest to the condition of music in Mommo's speech in *Bailegangaire* (1985), where, in White's words, in contrast with *Gigli*, "the music of language and not the language of music . . . prevails" (149).

As "the music of language" is of a much more intimate nature than the opera aria in *Gigli*, so is the miracle in *Bailegangaire*. Murphy's dramatic miracle is that he turns the most commonplace setting of a country cottage kitchen—deployed to utter boredom for decades in Irish drama—into a womb-tomb-like space, similar to that of *Gigli*, where existential transformations can happen, a ritualized area, where anything is possible. Daringly relying on the fragmented, repeatedly restarted, endless storytelling of the senile grandmother, Mommo, which drives her granddaughters mad, Murphy's unique imagination places into its focus a laughing contest, in which the laughter is fed by telling "misfortunes." This reveals family disasters—and those of their compatriots—through generations and causes further tragedies. Only by the play's end does it transpire that what she is trying to confess but unable to face is her own guilt, her responsibility for the death of her husband and grandson. Once able to admit that, she can complete her story—with the help of one of the granddaughters—and that, miraculously, enables the three women to find love and sharing, reconciliation, and forgiveness, including self-forgiveness. Mommo acknowledges that "the second chance afforded them through their opening up [her] past-fixated narrative into the mutually enacted dramatic present" (Roche 121). In the moving final stage image of the two granddaughters falling asleep on either side of their grandmother, the physical, emotional, and metaphysical aspects of home and of real homecoming—not the contradictory home visit of emigrants—become exceptionally united, and this rare happy ending even points to continuity in the future: "it was decided to give that—fambly . . . of strangers another chance, and a brand new baby to gladden their home" (*Bailegangaire* 170).

In the resolution of *Bailegangaire*, prayer and crying merge in Mommo's "to thee do we cry . . . Poor banished children of Eve," once she accepts life as "[m]ourning and weeping in this valley of tears," and Mary finally breaks down in "tears of gratitude," accompanied by Mommo's famous assurance: "And sure a tear isn't such a bad thing, Mary" (169). Crying may be a sign of repentance or despair over one's own evil side but, in most Murphy plays, it signals relief at the breakdown of the walls of silence dividing people from each other. Crying may come as a gift when the blockage to one's own emotions is broken, as happens to James and Rosie at the conclusion of *Optimism*, to Vera in the closing moments of *The Wake*, and to Irish Man sobbing in *The Gigli Concert*. *Alice Trilogy* (2005) similarly ends with the

heroine's weeping at an airport, a particularly non-homely place, which still features a homecoming of sorts: not only the sorrowful homecoming of the son in the coffin, but a homecoming to love, sympathy, empathy, and surpassing one's limitations, as Alice finds the way back to her own ability to feel through sharing in another person's tragedy.

"The ending of a Murphy play . . . involves transformation. The lights do not go down on stasis but on a new dynamic. Liberation is usually incorporated, if not always hope or transcendence (though these are certainly emphasized more in the later work)" (Murray, "Introduction: Reading Murphy" 8). Murphy left to posterity a rich oeuvre of remarkable consistency of interests, concerns, artistic sincerity, and passion rendered in a great variety of forms and shapes. A romantic temperament, whatever subject he addresses, his plays pulsate with his personal passion and conviction, while his meticulous forging and hammering of his works into shape make them great plays, several of them masterpieces, and valid as visions of Ireland and the Irish in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as well as human nature, aspirations, longings—the human condition of any time.

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Notes

¹ For a more detailed discussion of the religious and spiritual aspects of Murphy's work, see Bertha.

² For a detailed analysis of the Faust parallel, see O'Toole 163-77.

³ Along the lines pointed out, among others, by the late Martin Heidegger and Paul Ricoeur.

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