

REVIEWS

Dermot Healy, Resourceful Playwright

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Hopper, Keith, and Neil Murphy, eds. *Dermot Healy: The Collected Plays*. Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive P, 2016. xxxiii + 583 pages. ISBN 978-1-56478-930-3. Pbk. \$21.00/£15.00.

Following his untimely death in 2014, prominent Irish literature scholars Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper have performed a remarkable feat of recovery for Dermot Healy: they have brought out with Dalkey Archive Press Healy's *Collected Short Stories* (2015), an edited reprint of his first novel, *Fighting with Shadows* (2015), a volume of memories and critical reflections entitled *Writing the Sky: Observations and Essays on Dermot Healy* (2016), and finally *The Collected Plays* (2016), a formidable tome comprising over 600 pages.

Healy's celebrated fiction—which includes *A Goat's Song* (1994), one of the most original Irish novels of the contemporary era—and the six collections of his poetry have generated remarkably little critical commentary up to date; instead, many have contented themselves with labeling Healy a “writer's writer.” Moreover, his considerable output as a dramatist has received no scholarly attention whatsoever, since with the exception of a single play it remained in typescript. Thus, this collection will make for a genuine discovery not only for specialists but also for the general reader. *The Collected Plays* includes thirteen dramas which display a stylistic versatility that is paralleled perhaps only by Stewart Parker in the Irish canon: Healy wrote psychological drama, absurdist metatheatre, domestic drama, a history play, a poetic docudrama, a theatrical folk tale, a sketch of prison life, and a range of plays for young actors and audiences. He regularly used elements of physical theatre, vivid soundscapes and symbolic sets, demonstrating a deep understanding of theatre that may seem surprising in an author perceived primarily as a novelist. What Healy shares with Parker is a keen sense for finding an appropriate style and method for his subject; instead of Parker's wild exuberance and quick wit, however, Healy's approach is more muted, always attuned to the lives and predicaments of ordinary people and addressing large issues of history by extension rather than overt dramatization.

The first highlight of the collection is the early play *The Long Swim* (1987), a harrowing account of an intellectual's mind succumbing to

dementia. Matti is a writer and drama lecturer who develops Alzheimer's disease in early middle age, and the audience gets to witness the gradual erasure of her memory together with its effect on her husband and family over the period of six years. In detailed stage directions reminiscent of Samuel Beckett, Healy carefully outlines his use of a symbolist set to reflect Matti's growing alienation from the world around her. He establishes a series of interconnected images of mirrors and foregrounds the idea originally voiced in Plato's *Phaedrus* that writing might serve "as the mirror that might capture the reflection of time, and also ease the great stress on . . . memory" (74); the spectators see Matti's typewriter in front of a mirror early in the play but are subsequently exposed to its absence, silent, and telling. Matti's condition is simultaneously expressed through the use of her body, from carefully orchestrated motion and physical expression of rage up to full frontal nudity, which functions in a final scene as a chilling image of the dehumanizing effect of the disease.

The two plays that Healy wrote for Theatre Omnibus in Ennis, *On Broken Wings* (1992) and *Last Night's Fun* (1996), use physical acting more extensively. The former stages an old man's memories of living and working in Scotland and America through techniques developed in Continental pantomime, choreographed action, and the use of masks; whereas *Last Night's Fun* is a domestic drama of a young couple living with the husband's mother, which pivots on the idea of household objects functioning as music instruments and being variously sounded or played throughout the show. Non-verbal elements are seminal also to another play about relationships between men and women, *Mr Staines* (1999), staged by the celebrated Pan Pan company. In *Mr Staines*, Healy produced a full-bodied absurdist drama that belies the influence of Pirandello and early Beckett in its radical metatheatricality. The characters' repeated routines interestingly parallel those of Václav Havel's plays from the 1960s, although Healy's focus is on individual existential angst rather than on the detrimental consequences of a mechanistic, oppressive social order.

Men to the Right, Women to the Left (2001) is a remarkable memory play which interweaves the voices of two women and a man in a retelling of fragments of the past. The play was developed by Healy with The Clones Drama Group, comprised of clients of a senior care center in Monaghan who provided the material. It was first staged by professional actors at the Abbey Theatre Bar as part of "Bealtaine, the Season of Creativity in Older Age" and later broadcast by RTÉ Radio 1. The aural landscape of *Men to the Right* will be familiar to anyone who saw the film *I Could Read the Sky* (1999, dir. Nichola

Bruce, with Dermot Healy in the lead role); like Timothy O'Grady and Steve Pyke, on whose novel the film is based, Healy is concerned with an artistic recreation of memories of old people that are not part of the general public discourse. However, his play does not feature a main protagonist and presents instead a de-centered poetic collage from the stories of multiple individuals, punctuated by the sound of a passing train. What is notable is that while the reminiscences concern a border county in the period from before World War II until, approximately, the 1960s, there is virtually no mention of any tension between the local Catholics and Protestants, and the *grand récit* of history forms merely a distant backdrop to the lives of these ordinary country people.

In *Metagama* (2004), Healy used the largest canvas, creating an epic play about the emigration from the Isle of Lewis on the eponymous ship in the early 1920s. Having won a commission from Theatre Hebrides in Stornoway to write the drama, he spent several months on the island, researching documents and getting to know the people and the landscape. The resulting work views the devastating impact of history on the lives of the local farmers in a manner that is similar to Tom Murphy's *Famine*. However, Healy's language is strikingly sparse and matter-of-fact, and the emotional impact is not achieved so much by psychological insight as through gradual accrual of information combined with the effect of stylized stage action and forceful use of soundscapes, such as that of the sea, omnipresent on Lewis and palpably absent in Canada, where the *émigrés* are pictured as displaced and subject to the same heavy toil and poverty as back home on the Hebrides.

Providing further proof of Healy's theatrical resourcefulness, Hopper and Murphy's edition includes the short play *The Music Box* (1998), which emulates the language of a folk narrative; it was produced alongside one-act pieces by Eugene McCabe and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne as a children's show by the Abbey Theatre at the Peacock. There is also Healy's version of Lorca's *The Blood Wedding* (1989), the final two scenes of which include some extraordinary, soaring poetry. It is regrettable that the play had apparently never been considered for publication, since appropriate editorial comments would have helped the author eradicate minor glitches in the opening scenes and would have perhaps made him reassess the attempted geographical domestication of the play in Ireland which goes only part of the way and produces an incongruous admixture in the landscape of the original. Healy's last original play for an adult audience, *Serious* (2005), was developed with the inmates of Castlereagh Prison in Co. Roscommon and depicts their life in jail. While being merely an occasional piece, it documents the modesty that seems characteristic of Healy's involvement in the theatre in general: he clearly first

listened to his collaborators and then worked with their needs and concerns, often letting the authorial voice fade into the background.

The collection also features four plays written for young theatre groups and audiences. *Here, and There, and Going to America* (1985) outlines with intense energy the grim situation of young working-class people in 1980s Ireland, suffering from the long-term effects of de Valera's isolationism, and their similarly bleak prospects in the UK under Thatcher. *On the Ramparts* (1994) sets the lives of teenagers in Drogheda against the backdrop of a prehistoric past embodied as Beckettian ghosts of ancestors dwelling in a local passage tomb. *A Night at the Disco* (2006) was devised to stage the frustrations of teenage girls in Ballina resulting from ostracism and attacks in a neighboring community. Finally, the much more ambitious *Where Are You?* (2010) is a brilliant dramatization of the confusions and pains of early adulthood, which are juxtaposed with the migration and social rites of barnacle geese, which the teenagers get to enact in powerful scenes of physical theatre. Healy's linking of these seemingly incongruous worlds is wonderfully elaborated in his mesmerizing long poem *A Fool's Errand*, published the same year by Gallery Press.

The Collected Plays by Dermot Healy is a rare volume, recovering the voice of an accomplished, versatile dramatist and at the same time providing a seminal resource for a full appreciation of Dermot Healy's writing career by scholars. Several plays in the volume are clearly asking to be given new productions by major theatres, allowing for an appreciation by larger audiences that is long overdue. Last but not least, this comprehensive edition provides exciting original material for young acting groups at various stages of development, some of which is suitable not only for local acting schools in Ireland but also internationally.

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