

## Irish Drama, Theatre, and Performance

### Editor's Notes

This special issue on Irish drama and theatre is dedicated to Professor Mária Kurdi, University of Pécs, a long-time contributor, several times guest editor, and now Contributing Editor to *HJEAS*. Mária Kurdi, nationally and internationally acknowledged scholar of Irish Studies and one of the initiators of Hungarian Irish Studies at the university level, will celebrate her seventieth birthday later this year and *HJEAS* takes the opportunity with this special issue to thank her for all her work for, and loyalty to, the journal over many years.

Mária Kurdi, an alumna of the University of Debrecen, has taught in Pécs; introduced Irish studies at the College, later the University of Pécs; published books, essays, interviews in Irish Studies both in Hungary and abroad; edited volumes of essays and journal issues; founded the scholarly journal *Focus, Papers in English Literary and Cultural Studies* at the Department of English Literature and Culture in Pécs; serves on the advisory board of several scholarly journals (*Estudios Irlandeses, Litteraria Pragensia, Americana: E-journal of American Studies in Hungary*); organized conferences; taught many courses at all levels; supervised Master's and Doctoral theses; served as outside evaluator of Ph.D. dissertations in Hungary and abroad; and worked as Head of the Department of English Literatures and Cultures and Deputy-Head of the Institute of English Studies. She also served as Board Member, Vice President, and President (2001-04) of the scholarly association the Hungarian Society for the Study of English, HUSSE, where she was awarded the prestigious László Országh medal. It is, therefore, only appropriate that this special issue be presented to her at the 13<sup>th</sup> biennial HUSSE Conference.

This is not the place to list all her publications and scholarly work, so let it suffice to mention her books: *Nemzeti önszemlélet a mai ír drámában (1960-1990)* [National Self-Image in Contemporary Irish Drama] (1999), *Codes and Masks: Aspects of Identity in Contemporary Irish Plays in an Intercultural Context* (2000), *Otthonkeresés a színpadon: Beszélgetések kortárs ír drámaírókkal* [Search for Home on the Stage: Interviews with Contemporary Irish Playwrights] (2004), *Representations of Gender and Female Subjectivity in Contemporary Irish Drama by Women* (2010), *Kultúrák között: Magyar és más közép- és kelet-európai emigránsok a kortárs ír prózában és színpadon* [Between Cultures: Hungarian and Other Central and Eastern-European Immigrants in Irish fiction and on the Stage] (2011). Her edited and co-edited books include, apart from conference publications,

collections of essays such as *Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry: "The Work Has Value"* (with Donald E. Morse and Csilla Bertha, Dublin, 2006), *Literary and Cultural Relations: Ireland, Hungary and Central and Eastern Europe* (Dublin, 2009), *The Binding Strength of Irish Studies* (with Marianna Gula and István Rácz D.) (Debrecen, 2011), *A színpadtól a színpadig: Válogatás Marvin Carlson színbázi írásaiból* [From Stage to Stage: Selection from Marvin Carlson's Theatre Writings] (with Zsuzsanna Csikai, Szeged, 2014), *Radical Contemporary Theatre Practices by Women in Ireland* (with Miriam Haughton, Dublin, 2015), *Arthur Miller öröksége: Centenáriumi írások műveiről* [Arthur Miller's Heritage: Centenary Essays on his Works] (Szeged, 2015). Among the special *HJEAS* issues she guest-edited, the one dedicated to Brian Friel at seventy (1999) became the basis for the Dublin volume of essays, another focused on Arthur Miller (2005), and special sections on Literary Encounters from Swift to the Present (2009) and Caryl Churchill (2013) constitute her other contributions. She also co-edited *Irish Theatre International* (with Miriam Haughton, 2014). She compiled teaching materials on English, American, and, most important because most needed, Irish literature: *Critical Anthology for the Study of Modern Irish Literature* (2003). As these titles (and the long list of her scholarly essays) indicate, her work centers on Irish drama and theatre but extends also to other aspects of Irish culture and literature, occasionally to American and English drama with excursions into the fields of Irish-Hungarian literary and cultural relations. Her most recent work concentrates on gender issues, female playwrights and theatre. In 2012 she was awarded the Hungarian Academy doctorate for her book on *Representations of Gender*. This issue includes a review of her co-edited *Radical Contemporary Theatre Practices by Women in Ireland*.

The contributions to this issue—by Hungarian and international scholars of Irish drama, including a few of Kurdi's one-time students—address aspects of the work of cutting-edge contemporary playwrights: the most prominent among them along with some lesser-known yet important members of the “new” or “third” generation. Outstanding classics, such as Yeats and Synge, are also revisited. Strangely though, nobody chose any of the “second renaissance” giants, perhaps because they—Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Thomas Kilroy, and, a little behind them in age, Frank McGuinness—have attracted so much critical attention in the recent past.

Also noticeable in this collection, as in Irish drama and theatre studies in general, is the increased critical interest in performance and theatricality as equally important as (or sometimes more than) written drama and spoken word. Performance theory and practice—one of the areas that Kurdi

researches—is addressed in several essays on new and earlier plays, as is translation and adaptation theory through examples of particular case studies.

What Christopher Murray famously said twenty years ago, that in Irish theatre the avant-garde “is always only a transitory moment” and soon becomes “assimilated into the establishment” (238), is borne out by contemporary playwrights, among whom this volume features the most celebrated and discussed Enda Walsh, Conor McPherson, and Martin McDonagh. This trio introduced perhaps the most radically experimental dramaturgies, spectacularly breaking with Irish theatrical tradition, and yet it seems that in their more mature works the former two tend to implant psychological and spiritual concerns while the latter introduces serious social issues. So the circle revolves: the most experimental, avant-garde playwrights show signs of joining and internalizing tradition, but obviously in their own way, at the stage when they have already established their own hallmarks.

Enda Walsh is, perhaps, the playwright who belies most obviously the long-standing complaint that Irish theatre is highly verbal and text-centered. His plays create true physical theatre, with explosive dynamism, extraordinary kinetic energy, pure theatricality in strongly relying on movement (sometimes at breakneck speed) as well as aural and visual effects. Two essays, one by Christopher Murray, the other by Clare Wallace, are devoted to this unique world. Murray carries out an in-depth survey of the main lines and discernible tendencies in Walsh’s oeuvre up to the present while Wallace concentrates on three of the most recent plays. Both critics point out Walsh’s postmodern dramaturgy and his increasing concentration on metatheatricality. Murray places the plays in their context of dramatic predecessors and inspirations, most importantly relating some features to Shakespearean and Jacobean drama, others to Beckett, brilliantly guiding readers through Walsh’s comic farces—which are “just plays” in the Beckettian sense, but with all the clowning, unlike in Beckett, as an “end in itself rather than a means to a philosophical end”—to the deeper emotional, psychological, philosophical, and even transcendental meanings created in the last few plays. In their inside-outside dialectic Murray sees a focus on life and death, the fear and acceptance of mortality, and even “wished-for death linked to a beneficial result for others.”

Wallace reads *The Walworth Farce*, *Penelope*, and *Ballyturk* against linguistic, philosophical, social, and more directly theatre performance theories, such as those by John L. Austin, Jon McKenzie, Marvin Carlson, Erika Fischer-Lichte, and Hans Thies Lehmann, and regards them as “plays about performance and performativity vis à vis creativity and death.” She

sensitively teases out meanings from the decidedly anti-naturalistic, metatheatrical, postdramatic performance texts that are “deliberately excessive” in signs, “over-coded, overflowing with signifiers, utterly cluttered with objects, semi-familiar narratives of identity, and fragmented associations.” Yet she is aware of the interpretive possibilities some plays (*Penelope* in particular) convey to be read as reflecting Irish social problems, always foregrounding performance and performativity not just for stage effect but as meaning-making, self-reflexive components. These two interpretations and evaluations, published side by side, coinciding at parts and departing at others, will provide intriguing reading.

Eamonn Jordan offers a deep and sophisticated analysis of the plays of Conor McPherson, another highly acclaimed playwright both nationally and internationally. Jordan focuses on “McPherson’s particular interweavings of pagan, religious, and ritualistic connotations associated with a death-obsessed funerary consciousness [dominant in Irish culture] and with a Winter Solstice/Christmas sensibility linked to re-birth, renewal, and salvation.” Through non-linear time, “present-oriented dramaturgy,” and especially rituals or ritualistic actions, Jordan claims (with Victor Turner’s theory in the background as a point of departure) that in McPherson’s hands funerary tradition becomes sublimated, darkness turns creative, and fragments of patterns, associations, dispositions of Christmas celebrations tend to carry unsentimental, undogmatic yet profound spiritual implications.

Vincent Woods, a less celebrated yet significant theatrical voice, is able to bring to the surface treasures from the well of the mythical tradition in this unmythical age. In *A Cry from Heaven* (2005), he revisits one of the best-known Irish legends, that of Deirdre, joining mythic, linguistic, and theatrical interests, and, in Giovanna Tallone’s analysis, not only lends the legend contemporary relevance, but deploys it as a means of posing questions about the loss of tradition, the end of mythology, and responsibility towards Irish cultural heritage. Words and language become primary tools again in this drama but applied in an innovative, self-reflexive, metatextual, and metatheatrical manner. Tallone’s meticulous investigation of the play in relation to original versions and remakes of the legend reveals the layering of meanings in particular words and images and she argues that here language itself serves as a “structuring principle,” as the playwright deconstructs, dismantles, and recreates the original (and frequently rewritten) story.

Conversely, Chris Lee’s *The Map Maker’s Sorrow* (1999) addresses a severe, then-almost taboo social problem in Ireland: suicide among the young. Donald E. Morse illuminates the dramatic means of reflecting the

unknowability of the causes and motivations of suicide (supporting his argument with those of psychologists) and the lack of understanding among survivors. Morse contends that “true to its subject, loose ends abound” in the play, and through fragmented scenes following each other without the traditional cause-and-effect succession, non-linear, map-like spatial form, structure, and dramaturgy, the playwright positions an audience in the same state of not-knowing as where the suicidal young man’s parents are within the play. This uncertainty and unpredictability creates a sense of the total incomprehensibility of suicide as a response to existential despair.

Each of these essays, while studying the drama texts, also reflects on their performances. The following group, however, concerns itself more directly with theatre performance. Péter P. Müller examines the role and function of violence on stage in the celebrated and much-debated contemporary plays by Martin McDonagh, while Ondřej Pilný reviews the London performance of McDonagh’s *Hangmen*. P. Müller, drawing attention to the two main approaches to stage realism—the expectation of realistic representation of moral, social, psychological features, on the one hand, and, on the other, the focus on the aesthetics of self-conscious theatricality of performance—claims that McDonagh’s horrific scenes of extreme brutality, the abundance of “blood and brains” on stage, should be regarded from the latter point of view. Through the example of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* P. Müller demonstrates how exaggeration of stage brutality leads to comic effect, parody and satire, so “what seems outrageous and provocative as subject matter, from an aesthetic point of view can be a means for strong and subversive influences, often in the comic register.” He concludes with a lively discussion of two different Hungarian performances of the same play. Knowing the language of McDonagh’s plays at an exceptionally deep level as *Hangmen*’s Czech translator, Pilný finds the hugely successful recent London Royal Court production (that won numerous awards, transferred to the West End and, was broadcast as NT Live scheme) somewhat wanting. He argues that *Hangmen* strikes one as the first McDonagh play maintaining a serious note and grim realism while “the issue is not pushed aside by the presence of any subversive framing device.” But this is what the director and critics did not seem to realize or accept in a performance that mostly foregrounded the farcical and the comic, slighting the serious note, missed the right balance “between the ‘knockabout’ and the somber side . . . of McDonagh’s new work.”

Rhona Trench, on the other hand, analyzes an innovative and successful site-specific production of W. B. Yeats’s *On Baile’s Strand*. The

Sligo Blue Raincoat Theatre Company—which, as Trench contends in her book-length study of their work, among other experiments, creatively engages with its “unique geographic location” and “with its surrounding history and landscape” (18)—placing performances in a natural environment; in Yeats’s case, one that deeply inspired the poet-playwright. The author explores the ways in which the landscape, the weather, the setting of Streedagh beach on the Atlantic coast provided “the wildest elements of Irish nature” to match the play’s passionate feelings and themes of “vengeance, love, betrayal, loyalty, loss, and madness,” and how all those together with accidental sounds and visual effects contributed to the overall audience experience. The Yeats performance leads to another discussion of Yeats’s plays by Edit Bódy and to Michal Lachman’s addressing that other giant of the Irish Renaissance, J. M. Synge. Bódy focuses on Yeats’s hero image, as a merging of the Nietzschean tragic hero with Castiglione’s courtier ideal, in its modifications from the early *The Green Helmet* to the very last play, *The Death of Cuchulain*. She argues that although Yeats’s early belief in Unity of Culture disappears in the late plays, nevertheless a hero—more resigned, naturally—remains present, now positioned in an unheroic world. Yeats’s statue-images (in the last play as well as in poems) make her conclude that “the statue symbolizes the very essence of heroism” as it connects the past with the present and “evokes the feeling of timelessness.”

Reading Synge’s plays against his prose work, *The Aran Islands*, Lachman focuses on a so far somewhat neglected aspect: the playwright’s social sensibility and criticism. Lachman finds a sharp contrast between Synge’s idealistic, almost utopian image of the Aran islanders’ authenticity of culture and sovereignty of thinking depicted in the essays and institutionally imposed normative social relationships, restricting moral expectations in Synge’s contemporary Irish communities “disconnected from the vital energies of the past and rejecting the prospect of future renewal,” dramatized in the plays. In these communities, “unready for social change,” the independently thinking, often rebellious individual—reflecting something of the ancient Celtic spirit—who challenges the social order, is doomed to failure, escape, or exile.

The last unit of essays on the translation and adaptation of specific plays offers a wider perspective on the problems of the transfer of ideas, values, and meanings from one culture to another. Monica Randaccio examines the Italian translation and performance of the Northern Irish playwright Owen McCafferty’s *Quietly*. Considering (classical) translation and reception-theories by Patrice Pavis and Sirkku Aaltonen, Randaccio

raises questions of how globalization affects the concepts of translation, earlier regarded as a linear process between the source and the target culture but now morphing into the practice of reproduction and similarity: the “clonialism” (Michael Cronin’s phrase) of twenty-first-century homogenization, which, making away with differences, turns everything into a replica, a simulacrum. Randaccio argues that the changes the translators/directors of *Quietly* administered, aiming to make the play more universal, rendering spatial and time deictic markers vague and the location uncertain, deprived the original of some of its significant specific meanings.

Zsuzsanna Csikai’s reflections on two recent Tolstoy translations and adaptations onto the Irish stage, Nancy Harris’s *The Kreutzer Sonata* (2009) and Peter Reid’s *Desire* (2014, based on “The Devil”), interrogate both genre and cultural change. The genre change was solved by both adapters in a way most adequate to the novellas: they were turned into monologue plays—a frequently used form in contemporary Irish drama. The cultural change of emplacing rigidly Christian nineteenth-century moral values in the twenty-first century proves much more challenging. Csikai juxtaposes the very different solutions: Harris created a period-piece with little to say to twenty-first-century audiences about the “devil” of sexual obsession while Reid updated Tolstoy’s psychological distortions to speak to contemporary audiences.

This brief summary of some of the chief concerns and approaches can obviously only whet the appetite for reading the arguments, sensitive observations, and subtle analyses in the essays on significant facets of contemporary Irish drama, theatre, and performance.

The editorial board of HJEAS are delighted to have this opportunity to celebrate the life and work of our esteemed colleague Mária Kurdi. As the guest editor of this issue, I am grateful to all the contributors for enriching readers with such a feast of ideas. I also wish to express my heartfelt thanks to Gabriella Hartvig and Gabriella Vőő for their enthusiastic participation in the editorial work. Sincere thanks to Gabriella Moise for conscientiously editing the reviews, Kálmán Matolcsy for copy-editing, and Balázs Venkovits for typesetting the issue. And, as always, to Donald E. Morse, editor-in-chief of HJEAS, for his unceasing manifold support.

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