

The Plays of Enda Walsh: An Interim Report

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Introduction

Enda Walsh (born 1967), author of nineteen stage plays, is one of the new generation of Irish playwrights that has succeeded the group led by Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, and Thomas Kilroy. It would include such writers as Marina Carr, Conor McPherson, Billy Roche, Mark O’Rowe, and Martin McDonagh. There is little sense of a “movement” inherent in this generation. There is no program on view, no lasting attachment to a specific theatre and its aesthetic, and if there are overlapping themes, there is nothing reassembling a common language, style, or form. McDonagh goes his way, against the grain of Irish traditionalism while gleefully exploiting it; McPherson goes in a different direction, delving into spiritual dilemmas in a secular, deracinated world; while Marina Carr seems *sui generis*, an individual voice determined to articulate basically feminist issues within social formations perceived as dysfunctional and hostile to civilized values (as posited within classical humanism, her abiding framework). For his part, Enda Walsh has built up a body of work over the past twenty years which avoids preoccupation with issues, whether social, political, or spiritual, which have formed the Irish playwright for over a century. While sharing the determination of his coevals not to write a state-of-the-nation play, Walsh stands aloof from even a tentative involvement in what may be termed the archaeology of cultural collapse in Ireland, which keeps his colleagues in contact with the Friel generation. He is, in the main, a comic writer with a huge commitment to a theatre of self-sufficient performance. While this temperamental preference brings him close to Beckett, for whom clowning and popular entertainment provided a focus for the dramatization of alienation, I will argue that Walsh is wary of Beckett’s elitism and in his own roles as writer and director seeks to establish and maintain a general audience. As will be shown, for Walsh clowning is usually an end in itself rather than a means to a philosophical end. He maintains a focus on *homo ludens* as image of a postmodern, basically meaningless world. But latterly he has begun more to explore the tragic than the comic mask.

When Walsh began as a writer for the Irish stage, twenty years ago, his context was fringe theatre, which was at that time mainly radical and anti-establishment. It was officially isolated from the mainstream theatre by institutional design. This situation could not satisfy a writer with Walsh’s

sense of audience as community. By the year 2000 he had penetrated the Dublin Theatre Festival with *Bedbound* and its Beckett-like monologues: “for what am I if I’m not words?” (*Plays One* 125). He was not overtly political; he had no bone to pick with the establishment; his belief was in experimental comedy, humor, and the act of performance on an intimate stage where the fragility and yet the resilience of the self were on trial. Looking back at that period in the 1990s, when the distinction between high and low art was being dismantled by small theatre groups outside as well as inside Dublin, Walsh concedes that he was an innocent, in search of fun and how to create it but ignorant as yet of how to structure a play to whatever ends the theatre itself seemed to allow. Having moved from Dublin to Cork he joined the experimental Corcadorca Theatre Company there, and quickly learned that the center of what interested him lay in actors and their skills. Meeting Cillian Murphy was life-changing, in that Walsh saw how language—his area of responsibility—could be entirely transformed and expanded by an inventive actor of Murphy’s calibre. It was not just a matter of voice, of articulating the words written, but of the whole body, its energy and elasticity, and the contributive power of the actor’s inventiveness. Walsh speaks also of the director Pat Kiernan as a significant collaborator:

We sort of began an apprenticeship in Cork and gave ourselves two years to learn our craft and try to get good at it: him directing, me writing. Pat really helped me, because he had this real drive, this energy, this incredible devotion, and I didn’t really have that, so he spurred me on. And, slowly, I began to find my voice, and then we did *Disco Pigs*. (Keating 7)

That production in 1996 of a cheeky, patois-based two-hander by Cillian Murphy and Eileen Walsh was a breakthrough. The play toured internationally, to Hungary among other places, and proved very popular in Germany: there were 42 different productions between 1998 and 2001, allowing Werner Huber to claim that *Disco Pigs* “has undoubtedly been the darling of German-speaking theatre directors and dramaturges” (84). Its success led to Walsh’s securing valuable contacts within the German theatre; his *New Electric Ballroom* would be premiered in the Kammerspiele, Munich, in 2004. In an interview with Jesse Weaver, he has indicated indebtedness to the dramaturg Tilman Raabke in particular (Weaver 26).

From the outset, then, Walsh has been one of those writers who is not merely at home in the theatre, but sees it as a kind of school in which the artist is endlessly learning lessons. Although his imagination cannot be related

to Wagner in scale, form, or mythological fertility, Walsh does accept the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the unity of all the arts in production, and his own work is always collaborative in that sense. Music, sound, and lighting are as much part of a Walsh play as are the performance and direction. One may also include the audience, less spectators than assistants in bringing the play to completion. The seeds of Walsh's attitude, his humility in this area, were planted in the actual school he attended in Dublin around the mid-1980s, where his teachers of English were Paul Mercier and Roddy Doyle. Mercier, a playwright himself, was the major force behind Passion Machine, a significant young people's theatre founded in 1985. Doyle, whose milieu was to be prose fiction, was an occasional writer for Passion Machine: *Brownbread* (1987) and *War* (1989), both directed by Mercier, prefigured what the author of *The Barrytown Trilogy* (1992) was capable of in comic dialogue, characterization, and use of setting. As his teacher, Doyle left his imprint on Walsh, rewarding him for his essays in English and inspiring a love of fun: "All our school plays were adaptations [Doyle] had written himself. He made theatre seem like a laugh," Walsh remembers, and of Mercier he adds: "I'd say he's our Sean O'Casey, and he was also a big influence on me, partly because—well, they both made it look as if it [writing] was quite easy!" (qtd. in Sweeney 12). Yet while he found their presence and extravagance liberating in the classroom, Walsh does not seem to have taken any direct interest in Passion Machine, where he would have found another teacher double-jobbing, the future star actor (and author of one play, *Breaking Up* [1988]), Brendan Gleeson. Instead, the young Walsh turned to the Dublin Youth Theatre to gain experience and then set out for Cork, where his true apprenticeship began and flourished because he was willing to learn from others. It would be several years before Walsh could generate the high-speed, mad-cap comic action that fuelled the stage work of Passion Machine, but he came to that point with huge success in *The Walworth Farce* (2006) and, as the saying goes, never looked back.

***The Walworth Farce* and other stories**

It is the case that the Passion Machine plays were realistic depictions of issues affecting urban youth. It is equally the case that Walsh, even if in *Disco Pigs* he explored the lives and feelings of two disaffected young Corkonians, showed no intention of using drama as intervention in social debate. *The Walworth Farce* is a clear statement of intent in this regard. For all that it focuses on an Irish family adrift in London, the play steadfastly refuses to "deal with" any of the issues the story-line supplies, and instead creates a

play-within-a-play, which depends almost entirely on virtuoso acting for its success. In both technique and purpose it is entirely self-reflexive, and such was to be Walsh's signature style thereafter.

The Walworth Farve concerns a middle-aged Irishman, Dinny, exiled in London with his two sons and existing in a fantasy world in which all three re-enact a warped version of Dinny's guilty past. The play is enacted every day, with Dinny as director/playwright/performer, alongside Blake, aged twenty-five, and Sean, aged twenty-four. All three perform multiple roles, male and female, in a story of family rivalry, murder, and flight. Dinny's complete attention is on strict observance of the script: any deviation or lapse is greeted with anger and correction. The pace is manic, the costume and wig changes instant, the use of props meticulous, all building up to a resolution which will give Dinny himself the prize as best actor and at the same time supposedly provide all three with a sense of transcendence through ownership of a family myth which celebrates escape. All goes awry, however, when Sean breaks the taboo on allowing any outsider to know of the family's affairs: on his daily mission to Tesco's supermarket for fresh supplies of foodstuff for the play he inadvertently takes home the wrong bag because he is distracted by the friendly checkout woman, Hayley, who happens to be black. When she arrives with the right bag Dinny is driven into a fury, forces her into the play (having whitened her face), and by this change of text causes real violence to erupt in Blake and Sean. The play we see is given a totally unexpected ending as a result.

The Walworth Farve had its premiere in 2006 as a Druid production. It was directed by the actor Mikel Murfi, who was to be another major collaborator in Walsh's evolving output. Trained in mime at the *École Jacques Lecoq* in Paris, Murfi is highly skilled as a modern clown, and fully cognizant of the tradition from which it sprang and developed throughout Europe. As Eric Weitz has pointed out: "The clown persists as an interesting creature in today's world. With bloodlines to the medieval Vice figure, popular entertainers, and the *zanni* of the *commedia dell'arte*, the clown habitually throws the invisible lines of socio-cultural convention into relief by playfully, naïvely or foolishly failing to observe them" (95). But the clown does so not to introduce reforms but to display the pleasure of superiority that exists for an audience in enjoying the spectacle of incompetence exhibited by the best efforts of the clown to enact the simplest tasks: "[T]he clown often presents an image of instinct-driven bare life, whose credentials for social viability are laughably suspect" (Weitz 98). (Later on, in *Ballyturk* [2014], Murfi was to show his skills as clown alongside the quite different acting style of Cillian

Murphy.) In *The Walworth Farce* as director, his task was to engineer the clockwork precision of farce, which demands physical competence of a high order. Murfi was very successful in orchestrating Walsh's tragi-comic vision, and in persuading him to change the ending. "He came over to London," Walsh told Jesse Weaver, "and we read and cut [the text], and then we found the ending—the repetitious moment of one of the characters [Sean] playing at being in blackface. That scene wasn't in the original. I couldn't commit that character to that ending initially, because it broke my heart. I just couldn't do it; but then of course it has to end like that" ("The Words" 138). That moment in the play ensures that after the bloody mayhem triggered by the arrival in the flat of Hayley, the London outsider whose entrance explodes the script and its sustaining narrative, the farce is turned inside out.

To clarify this point, I want to contrast the Druid production of *The Walworth Farce* with a revival by Landmark Productions at the Olympia Theatre, Dublin, in 2015. The Druid production, which travelled to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2007 and won a major award, after which it toured the world, arrived at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin in December 2008. The small black-box space suited the claustrophobic atmosphere of the play admirably. The role of Dinny was played by Denis Conway, a Cork actor of great power and ability. He is not a comic actor but has vocal and physical skills which allowed him to combine in this role the savagery and the authoritarianism of Dinny while maintaining the necessary sense of absurdity he emanates. It can readily be seen now that Conway would succeed in the revivals of Murphy's *The Gigli Concert* and of Friel's *Faith Healer* in 2015, where he played the Irishman and Faith Healer respectively. His weight gave to Walsh's *The Walworth Farce* a sense of danger, which interrogated the form of farce itself. Garrett Lombard as Blake and Tadhg Murphy as Sean, schooled no doubt by director Mikel Murfi, played farcically to please until the game was up and then, as it were, reached for their "real" selves. To my mind, this production was definitive. It showed that the key to the technique Walsh was developing lay in "The Mousetrap" of *Hamlet* and its Jacobean imitators, such as Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607), whereby a play-within-a-play juggles the terms *reality* and *imitation* in exciting ways. For his part, Hamlet ironically assures the anxious Claudius, when "The Mousetrap" seems about to touch on guilty secrets, that all will be well, that the characters only "poison in jest": the play contains "No offence i' th' world" (*Hamlet*, 3.2.227-30), even though his intention is to catch the conscience of the king and force him to reveal his guilt. *The Walworth Farce* reverses this position. The guilty one here is Dinny and he is in the play-within-the-play himself; it

only masquerades as truth until Blake turns it into “reality” by stabbing Dinny to death. Here the parallel is more with *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, where real revenge takes place in grotesque style within the play staged by the avenger Vindice. Whether conscious or not of these Elizabethan-Jacobean prototypes, Walsh has scripted an original piece of self-conscious theatre which taps into the ambivalences of seventeenth-century tragedy.

The Landmark production in 2015 was a very polished and worldly-wise affair which sidestepped the darker side of Walsh’s play in favor of the comic skills it demands for metatheatre. The main attraction of this production, directed by Englishman Sean Foley, was the casting of Brendan Gleeson and his two sons, Domhnall and Brian, as Dinny and his two sons Blake and Sean. This was a clever extension of the reality-illusion theme of the play, and, in truth, the actors did not disappoint technically. But, of course, the idea could only work if the audience kept in mind at all times that they were watching a real family displaying their skills. This was in accord with the director’s concept of farce, supplied in a program note: “A comedy that aims at entertaining the audience through situations that are highly exaggerated, extravagant, and improbable: often incomprehensible plot-wise, they are also characterised by physical comedy, the use of deliberate absurdity, and stylised performances” (Foley 4). Here is a textbook definition, but is it flexible enough to contain Walsh’s elusive style? Foley does go on to acknowledge the serious dimension behind Walsh’s farce: “It’s a play with a multiple personality disorder” (Foley 5). And yet he insists, for after all this was an expensive production and seriousness must be kept in check, that the play is “simply—a Great Night Out” (Foley 5). The capitals here make it clear Foley is referring to John McGrath’s well-known book, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form*. It is an interesting and important reference. The question mark that hangs over Walsh’s plays in general—because they are, in Tanya Dean’s phrase, “hermetic playworlds” (120)—is whether they have, in the end, any social or political point to make. I tend to think not. Foley seems aware of this question, when he says in his program note that behind the high jinks, “and woven in to [*sic*] the telling of the farce, is a supposedly real-life situation based on a family desperately telling its own story in order to eke out survival in a hostile land. And that family is exploding” (Foley 4). He understands the schizoid nature of Walsh’s work. But the allusion to John McGrath and his crusade to tour Scotland in search of a new audience for socially engaged plays is a bit off the mark. After all, McGrath as a neo-Brechtian stood by his ulterior purpose: “I can see no way of discussing contemporary theatre, the way reality is mediated, without the

participants in the discussion declaring, or at least being aware of, their political position” (McGrath 20).

The problem lies in Walsh’s own ambivalence. His opening stage direction in the text of *The Walworth Farce*, meticulously realistic and quite long, goes:

The set is three square spaces. Essentially a living room at its centre, a kitchen to stage left and a bedroom to stage right. Much of the plasterboard has been removed from the walls and what remains are the wooden frames beneath. . . . Everything worn and colourless and stuck in the 1970s. . . . The kitchen is fitted and very messy. . . . We’re in a council flat on the Walworth Road, South London. (5)

This is the typical “kitchen-sink” décor introduced to working-class English drama by Arnold Wesker and John Arden in the 1950s. Walsh is aware of the implications, or he would not have given the final line, complete with address. He wants the truth on stage. At the same time, the core of the play is not realism but fantasy. There are two layers of dramaturgy present, one parodying the other, as in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, where the play mounted by Bottom (a dead ringer for Dinny) and his fellow tradesmen, the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, unwittingly mocks the earnest love stories that make up the main plot. Behind Dinny’s speeded-up and ludicrous play lies a horror story which the audience is left to unpack. As Eamonn Jordan has put it, “What Walsh blends together delivers a radical variation on the traditional Irish diasporic play” (119-20). Perhaps Tom Murphy’s *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961)—although “traditional” is not a word that properly applies to Murphy—could be seen as the prototype. Certainly Dinny has much in common with Murphy’s Dada, who even has a trophy cup to present to his sons if they uphold the family name in gang violence. Murphy’s play can thus illuminate the essential tragedy behind the comedy in Walsh’s farce.

In that context, the key passage in *The Walworth Farce* is Dinny’s speech describing his flight from Cork to London, which suggests how his story can be read as a parable on modern Irish emigration and spiritual exile: “I run [that is, ran] the same race a million Irishmen ran. . . . I run right past the cars in the [English] motorways, the trains in their tracks. I run fast towards London. . . . The road signs steering me. Like a little rat caught in a drain. Pushing me further and further to its centre. But what centre?” (30) It is clear from what we see of Dinny’s mad attempt to create a sustaining life by re-enacting his story over and over that the center cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed against his project. Passionate intensity is no longer enough

to survive on. The alien world of London and the power of Tesco must break in and break up the enduring fantasy, transforming murder “in jest”—as in Hamlet’s metadrama—into the actual murders of Dinny and Blake. Sean is left alone on stage, “as we watch him calmly lose himself in a new story” (85). Like Michael at the end of *A Whistle in the Dark*, Sean has been pushed into violence. Unlike Michael, however, Sean is immersed in metatheatricality rather than in social drama. For him the horror goes on. Or, properly, the image of that horror. For when Hayley escapes this madhouse, we as audience rejoice, and with that sigh of relief we become part of the fantasy and divorce ourselves from consideration of “real” conditions. Catharsis is not on Walsh’s agenda.

Walsh calls *The New Electric Ballroom* “the sister piece to *The Walworth Farce*” (Weaver 26). It treads some of the same ground, a variation on the theme of alienation. Again, there is a set (by Sabine Dargent) symbolizing incarceration. Again, there is a family—this time three aging sisters—living in the past and creating dreams arising from it. But now the mood is romantic and the dreams are dramatically harmless. When Walsh said “sister piece,” he made a definition in gender: this is a feminine play. That he directed the Irish premiere himself for Druid productions in July 2008 (as part of the Galway Arts Festival) suggests a protectiveness. In its revival at the Town Hall, in April 2009, following outings at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and Perth International Arts Festival, *The New Electric Ballroom* was directed by Garry Hynes, and this in turn suggests an acknowledgement by Walsh that this play is indeed a woman’s play and best directed by a woman. Hynes made one change of cast, Ruth McCabe stepping into the role of Clara, alongside Rosaleen Linehan as Breda and Catherine Walsh as Clara. The only male character is the outsider Patsy, played by Mikel Murfi. As the name suggests, Patsy is the fall guy, the fool, the clown; he has the absurd role of delivering supplies of unwanted fish and is mainly the plaything of the three women.

Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* and Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* both cast their shadows over *The New Electric Ballroom*, but not in parody or any form of energy-releasing dialogue. Chekhov’s sisters are younger, however, and are characterized by a yearning for the future. Although *Dancing at Lughnasa* is a memory play, set in the past, the sisters here are also comparatively young and again look to the future: “I want to dance, Kate,” Agnes says, “It’s the Festival of Lughnasa. I’m only thirty-five. I want to dance” (Friel 13). We bear in mind that Friel had already adapted Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* for Field Day prior to this play. So, the idea of women’s self-awareness taking the form of anxiety over the passing of time and the loss of youth is well-established

decades before Walsh's take on the subject. Indeed, it is part of Synge's legacy to Irish drama, as the portrait of Nora in *The Shadow of the Glen* (1903) clearly shows. Walsh's play, in contrast, looks backward. His older women are immured in the past, in romantic memories of the days of the Irish showbands and the love that might have been. It is, indeed, more a version of William Trevor's story "The Ballroom of Romance," published in 1972 and subsequently filmed in 1982 as a joint drama production by RTE/BBC (1972), which impacted greatly on Irish audiences in the 1980s (McKenna 139). In Walsh's play, the emphasis is on memory, recollection, and recreation. The props of 1950s frocks and an exotic showband costume dominate the set and are donned at strategic moments, thus establishing a space, a distance from history, to allow the sort of "dressing-up" which also defines *The Walworth Farve*. The play is a form of ritualized re-living. The story is told mainly in lyrical monologues. But Walsh is determined to puncture the nostalgic mood and introduces a twist when Patsy is revealed as more than the village idiot and as the illegitimate son of the heart-throb beloved by both Breda and Clara. The shock totally alters the mood of the play. Walsh can be seen as playing games with women's feelings and fond memories, but he quietly subverts the myth of *The Ballroom of Romance*.

At death's door: *Penelope, Misterman, Ballyturk*

It can readily be seen, for it is something of a trademark, that Walsh's plays present an inside/outside dialectic. The setting is, for the characters, a chosen form of imprisonment. They adopt a stance of opposition to the world outside, seen as hostile and threatening. What we see enacted, in face of that acceptance, is a kind of dance of death. The dramatic prototype here is Beckett, and *Endgame* provides an obvious paradigm. "Outside of here it's death," proclaims Hamm, twice (Beckett 96, 126). Walsh says: "Beckett is not a conscious influence, but he taught us all two great things: he helped free drama from any obligation to be sociological; and he showed us the power of real time. I am hugely attracted to that" (qtd. in Billington 21). Both points remain relevant to an understanding of Walsh's own body of work. We have seen previously that, on the sociological point, he could be ambivalent. Beckett, after all, avoided realism like the plague; he knew his area of exploration was better served by symbolism, surrealism, and expressionism. As *The Walworth Farve* shows, Walsh's priority is for theatricalism, what Beckett calls "just play" (313). Walsh believes in bringing his text to actors he knows so that together they can read it and improvise around it and work (and play) until he is satisfied that, in its newly devised form, it has acquired

the organic, sponge-like qualities sufficient to soak up, expend, and exhaust all the energy that can be generated by the developed text. Then there is almost completeness. The rest is up to the audience, whose role, as with participants at a rock concert, is to give their all in support of and empathy with those working their socks off on stage. There is nothing sociological in that. It comes closer to group therapy. But as to the question of “real time,” all drama takes place in the present tense, in that we witness people on a stage who coexist with us, even though the story unfolded may be grounded in the past. Even Beckett’s monologues, although describing what happened in the past, are heard in the voice articulating the feelings arising as we listen. *That Time* (1976) offers a good example. Passion Machine, and youth theatre in general, may be exceptional in not focusing on the past but pitching its stories in immediacy, where being alive is the most important feeling to be communicated. This, too, is where Walsh bases his aesthetic, while insisting on a pattern of stage *timing* rather than of time’s malleability.

Penelope was commissioned as part of an invitation from Oberhausen Theatre to join four other writers in dramatizing an episode from Homer; Walsh chose Odysseus’s return to Ithaca and punishment of the suitors. Accordingly, like *The New Electric Ballroom*, it had its world premiere in Germany. The Druid production took place some months later, in July 2010. *Penelope* is probably Walsh’s most literary play. It is by way of being a modern parable, a search for meaning in the face of mortality. Set in a large, dried-out swimming pool, bizarrely equipped with a deluxe gas-fired barbecue, it features four surviving suitors, with Penelope as mute observer always in the background. The suitors, modern go-ahead types—initially, Walsh thought of “financiers” (*Plays: Two* viii)—have all had the same dream portending the sudden return of an angry Odysseus, so they know their time is limited and death awaits. That is the situation, an anti-*Godot* one in which the waiting has a certain and awful outcome. Yet the suitors are “Beckett-like in their trappedness” (Clapp 35). As the play begins, the youngest of the suitors, Burns, is slowly mopping up the blood of another suitor, Murray, who does not appear but who has killed himself in despair. In spite of this grim introduction, the play is funny and entertaining. In a sense it is an auditioning play, as each suitor gets his chance to step up to a microphone under the CCTV monitor which automatically comes on whenever Penelope enters the precincts, although she always remains behind the transparent panel partly enclosing the swimming pool. Each suitor thus participates in a rhetorical competition, and each—apart from Burns (Walsh’s spokesman)—is betraying his real self at this moment, while ironically believing (in his vanity)

that he alone is getting through to Penelope. In that sense, the exercise explores the proper uses of theatre, and Walsh is quite harsh on two of the men in particular, the flamboyant Quinn and the would-be author Dunne, who have high notions of themselves. When Quinn dares to offer Dunne acting advice, that is, to focus less on himself and more on Penelope in the monologue he is preparing, Dunne snaps back: "It's all for her! I'm channelling this poetry through her . . . ! I will not be edited by a lesser scribe!" (*Penelope* 25, ellipsis in original). Quinn himself is all ego, and uses his audition time for a spectacular display of quick costume-changes: here Walsh offers a parody of the sincerely meant theatricals in *The Walworth Farce*. So, the play is about integrity and the lack of it. Audrey McNamara argues that *Penelope* is about corrupt bankers and the Irish financial crash (151-60), but this seems too narrow an interpretation, even though Walsh does say that *Penelope* was to be his "one attempt to talk specifically about 'something that was actually happening'" (*Plays: Two* viii). It is rather more, however.

With the exception of Burns (sympathetically played by Tadhg Murphy, who had played Sean in *The Walworth Farce*), whose concern over the suicide of Murray puts him into another category, the suitors are opportunists, parasites, the stuff of Roman comedy. The show that each puts on for Penelope is no more than a dazzling solo run. Although they claim to be all-for-one they have no sense of commonality, much less of community (or family). To Walsh this is a serious moral flaw, and in Burns's final address it is underlined: "Outside of here there must be a world" (49). He speaks covered in Quinn's blood, whom he has just stabbed. The line rebuts Hamm's line, already quoted: "Outside of here it's death" (Beckett 96). In *Penelope*, death is inside because this is what the suitors are courting through their self-interest. Burns speaks for Walsh when he says that what lie outside are stories lived out by people who "move about from one story to the next, from a moment's conversation to a whole life's dialogue, maybe" (49). But where instinctual living brings freedom, the intrusion of the intellect brings rules and regulations. "Rules are placed on stories, talk is a veil for lies" and yet "it shouldn't be like that" (50). Burns goes on in this vein, addressing Penelope simply and naturally and not asking for anything. Unlike the others, Burns does not speak of himself but of "us," which can include the audience. He speaks of his love for the dead Murray and the hope that this discovery can lead to a new start, affirming, "I can't let love die" (50). Penelope turns and looks down at Burns, Fitz (an elderly, ineffectual writer), and Dunne, "as tears fill her eyes" (51). Only Burns sees those tears, which he acknowledges with his final line: "Love is saved," even though the barbecue goes up in flames

and all three remaining suitors are “ready for the end.” They become the necessary purifying sacrifice, while Penelope “*turns and looks offstage and into her new future*” (51). The death-bearing Odysseus does not need to make an entrance.

If *Penelope* is Walsh’s most overtly ethical play, *Misterman* is his most empathetic. That is not quite how Walsh himself, who played the title (and only) role in its 2001 premiere in Cork, sees it. “As a reaction to the urban cool of *Disco Pigs* I found myself writing a nasty rural thriller called *misterman* [sic]. That play went on to influence other plays. It’s very thin on the page but the life and lies of the central character Thomas felt very large and dark on stage” (“Foreword,” *Plays One* viii). The revised version, directed by Walsh with Cillian Murphy in the lead, was premiered by Landmark Productions at the Galway Arts Festival in July 2011, transferred to St. Ann’s Warehouse, New York, later that year, was staged at the National Theatre, London in April 2012, and had its Dublin debut that same year. In *Misterman*, as in *Penelope*, there is a romanticized, unobtainable woman; in *Penelope* she is enabling, though mute, but in *Misterman* she is destructive, though offstage and aged only fourteen (perhaps no older than Nabokov’s *Lolita*). Whereas in *The New Electric Ballroom* Walsh emphasized the world of women as victimized in their youth by men, now he is intent on the vulnerable male at serious odds with his community. The new play dramatizes a disturbed consciousness, a kind of Dostoevskian idiot (Walsh had already written an adaptation of part of *The Brothers Karamazov* under the title *Delirium* in 2008), overwhelmed by the death of his father and suffering from religious mania in his guise as messiah (Thomas is thirty-three years old, Jesus’s age when crucified).

There is a bouncy comic quality to this play, in line with Walsh’s usual deployment of comedy and farce within a tragic framework. The form may be seen as loosely based on the *Misterman* series of children’s stories by Roger Hargreaves. These are uniformly produced stories in bright colors under such titles as *Mr Mean*, *Mr Nosey*, *Mr Uppity*, *Mr Silly*, *Mr Tickle*, and so on. (Gender balance prescribes a companion series for *Miss Nice* and other guessable titles.) The little books depict one-dimensional figures (Ben Jonson would have called them “Humours”), who sally forth into the community, behaving oddly, upsetting people, or simply playing the fool. Jonson called his first comedy *Every Man in His Humour* (1598), suggesting that we all have some prevailing proclivity or passion, in a world where balance is required. In Walsh’s play, although he becomes angry if people do not give him his full name, Thomas Magill is variously called Mr Holy Man (*Misterman* 17), Mr

Weatherman (19), and Misterman (19); his mother calls him Mister Traveller (14) since he is out and about town a lot with his notebook and tape recorder, setting down the sins (or modern humours?) of the townspeople: “Dwain Flynn. Profanity” (18), “Charlie McAnerney. Immodesty” (21), and “Mrs Cleary. Indecent” (32). He is also called, less politely, a “mad fuckin’ eejit” (35). The world as Thomas experiences it is hell on earth, where “Evil is our God” (11). But when he sees his dream girl, Edel, for the first time, he believes she is an actual angel sent to help him: “I can see the happy destiny of Inishfree being painted by me and the Angel” (38). Walsh probably wants us to understand the place-name as an echo both of Yeats’s ideal retreat and a nod toward John Ford’s vision of pastoral Ireland in *The Quiet Man* (1952). But to Thomas, Inishfree is a degradation of that ideal, a dystopia, “all bad and diseased” (29). Thomas, too, is a quiet man in whom violence is a pathological time-bomb waiting to go off. Edel plays on his simplicity, not unlike the situation in another Irish portrait of teenage cruelty, Gina Moxley’s *Danty-Dan* (1995), about which Mária Kurdi has usefully written (48-52). Walsh was familiar with that play, since he wrote *Disco Pigs* especially for Eileen Walsh, who had appeared in its premiere (*Plays One* viii).

The structure of *Misterman* works to undermine sympathy for Thomas but it cannot kill empathy, without which Walsh’s work would be mere comic-strip mockery. The play comes full circle. We see Thomas at the outset inhabiting a large space within which he has constructed a series of small areas representing locations in his world of Inishfree. “*The space immediately feels [un]inhabitable and dangerous with electrical cables everywhere. And yet . . . [i]t suggests that someone is trying to live and has lived here for some time*” (7). We find that Thomas is actually reliving his bad experience of falling for Edel, whom he brutally kills in disillusion: a reprise of his brutal killing of the dog (Roger—possibly Walsh’s sly reference to the author of the Misterman series). Thomas has dozens of tape recordings of conversations made of the townspeople, with which he interacts throughout in what remains a one-man play. (This “eejit” has a vast number of sound cues to work with, calling for split-second timing from the actor.) In the end, “*How small he looks in this huge space*” (52), wearing his dead father’s lounge suit which is too big for him. It is the kind of diminishment we find in Macbeth, who is described in act 5 as feeling his title as king “[h]ang loose about him, like a giant’s robe / Upon a dwarfish thief” (5.2.21-22). But sympathy cannot be withheld in either case. Thomas is a sad, deluded figure, teased and cruelly treated by those he lives among. The crucial twist in the story is that it is only to meet a dare from her friends that Edel goes along with Thomas’s mad idea that she is an angel sent to help him. His

discovery of this betrayal sends him berserk, and he batters her to death with his tape recorder, while simultaneously recording the awful moment. That sudden violence was inevitable, as at the end of *The Walworth Farce*. Like Sean in that play, Thomas “*tries so hard to lose himself back in the pretend*” (*Misterman* 53), but Thomas has no resources left. The play ends bleakly with his defeat.

In contrast, *Ballyturk*, which is closely related, ends in transcendence. This is a play for three actors, played in the premiere (Landmark Productions and the Galway Arts in July 2014) by Cillian Murphy, Mikel Murfi, and Stephen Rea. For perhaps three quarters of its length the text is a comic romp conducted in classic duo fashion by 1 (Murphy) and 2 (Murfi), a kind of latter-day Vladimir and Estragon masquerading as the Two Stooges. (One would not dare include Stephen Rea in that category here, just to make up the total of the famous film trio of clowns beloved by Walsh.) As with *Misterman*, these two inhabit a large space cut off from the outside world, which they create, not through tape recordings but by imitations and parodies. Some voices (off), played by other actors, simply obtrude. The inside-outside dialectic is very much at the heart of the play, as the small town of Ballyturk, with echoes of Friel’s Ballybeg, is brought to vivid life and mediated by the actors. As always in Walsh’s dramaturgy, a room on stage is again used, as Raymond Williams famously said Ibsen introduced in 1877, “in order to show men trapped in them” (387). The opening stage direction begins: “*A very large room—too large. Essentially it appears to be a one-roomed dwelling*” (*Ballyturk* 5). The two men seem quite happy in their confinement: as expert players they enjoy conjuring up and mocking the local inhabitants. They wear their alienation lightly and use the occasion of their confinement to demonstrate, in a style *Passion Machine* would have been proud to own, their energy, timing, and jouissance. But the play is abstract, surreal, and postmodern. The two side-walls are “*covered with stacked furniture and drawings . . . like a child’s drawings of people’s faces and animals and buildings and maps and countryside*” (5). The large back-wall, covered by a curtain which, when drawn by a rope, reveals, “*Written in red-neon Celtic calligraphy, the word ‘BALLYTURK’ [which] noisily flickers on.*” Underneath this “*are dozens of small drawn faces*” (18) of the denizens that the two men impersonate all through the play. The space, then, is the physical representation of the inner lives of these two men who spend their time—like artists—imagining and re-creating the world outside. Popular music and sound effects, as always in Walsh’s work, form a crucial part of this representation. Once again, he directed the premiere of the play himself, thus ensuring the style he was after, a modernized and fragmented kind of *commedia dell’arte*.

Where *Misterman* is basically psychological in its concerns, *Ballyturk* is metaphysical. The mind-body struggle, so basic to Beckett's work, is here replayed in a more upbeat style, to rock music. The major theme of the play, after all, is death. It would be more accurate to say "mortality," the sense of youth having passed and the end reaching consciousness. In the play this is articulated as the "terrible foreboding," which character 1 feels as a result of a peculiar dream (11). Aged in his mid-thirties, 1 may be thought too young to have such forebodings, but his partner, 2, who is ten years older, also acknowledges it when he has a similar dream. It is Walsh himself who is dramatizing this foreboding, which the mad antics of 1 and 2 attempt to keep at bay. The question, as ever, is what is to be done in the face of the inevitability of death. For Yeats it was a matter of adopting a heroic stance amounting to indifference, as when he imagines the attitude of Lady Gregory's son, shot down in World War One: "I know that I shall meet my fate / Somewhere among the clouds above" (152), as an expression of Renaissance *sprezzatura*. Postmodern man (or woman) cannot be expected to summon such control. For the most part, 1 and 2 ignore horror by fixing their attention on the absurdity of the common person making conformity a god. In that context the denizens of Ballyturk are fair game for mockery. Accepting the instability of the self, they despise those who have no such consciousness. Their sense of superiority, of victory over mundanity and even over nature (also perceived as hostile), is insufficient when death comes to claim one of them. Colm Tóibín refers to Walsh's antics on stage as part of a "dark festival" (n. pag.). It is certainly so when, with a huge gear-change almost two-thirds into the text, as "*The two men stand frozen*" (35), the back wall tears away from the side walls to reveal the outside world, with a man, called 3, visible on a hill. Such a scene is unthinkable in a Beckett play. In *Ballyturk*, the man enters, neither a Pozzo nor a Godot but more a Button-Moulder from a modernized *Peer Gynt*, a collector of souls. He brings a drop to the temperature on stage. Walsh takes a big risk in moving the action here onto a new, apocalyptic plane. Yet the ordinariness of Character 3, his calm, apologetic manner, and his fondness for tea, biscuits and a cigarette, redefines the new scene as normal. To the surprise of 1 and 2, he enters into dialogue with the neighbors behind the side-wall, who have never answered back to 1 and 2, on the mind-body problem. When they concede that the head makes life miserable the dialogue continues:

3. Why not die?

VOICE 1. Sure isn't that what we're busy doin' here!?

VOICE 3. Life gets in the way—people say that.
3. Aye, people do say that. (41)

This is mere prologue to 3's dealings with 1 and 2. Moving into monologue mode, 3 remarks, "I wonder do they know how brief their life will be" (42). When he confronts 2 with the question "Did ya know I would come back?" he receives the lame response that 2 did know "once," and comments, "Everyone does" (43). He has turned *Ballyturk* into a morality play like *Everyman*.

Character 3 now turns his attention to 1. All through the play 1 is the more thoughtful and philosophical of the two main characters, the head rather than the body. His are the drawings of people and places adorning the walls. When Character 3 asks, "What do you see when you speak about Ballyturk—do you imagine people's faces and homes—can you see them?" Character 1 explains that he sees 2 "as them" and sees the wall drawings as the locations, but "sometimes I see nothing but the word." This is because, says 3, "none of it's real." When 1 quips, "Only inside our heads it is," he is explaining the whole *raison d'être* of the play. But 3 quips back: "And that's enough for you?" (44). Clearly the comic mask is now well and truly off, as 3 asserts: "Everything you've imagined—it is. All life. It's out there. Everything" (44). Idealism wins over realism. Such is Walsh's own creed. The outside must be accommodated to the inside and not vice versa. One must become aware, 3 continues, that one is not alone, that one wakes daily to a shared, universal purpose, that is, "to keep on living" (45). This speech is fundamentally an apologia for the creative life. Dramatically, however, it is dangerous, coming from a *deus ex machina*.

Before he exits again, through the back wall, to wait outside, 3 gives the two men a choice: one or the other of them must agree to follow him and so opt for death: "it's time for you and what you've made," because "In leaving you're giving shape to life—some design and purpose for being what you are—for this is the order that all life demands—(*Slight pause.*) it needs a death" (46). After his exit and the noisy return of the back wall, the duo return in some relief to their high jinks before facing the fatal question which of them is to leave. Character 2 tries to insist it will be he, but 1 queries, "How can I stay here knowing what there is? How can I talk about Ballyturk knowing that it's only ever inside this breaking body and nowhere else? There's no freedom to it—it's filling rooms with words, not real life . . . so how?" (55, ellipsis in original). But then altruism takes over and he thinks he will stay for 2's sake, because "you're more than myself—whatever that might

be” (55). From this monologue it is clear he (and perhaps Walsh) believes that death brings reality and freedom, where “your spirit, past and present, wraps with the spirit of billions of others, and it’s this that invisibly holds up this planet of ours in space” (56). And this will bring happiness to the individual. But as the wall opens up automatically once more, 2 insists that it is 1 who should leave, and he does exit “*into life*” (57). Left alone, 2 does not know what to do. “*He slowly turns around and looks at his cell*” (57), the first time the word is used in the play. Then comes the transcendent moment. A little girl, aged seven, enters totally unexpected from the side wall, “*Lost and frightened*” but quickly sensing there is no danger. She will be his charge and his companion, perhaps even his salvation, though the word is not in Walsh’s lexicon. The decision taken by 1 bears fruit for the future of 2.

Coda: *The Last Hotel* and new beginnings

The serious note sounded at the end of *Ballyturk* resonates louder in *The Last Hotel*, an opera by Donnacha Dennehy, libretto by Enda Walsh, which premiered at the Edinburgh International Festival (Royal Lyceum Theatre), 8 August 2015, and toured to London and New York before opening in the Dublin Theatre Festival on 24 September. A Landmark Production in collaboration with Wide Open Opera, *The Last Hotel* was directed by Walsh, who had already worked with Dennehy in writing *Misterman*. The theme is assisted suicide. The three main characters are opera singers, but Mikel Murfi as the Porter provides another point of continuity with Walsh’s stage plays. The Porter opens and closes the opera as mute servant in a hotel deserted except for the suicide and her two assistants, who travel over from England to Ireland for the purpose. Porter is remote from the tragedy, a clown who is physically beaten (as fools traditionally are) in the course of the opera. However, he is seen, like Burns at the opening of *Penelope*, cleaning the blood off the floor of the hotel room, where another suicide has apparently taken place; he is seen again at the end mopping up the blood after Woman has gone through with her suicide. Who can think of a Porter in a dark play without thinking of *Macbeth* and evil?

Yet, in *The Last Hotel*, the clown, though silent, is made part of the action, witness to a gruelling dramatic theme, bravely undertaken by all involved in the representation. We do not see the suicide, but we are treated to a “rehearsal,” which is perhaps even more disturbing. It makes “assistants” of the audience in a post-Brechtian fashion. The part of *The Last Hotel*, however, which links up with *Ballyturk*, comes after Woman has died and nevertheless is seen and heard again expressing her after-death feelings. She

can communicate with Wife, one of the two who assisted her suicide, and it appears Woman's death has had a positive effect on Wife and her relationship to Husband. The inference is that death by suicide can be a positive thing, a difficult concept with which the audience is left to cope. Because Woman is young and beautiful (a role played by Claudia Boyle, a winner of the Maria Callas award), who leaves teenage children behind, we feel horror at her carrying through her suicide. Yet the continuing suffering of Woman after death is somehow balanced by the Wife's improved marriage and Husband's improved career.

For the London production of *The Last Hotel* at the Royal Opera House, *in lieu* of a program note Walsh asked that the poem "Elm" by Sylvia Plath be included in full. To him, this is the best poem about depression.¹ According to Anne Stevenson, Plath's 1962 poem began as "The Elm Speaks," wherein a real wych elm in Devon "becomes a frightening mother-double of the poet, who offers death as the only possible substitute" (238). I see this idea carried through in Walsh's use of Wife as *doppelgänger* to Woman, who is deeply affected by Woman's death at the end of the opera. In Plath's revised poem "Elm" appear these lines: "I am terrified by this dark thing / That sleeps in me; / All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity" (193). This kind of terror drove Woman to give up her own life, just as Plath gave up hers. And yet, in contrast, the moment of Plath's death benefited nobody. Walsh lets the question hang which the spectator must ask, can an evil action do good?

The Last Hotel is a stark and beautiful piece of work. It is the most challenging drama Walsh has yet attempted, though it must be borne in mind that it is a collaborative work. In comparison, the musical *Once* (2011), another Landmark Production, for which he wrote the libretto (a fleshing out of the 2007 film by John Carney) and which has had extraordinary success on Broadway and in the West End, seems a pleasant, feel-good crowd-pleaser. And yet, even here, with this commercial venture, Walsh refuses to provide the accustomed happy ending. "*Once* shares the unsettling aftertaste of the majority of Enda Walsh's repertoire" (Caulfield, "For *Once*" 165). It is worth noting that in Walsh's libretto Guy is suicidal when Girl first meets him; she, in effect, brings him back into life's flow again, into creativity as a person and as an artist: to Walsh these cannot be distinguished. In a program note for the Dublin premiere at the Olympia Theatre (4 July-22 August 2015), he emphasizes that "Where in the movie [Girl] was almost ephemeral—for me she became the story's initial engine" and "the instigator of all things" (n. pag.) in life itself, for which music-making is in *Once* but a metaphor. Here,

perhaps, Walsh articulates his own riposte to the bleak statement of *The Last Hotel*.

Whether *Lazarus*, the musical drama by David Bowie and Enda Walsh, which opened at New York Theatre Workshop on 18 November 2015, can be related to *The Last Hotel* and Walsh's body of drama, cannot yet be said. Its theme of wished-for death linked to a beneficial result for others, however, would suggest a direct connection, as does *Arlington: A Love Story* (Landmark Productions and Galway Arts Festival, July 2016). The latter reasserts the notion that suicide can be a gateway to happiness in some afterlife, a romantic theme Walsh takes over from *Romeo and Juliet*, and other such tragedies and operas such as *Tristan and Isolde*, but sets in a dystopian, futuristic, and totalitarian world. His work is thus at an interesting crossroads. Walsh has outworn absurdist farce and is at present impressively seeking a contemporary form for absurdist tragedy.

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Notes

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