Lapsed, Augmented, and Eternal Christmases in the Theatre of Conor McPherson

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Introduction

Most commentators agree that many forms of theatre evolved from the ceremonies and rituals that existed across different societies and cultures at various historical moments. How ceremony and ritual might deepen, add significance or give substance to dramaturgical and performance practices remains one of the hallmarks of theatre traditionally and historically. In a world less and less connected to or rooted in such activities; and despite increasing secularization, postmodernist inclinations, and a distrust in metanarratives, myths, and meta-rituals; some contemporary theatre-makers variously integrate socio-political, religious, and cultural festivities, anniversaries, commemorations, celebrations, and various other rites with their dramaturgical practices.

Victor Turner proposes, "Often when ritual perishes as a dominant genre, it dies, a *multipara*, giving birth to ritualized progeny, including the many performative arts" (79). Turner also distinguishes between liminal and liminoid, the former associates ritual with tribal, early agrarian, and pre-industrial society, the latter with the onset of large-scale manufacturing, urbanization, leisure/work distinctions, and more recent sociopolitical formations. Drama is thus regarded as a "liminoid genre" (52), and Turner proposes that many plays offer evidence of "[l]iminoid phenomena"—derived from "liminal antecedents," which "tend to be collective, concerned with calendrical, biological, social-structural rhythms or with crises in social processes" (54).

In Irish playwriting in particular, there are various and persistent markings of ceremonies, events, pagan and religious practices, including the markings of births, christenings, birthdays, feast days, weddings, leave takings, homecomings, pilgrimages, infractions of norms, fertility rites, deaths, wakes, funerals, and the commemorations of moments of historic importance. Such incorporations of ceremonial, liturgical, commemorative, and festive occasions are utilized or activated sometimes in order to suggest the importance of traditions, sometimes to give an added significance to particular dramatic moments, and, more importantly, sometimes are undertaken to comment on the cyclicality and continuities rather than discontinuities of time.

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Also on occasion, writers may call attention to how ideology and market forces have appropriated such symbolic or festive events, almost divesting them of their shared or communal significances, and emphasize how modes of interaction are reduced to a base commercialization: how transactions have materialism, competitiveness, and personal advantage at their dominant inclinations rather than having, sharing, and celebrating respect and reciprocity as primary values. In many respects, it could be argued it is a tradition obsessed with a wish to embrace ritual, to mesh palimpsest-like ritual actions into the fabric of the dramaturgy, serving as a metareality or as a paratheatrical presence. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins argue that when the discussions on the staging of rituals or the uses of ritual activity as a backdrop for action in post-colonial contexts are important, then such "ritual takes place in drama, its codes accrete additional signification as part of both the theatrical and ritual spectacle" (61). While there are many instances of Turner's "liminoid phenomena" in the Irish tradition, there remains less of the disconnect that Turner identifies in such practices and some far more substantial accretions than merely the traces or residuals of rituals long past and faded into memory.

Thus in Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), the celebratory pagan Festival of Lughnasa is prominent but also kept to the back hills, while in *Wonderful Tennessee* (1993), mythic landscapes and ritualistically marked homecomings, departures and pilgrimage are important. The tendency towards countering the ritual of pilgrimage and waking practices may be seen in Frank McGuinness's *Carthaginians* (1988), where characters who are grieving the events and deaths of Bloody Sunday, 30 January 1972, in the graveyard that they occupy, enact a parodic, transgressive, carnivalesque play-within-a-play, which affords perverse expression of their collective grief and their entrapment within a funerary sensibility.

Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats. . .* (1998) includes a remarkable wedding breakfast scene, involving multiple characters in bridal attire, which ruptures the sacred ceremony of marriage and incorporates an inversion and perversion of various celebratory and religious traditions, including daily mass and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Towards the end of Paula Meehan's *Mrs Sweeney* (1997), family and friends gather in the Sweeney household, wear bird costumes, and drink in order to celebrate themselves as a community, alongside their defiance of social-economic devastation brought about by deaths, violence, madness, and the absence of employment possibilities. Yet celebration and insubordination do little in the face of the deaths and disasters that are foretold.

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Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire* (1985) and *A Thief of a Christmas* (1985) have as their central foci a laughing competition, which takes place after a winter market fair, close to Christmas; the former includes Mommo's narration of this seminal laughing competition which the latter dramatizes. It is the ritualistic inclination of competition that evokes the defiance and irreverence by laughing at disasters and death: in some ways it is an elemental battle between the sacred and the profane, the high and the low. In each of these examples, since the ceremonial and metatheatrical impulses are incorporated not for the purposes of spectacle, the intertextual references cannot be regarded as pulp or residual rituals.[1] Instead, the needs to incorporate and embrace are matched equally by the need to disrupt and subvert ritual.[2] While there is no ritual essence of sorts, there is the echo and the vibrancy of ritual.

In so many ways Conor McPherson's writings have been heavily informed by this Irish playwriting tradition, without him being inhibited by the influence of those before him or his peers. No contemporary Irish writer has been so obsessed, fearful, trapped by, and even dependent on, the idea or concept of Christmas in its anticipation, occurrence, and passing as McPherson. In the Program note to the 2008 production of *The Seafarer* at the Abbey Theatre, McPherson talks a good deal about fairy stories, natural cycles, the Neolithic monuments at Newgrange, [K]nowth and Dowth, evidence that "Irish stone-age farmers sought to locate our place in the cosmos" (4). He continues: "I think that Christianity (and particularly Catholicism) took root so well in Ireland because we are a superstitious race. Our superstition is embedded in ancient knowledge and rituals which echo dimly through time but always catch our ear" (4). In this essay, I want to isolate McPherson's particular focus on the festivities and rituals associated with Christmas time, and how these "echo dimly" but also ferociously in his work.

Funerary propositions/ritual precedents

In Nina Witoszek and Pat Sheeran's study *Talking to the Dead: A Study of the Irish Funerary Traditions*, a funerary consciousness is traced back to "a funerary *ancien régime*, much older than the Revival" (8). Throughout their book they illustrate the centrality and relentless continuities of funerary codes, dependencies, motives, preoccupations, obsessions, and tenacities in Irish writing. Shaped by "folk representations, popular rituals, the rhetorics of the Irish media," and by a "funerary mythology and experience" which underlies "the Irish construction of place and landscape" (13), this funerary culture is

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not a response to either a death wish or existentialism *per se*, rather it is "an ancestral, cultural characteristic, a powerful *locus communis*" (21).

Witoszek and Sheeran add that "[t]he loss of land and the displacement of the chief was very early on encoded in the metaphor of widowhood and conveyed through elaborate tropes of lamentation. It may well be that the anthropomorphization of the country as a woman in Bardic poetry lies at the basis of the funerary tradition" (38). Central to this funerary positioning is a "vernacular funerary code" which has effectively and pejoratively "reproduced and perpetuated the construction of Ireland as a place of death and fatality," according to Witoszek and Sheeran (41). They also argue that "[t]he 'death mystique' is partly traceable to the Irish version of Catholicism . . . [,] its emphasis on the spiritual rather than the material, its incessant *memento mori* and its exaltation of sacrifice" (39). This funerary perspective is also, they continue, "reinforced by the memory of the Great Famine" and its "accompanying horrors" (38), and "[i]t has also been further solidified by the response to the spiritual death in its various forms (despondency, resignation, passivity), threatening the Irish through the centuries of colonial oppression" (38). Equally, martyrdom and sacrifice are reflective of the responses to such subjugation. They suggest that funerary rites, even when they possess a counter-cultural imperative, are neither "rites of the powerless" under colonial rule, nor folk spectacles that could be interpreted as "spasmodic acts of resistance to church hegemony" (9). This partially explains why mourning trumps honor and revenge in response to colonial domination (12).

Under the terms of their argument, the existence of funerary culture in periods prior to and during colonization combined with imperial violence, the devastation of the Great Famine, and Catholic doctrine ensure its significance. Consequently, "necro-static" forms of expression, including suffering, endurance, loss, asphyxiation, claustrophobia, impotence, dilapidation, disasters, loss, failure, brokenness, decimation are "symptoms of death-in-life"; and very rare are expressions of "growth, regeneration or fulfilment" (4).

The work of Samuel Beckett, Brendan Behan, Brian Friel, Thomas Kilroy, Tom Murphy, and Stewart Parker are variously linked to this funerary disposition by Witoszek and Sheeran, who suggest that "[t]he Irish omphalos is the graveyard, the centre of continuity and the meeting place between the worlds" (78). (Yeats and Synge could easily be added.) Any scan of the tradition can invite conclusions similar to theirs, but they ignore the anti-funerary imperatives in plays like *Carthaginians*, for instance, and they give little merit to parody and irony evident in much of the writing.

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Although Witoszek and Sheeran emphasize Arnold Van Gennep's rites of passage (13), the phases of separation, transition, incorporation (aggregation), and are preoccupied with waking rituals, other forms of ritual than those that mark loss (including those of incorporation, life crises, and seasonal rituals or calendrical rites) need consideration. For Richard Schechner, human ritualization has three sub-categories: social ritual, religious ritual, and aesthetic ritual (229). And for Schechner, ritual is "ordinary behaviour transformed by means of condensation, exaggeration, repetition, and rhythm into specialized sequences of behaviour serving specific functions usually having to do with mating (sexuality), hierarchy, or territoriality" (228). Traditionally, Schechner adds, ritual is identified more with the sacred and less with the secular, but barriers between both are "porous and culture-specific" (228).[3] If Witoszek and Sheeran emphasize the relentless absence of release from a funerary cycle, Schechner stresses how "[i]ndividual and collective anxieties" may be "relieved by rituals whose qualities of repetition, rhythmicity, exaggeration, condensation, and simplification stimulate the brain into releasing endorphins directly into the bloodstream yielding ritual's second benefit, a relief from pain, a surfeit of pleasure" (233). And if a funerary culture is death-obsessed, the broader emphasis on hierarchy, territory, and mating has more to do with the living—presence rather than absence. Rather than extended liminal periods that entail breach, crisis, separation, and grief, these seem to be countered by pleasure, anxiety, release, and joy.

As rituals "contain and mediate" (228), much the same could be said of how Christmases in McPherson similarly contain and mediate the battles around sex, desire, fidelity, duty, gifts, materialism, social hierarchy, and the ownership of souls. Whether it is office or home parties, people traveling from near and far home for Christmas, the symbolic dressings of space, religious songs or popular tunes, traditional extended family dinners, the celebrating and gifting, the excesses, and the burdens of heightened expectations are all central to the Christmas experience. I will focus on McPherson's particular interweavings of pagan, religious, and ritualistic connotations associated with a death-obsessed funerary consciousness and with a Winter Solstice/Christmas sensibility linked to re-birth, renewal, and salvation.

St Nicholas: The gift of a story

McPherson's monologue S*t Nicholas* premiered in 1995 with a theatre critic as narrator obsessed with his own notoriety,[4] keen to express his

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disgruntlement with others, and eager to take most opportunities to manipulate, disparage, undermine, and humiliate colleagues and those who perform on the professional stage. His scathing critical disposition is matched by an equal self-loathing. His familial relationships are predominantly dysfunctional: he despises his wife, has no time for his son, and only his daughter's creative impulses inspire any level of enthusiasm in him. Despite his narcissism, Machiavellianism, and ruthlessness, the critic has the wit and charm to appease his newspaper editor and the producers and commissioners of other media outlets, and he remains admired, even respected, by some in his profession. The narrator can feign empathy to deceive others, but he has little or no real empathy, nor respect for reciprocity. Ruthlessness becomes of huge importance in terms of doing what one has to do in order to determine one's own survival. Yet how such self-determination might operate within familial or other communal spheres, including work places and zones of cultural and leisure exchange, is something that this and other plays return to again and again.[5] This narrator has little or no sense of a life purpose, or anything that instills a sense of joy or pleasure.

Having become infatuated with Helen, an actress playing the lead role in Oscar Wilde's *Salome* at the Abbey Theatre, this critic follows the production to London, where its brief run has been further shortened thanks to the generally negative reviews received in Dublin, poor notices to which this critic has handsomely contributed. While in London the narrator meets a stranger, William, and he agrees to procure prey for a household of vampires who take blood from unaware victims. Those bitten appear to suffer no long-lasting effects and do not become vampires as traditional lore and popular cultural representations would suggest.

Because he procures subjects for the vampires, they endow him with the gift of conviction, charm, and of being at ease—all somewhat contrary to his normal mode of social engagement, unless he is being manipulative or seductive. His new role of party organizer and his aiding and abetting in the exploitation of others appear in some ways an extension of what he does as a theatre critic: in both instances he exploits what seems like mutual self-interest and thrives on the gullibility of others, who do not question his ulterior motives.

On the occasion that the narrator meets the cast in a pub after the Dublin opening night of *Salome*, he tells them that the performance was a life-changing event for him, but what is published could not be further from what he expresses verbally to them. If the victims of the vampires are unsuspecting, the theatre creators that he critiques should always be less naive and

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susceptible to such deceptions. Yet, if the relationship between critic and the theatre is one of mutual dependency, it is also often one of disguised mutual disdain. To run simply with the notion of the critic as vampire would not be apposite. In performance as the text suggests, *St Nicholas*'s critic interacts with the spectator, asking questions, and querying an audience's assumptions and modes of thinking; that way the play is as much about the norms of newspaper/public criticism as it is about self-scrutiny. Clearly, this critic fails to honor the codes of compassion and generosity and the awareness of kindredness associated with St Nicholas. This critic, with his red cheeks and a "stomach [that] is like a brick wall," is Santaesque in stature and appearance, without ever trying to disguise or pass himself off as Santa Claus (140). He remarks that while in London, he longs for something else:

> . . . I found myself trying to miss my family. But something wouldn't let me.
> I could only miss what they were like years ago.
> And that's the way life is, you can't have that, can you?
> You can't light a stranger's face with the mention of Santa.
> You can only do that to certain people for a certain time.
> And then nature makes everyone a cunt because one day you look around and you're all in each other's way. (160)

The significance of "Santa" lies in his fleeting recognition that relationships with a history and intimacy are important connections, yet from a perspective of isolation and disconnection it appears that everyone else is an irritant to him, getting in the way of self-centered expression. From the latter point of view, mutuality disappears along with any sense of communal connection. When the critic attempts to write creatively he notes a contrary feeling: "And so, there I'd be trying to write something. Trying to capture the care I once had, you see. My kids on Christmas Eve. Something like that" (167).

In his writing, he latches onto Christmas as a grounding event, a core moment imbued with an awareness of interconnection and affection. This narrative fragment potentiality challenges some other aspects of his behavior and his reflexive dispositions. This awareness becomes his opportunity to move away ever so slightly from his spontaneous and reflective cynicism, and towards something more heartfelt, where the impulse is to be aware of mutuality, the need for generosity and reciprocation. Also he does benefit from the vampires' gift of a story, prompted towards a way of narrating a version of himself in the world that is somewhat positive in perspective. In a

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way, narrative becomes a gift, even when springing from a dark reality. Effectively it is partially a giving darkness rather than a taking one, an inversion of the usual associations of darkness with destructiveness. The title of the play, the critic's possession of a narrative, the framing of memories of Christmas giving combine to suggest that gifts may spring from the most uncanny of places. Vampires form part of his "rite of passage."

Dublin Carol: Sing as if you mean it

The almost overwhelming negative self-loathing of the critic in *St Nicholas* is also evident in John Plunkett, the main character in *Dublin Carol* (2000).[6] Set in an office of a funeral home, the play's three scenes happen late morning, early afternoon, and early evening on a Christmas Eve: a funerary culture of fatality and the marking of Christmas as a time of giving and renewal meet head on, even more so than in *St Nicholas*. The stage space as specified contains, apart from routine furniture and fittings, "terrible scrawny Christmas decorations. A few fairy lights. A foot-high plastic Christmas tree on one of the desks. A little advent calendar with just a few doors left to open" (79). Such objects suggest an aspirational, tokenistic, and desperate sense of Christmas rolled into one.

John's career in undertaking places him "*around*" death and in religious environments much of the time (84). Both John's employer, Noel, and his ex-wife, Helen, will be in hospital over the Christmas period. A request from his and Helen's daughter, Mary, to accompany her to visit Helen in hospital and to remain sober, results in the latter being a plea he cannot honor. The names of Noel, Mary, and John's ex-girlfriend, Carol, are significant in terms of the festive period. Carol's non-judgmental and "unconditional" giving prove to be ways of relating that grow out of desperation, a desperation which John is happy to exploit. Noel's nephew, Mark, fails to follow through on his intention to end his fifteen-month relationship with Kim because of her devastating response to his proposition.

Like the narrator in *St Nicholas*, John has particular memories of giving and sharing tied in with a particular festive sentiment, an awareness of alternative ways of being or doing: "Jays, it was great. I used to love all that, you know? The bloody lengths I used to go to. I was worse than the kids. Hiding presents all over the place. Leaving out cake and drink for Santy" (89). If the audience thinks that they are getting uncomplicated, unadulterated sentiment, there is yet a further shift when John notes: "I spent an hour one Christmas Eve telling them Santy didn't like Sherry. He likes Macardle's" (89)—his own tipple of choice.

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In the following exchange humor facilitates different sorts of perspective:

> JOHN. Get into bed before Santa comes and checks.
> MARK. And leaves me a bag of soot.
> JOHN. Or slips Kim in your stocking.
> MARK. (*a slightly sad laugh.*) Oh fuck. (126)

Regardless, John urges the young man to get out of the place, "Get out among the living" (127). So his early more negative grooming of Mark changes its orientation, transforming into something somewhat more fruitful and joyous.

When John asks Mark for help in taking the decorations down, abandoning the tradition of waiting until Twelfth Night to do so, he seems to want to bring things to a pre-mature end; he regards the illnesses of Helen and Noel as leaving him with not much to celebrate. After Mark leaves, John gives himself a wash, fixes his tie, and puts on his jacket and overcoat. Then he takes a comb and does his hair in a little mirror. This readying is vital in terms of setting the tone, even if he is not in the state of sobriety that he had promised Mary for his visit to the hospital. His decision to redecorate the space is, however, of huge symbolic significance. By reinstalling the space with the trappings of Christmas, the mangy Christmas tree and the advent calendar, there is a signaling of hope and possibility, if not quite redemption or transformation. Out of a particular bleakness, there is a semblance of new order, a tentative resoluteness to resist old patterns and an attempt to put new ones in place. The gesture of putting back up the decorations is accompanied by the sound of church bells ringing out the time; it is 5 p.m. The bells also coincide with the playing of festive music, a further marker of hope and possibility.

The office in the funeral parlor captures not only the proximity of death, but also John's death-in-life frame of mind. Despite the addiction, the self-destructiveness, the absence of resilience or fortitude, and despite his previously pathetic attempt to make a fresh start with his wife, John's emerging behavior offers some form of contestation of a funerary culture and its destructive hold over a consciousness. If ritual's potential is to sublimate violence, as Schechner *pace* René Girard proposes (234), then it is the ultimate violence of the undue negativity of funerary tradition that is being sublimated.

***Shining City*: Hiding in plain sight**

In *Shining* City, Ian, the therapist and ex-priest, has one encounter

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with his girlfriend and mother of their child, Neasa, a single interchange with Laurence, an occasional male prostitute, and three exchanges with a recently widowed client, John—yet another John.[7] (Of course, John and Ian share the same root name.) The play's action turns on a chance encounter and a lengthy conversation between John and Vivien, a stranger he meets at a Christmas party in Howth. Vivien seems like some fated if unconventional and unexpected (Christmas) gift/present; her class difference, social standing and empathetic demeanor are important to John, as is her capacity to have children, unlike Mari, who is not able to do so, or, to be more precise, that is John's version of things.

After Mari dies in a car accident caused by a stolen car crashing into the taxi she was riding in, John has two encounters with Mari's ghost in their home. The events prompt him to leave the house and to take up residence in a Bed-and-Breakfast and later to seek out a therapist. Ian's life is as chaotic as John's. However, by the play's end Ian claims that he is moving to Limerick to be with Neasa and their baby, Aisling. Having come over to say goodbye to Ian and gift him an antique lamp, John proposes that he has in some ways resolved things for himself realizing that his connection with Vivien was a temporary delusion. Then the unexpected occurs, just after John leaves. The stage directions suggest:

> *In the darkening gloom of the afternoon, we see that MARI's ghost has appeared behind the door. She is looking at IAN, just as JOHN described her; she wears her red coat, which is filthy, her hair is wet. She looks beaten up. She looks terrifying. IAN has his back to her at his desk, going through some old post. But he seems to sense something and turns.* (64-65)

Mari's appearance is accompanied by "the faint sound of an ice-cream van's music," which is the sound John previously associated with her appearance in her home. This is not a friendly ghost but a traumatic, troubled one. Mari's disheveled, terrifying appearance suggests that although Ian does not quite see her, the fact that he has only a small intuitive response is probably all the more chilling in terms of performance reception. Mari's red coat and black hair are from the world of fairy-tale, and red is a color associated with Christmas, and also with sexual desire, in some cultures. If the purchase of the red coat as a gift is decided upon under the intoxication of illicitness, it is also associated with Mari's unexplained presence in the taxi as it is the coat she wore in the accident. Ian's encounter with part-time rent boy Laurence, John's presence in the hotel room with Vivien—where they prove incapable of having sex—John's visit to a

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brothel where he ends up beaten, and Neasa's infidelity all suggest that sex is a rather more dark and destructive force than a liberating and pleasurable one.

The presence of Mari in the room does not suggest that Ian has now somehow inherited the ghost, or even less so that this woman character, rather than being sexually exchanged between men and objectified within a patriarchal economy, is being ethereally swapped instead. While it could be argued that there is transference or displacement going on between analyst and analysand, more important is the notion that they are one and the same character. If space and time are continuous, it is as if the characters are part of some greater unity as well. And in a late exchange with John, Ian affirms that he once would have looked on the presence of ghosts as a confirmation of God.

In *Shining City*, the male characters are challenged by the delusion that the past can be accounted for, accepted, and forgiven. There is nothing John can say or do, such as sell the house, move on from his fixation on Vivien, or go on a date that can erase Mari's subjectivity. Mari trumps his attempts to suppress her. The sensational theatricality of the moment when Mari appears possibly helps the spectator to keep at bay the full implications of the play's dark turn. It is not that a woman can only be a ghost, rather it is Mari's appearance that confirms a presence or omnipresence, not of a God *per se*, but of a force that must be encountered, accommodated, even befriended; the revenant has to be embraced. That is not to say that McPherson is simply neutral on the merits of the darkness. While darkness always is a destructive proposition, there is equally an optimism in the perspective that the darkness can be creative, generous, or benign in many ways. This is neither to argue simply that the concept of a Theatrum Mortis—Witoszek and Sheeran's "the theatre of the dead" (21)—makes way for a theatre of the living, nor that the "cluiche caointeach" of waking games make way for rituals or games of merriment and transformation in McPherson's work.

The Seafarer: Out of line

If Mari in *Shining City* is a ghost that cannot be banished, it is a devil figure who emerges from the past of the characters in *The Seafarer* (2006),[8] a play that draws on the myth of an encounter at the Hellfire Club, where the devil plays a game of cards with a man for his soul.[9] It is a dramatic scenario bothered by the ghosts and devils of Christmases past and a living reality equally haunted by near subsistence living.

The Seafarer is set in the unkempt home of Richard and Sharky Harkin, a home which has over time transformed into a pub, having accumulated numerous "artefacts" from various public houses (3). As *Dublin Carol*, this

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play opens on Christmas Eve morning, "a scrawny artificial Christmas tree . . . haunts a corner" (3). It is this symbolic object that does the initial ghosting.

The recently blind Richard uses the occasion as an opportunity to consume as much alcohol as possible. A long night's drinking has left Richard sleeping overnight on the floor. His still drunk, disorientated friend, Ivan (yet another variation on John), staggers outrageously down the stairs, not helped by the fact that his glasses are missing. As Ivan and Richard are in hangover hell, they are of the conviction that only a renewed bout of drinking will set them right: amongst those who seek out the next drink as quickly as possible, alcohol incites seemingly common purpose and empathetic collegiality. Christmas shopping becomes their excuse to get outside and go drinking, and the food-stuffs associated with Christmas that they intend to purchase are merely supplementary items rather than the indulgent focal point of the festive celebration. As it is Richard's "first Christmas here in the dark" (37), he also wonders how many Christmases he "has left" (30).

For Ivan, "Christmas is great!" (26), yet he only imagines that the presents are sorted for his kids; he is as uncertain about this as he is about almost everything else, but as this is a play that relies on an uncertainty principle, nothing will be straightforward. His best Christmas ever was when he won twelve thousand euro in a game of cards and blew it all in three weeks; "great" because he remembers so little of it other than the excesses and the bodily impact of such excesses. Later in the day Ivan's plan to make it home is scuppered after he spends too long in pubs consuming free Christmas drinks; once he is "spotted" by his wife Karen, she "tears into him" (33). Upset that the kids saw the couple fight, Ivan feels that he is "after ruining Christmas on them all" (33). He may feel some guilt, but that does not result in any corrective or restorative action.

As with Ivan and Richard, alcohol has been a major driver of Sharky—the third male character's life and circumstances. He gets sacked from his job as a chauffeur, after he got too close to Miriam, the wife of his employer: this and his involvement in a street brawl in the lead in to Christmas are two factors that shape his decision to quit drink. Sharky is separated from his wife, Eileen, and is not really interested in connecting with his children, as the spirit and expectation of the occasion might seem to encourage. As Sharky is cranky from being off the drink, Richard calls him a "Christmas wrecker!" (28), and goes on to accuse him of being someone who is "gonna blow the whole Christmas atmosphere" (30). As an ex-seafarer, Sharky's patron saint would, of course, be St Nicholas. Sharky puts a red candle in the window and his symbolic invitation to come inside is taken up

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by Eileen's new partner, Nicky, who brings a stranger, Mr Lockhart, around for drinks and a game of cards, both of them appearing to be glowing "warmly with festive indulgence" (36). Nicky's and Mr Lockhart's arrival coincides with Richard singing a tuneless and inaccurate version of a Christmas song "Let it Snow, let it Snow, let it Snow": He sings: "Oh the weather outside is frightening, it's dark and there's thunder and lightning . . ." (35).[10] The stage directions are particularly pertinent: "He (Richard) suddenly hunches and shudders, holding his shoulder as though someone has walked over his grave . . . . It is completely dark outside by now" (35). Mr Lockhart notes Richard's "fine *holy* glow" (37; emphasis added), and initially toasts "old friends and old times" (39). He is the stranger intent on making Sharky not renege on his old promise to play him another game of cards for his soul, after Lockhart helped Sharky evade a charge of murder twenty-five years previously, they having met in a holding cell in a police station. This shadow figure represents the disappointments, failures, dark deeds, losses, fear, dread, and poor choices that bring an additional brooding quality to Sharky's consciousness. Mr Lockhart is anti-music, anti-sing-song, anti-celebration, and anti-Christmas. He has a (sinister) purpose but he has no joy, much like the narrator in *St Nicholas*. Mr Lockhart's mindset is almost the opposite of that of the revelers, who want to make as much as they can of the festivities, apart from Sharky, who is not quite sure what he wants. That said, Mr Lockhart is a cut-out figure, horrific, omnipotent, and malevolent as well as melodramatic, even comedically pathetic, in his self-aggrandizement.

Nicky (a variation on St Nicholas or Nicky as the devil) had previously encountered Mr Lockhart; his memory is, however, as vague as Ivan's of such a prior encounter. Ivan was previously found not responsible when people died in a hotel fire: his luck was in, and perhaps abetted by Mr Lockhart in evading punishment for his negligence, unintentional or otherwise. After a long night's drinking, Lockhart seems to have won the final hand of cards. In Sharky's acceptance of and resignation towards his fate, there is a sense of him facing down responsibilities and debts, but without his glasses, Ivan mistook four aces for four fours, so he did in fact hold the victorious hand. Temporarily defeated, the devil is to disappear until Good Friday when his return will coincide with the death of Jesus. Mr Lockhart's banishment brought very positive audience responses in the Abbey Theatre productions in 2008 and 2009, triumphantly achieving what Eric Weitz describes as a reversal that prompts a "groundswell of feeling from a genre diametrically opposed to the one previously thought to be in force" (150).

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The Harkin household gains the impetus of living that Christmas day provides. Those remaining in the house will go to church for prayers and some alcohol, courtesy of the monks, and they will celebrate what they have. One of the CDs sent by Miriam as a Christmas gift provides the song, "Sweet Little Mystery" by John Martyn, which ends the play. It is a sound that heightens the optimism and prompts a semblance of joyful renewal, even when renewal is not dutifully earned. To that end, the play is full of the comedy of incompetence, desperation, even chaos, rather than trickery in the face of a fundamental evil. Inadequate patterns of thinking, non-negotiable reflexes, and stupidity rather than insight or consideration drive most behaviors.

Joy Meads in "In the Paths of Exile: Guilt and Isolation in *The Seafarer*" argues that the Newgrange burial mounds had a decisive effect on McPherson's writing the play:

> An eighty foot long passageway leads to the burial chamber at the heart of Newgrange, a five thousand year old tomb on the banks of the Boyne River sixty miles north of Dublin. The tunnel usually lies shrouded in darkness, but on one day each year (at the dawn of the winter solstice) the beams of the rising sun pierce the blackness and flood the tomb with light.
>
> (n. pag.)

That movement into light appears to be the dominant impetus behind this play. McPherson pushes things further while noting: "And an element of nature itself, with its non-negotiable relentless cycle of change, became Satan, the son of the morning" ("The Pagan" 7). As always with McPherson the devil is as much within as without. Mr Lockhart is Sharky's foil and shadow, in the way that John/Ian mimic one another and Mari ghosts them both in *Shining City*. It is neither the denial nor banishment of Mr Lockhart that is important, but the fact that Lockhart's certainty is trumped by the myopic, the incidental, chance, rather than a definitive victory or decisive heroic deed. It is not just the devil as scapegoat or sacrificial offering whose banishment draws no sense of loss from the other characters but indifference. Despite the anti-music and anti-joy sensibility that Mr Lockhart revels in, the devil is redemptive in a particular way, as he forces Sharky back into the light of a new dark. Only Sharky knows the nature of the victory on Christmas morning, over the devil, over himself, even over a funerary disposition.

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***The Night Alive*: Worth the wait**

In many an interview given prior to the premier of *The Night Alive* at the Donmar Warehouse, London, McPherson went out of his way to describe the work as being inspired by the Celtic Tiger period and its aftermath but also a nativity play of sorts[11] (See Jordan, "Black Hole"). The play's epigraph is from St Mathew's gospel, which gives an account of the birth of Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem, under the most humble of circumstances. For Christianity, the birth of Jesus announced a new beginning for humankind, as the Christ is sent by God in order to redeem the world. The four Gospels of *The Bible* provide no coherent narrative of this birth, and many commentators have reflected on the many similarities between this account and other foundational narratives of various faiths and belief systems. Furthermore, many critics connect this central Christian narrative's marking of a savior's birth with pagan practices of worship and celebration of the Winter Solstice as well as the recognition of the shortest day and longest night and the signaling of an imminent new year.

The Night Alive does not have a Christmas setting *per se*, and one of the play's few specific time-frame indicators has one of the final scenes on 10 November, during which Doc untangles Christmas lights. McPherson's various manifestations of a Christmas sensibility in this play do not constitute a re-enactment of a Christian narrative of the birth of a savior, and there is no simple calling on an "original narrative," which McPherson knows all too well to be a fool's errand. Still less, there are no pregnant travelers, innkeepers, stables, shepherds, or magi arriving bearing gifts and announcing a new world order. Aimee's child has been taken from her and is in foster care. So while there is no simple essence of Christmas, there remains something considerable in terms of sanctuary and the obligations towards the protection of the incapacitated, the lost, and the helpless. Tommy, a character with a van and a storage space, takes Aimee into the accommodation that he rents from his uncle, Maurice, after she is assaulted by her pimp/boyfriend, Kenneth. That concept of sanctuary is dwelt upon in particular by Tommy's work companion, Doc, who, often homeless, stays with Tommy in the flat or sleeps in Tommy's work van.

At a late point in the play after Kenneth has been killed by Aimee and she has refused to flee to Finland with Tommy, she is now seemingly back living on the streets. Despite the serious assault he suffered at the hands of Kenneth, Doc remains optimistic. His resoluteness has something to do with his intellectual disability but more to do with the way that his mind processes information. Doc discusses the implications of having a candle in the window

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during the Christmas period and why requests for assistance should always be honored and nobody turned away. Such a possibility is challenged by Tommy, who suggests that not everyone can be accommodated, rescued, or supported, that there are limits to what any individual can do: "you can't save everybody though, can you? I mean . . ." (89).

Tommy is both a giver and a taker, kind towards and exploitative of Doc; he also takes advantage of Aimee, when he starts paying her for sexual services in the form of hand-jobs. His actions complicate any sense of pure, unconditional generosity, and in some ways one is back with Carol's behavior towards John in *Dublin Carol*, her controlling, misplaced unconditionality.

Central to the way time and space alter, however, are Doc's various premonitions and his theory of black holes, related to him in a dream by one of the three wise men. Rather than gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, Doc's gift from the Magi is an awareness of time, a sense of timelessness, of an eternal present. Just as Ian in *Shining City* wonders if the presence of ghosts would be an affirmation of God, here Doc suggests that if timelessness is the cosmic order, why is there not a space for a notion of God-like presence?

It is from this consciousness that the final exchange of the play emerges. (The Christmas lights that Doc had earlier untangled and repaired are lit on stage in the recent production directed by McPherson for the Dublin Theatre Festival of 2015.) Aimee is refreshed and blooming, and Tommy is well dressed, motivated, purposeful, happy to accept an invitation to his daughter's birthday. Tommy and Aimee overlap in a space where they both are thriving. It is a rupture of consciousness of sorts, where optimism and connection are essential. By subtracting time, it is a moment that combines death and resurrection. (The final moments of the play are accompanied by the playing of Father John Misty's "Funtimes in Babylon.") Yet it is an ending that troubled some commentators, who were locked into understanding the piece based on some of the naturalist conventions of causation and continuity within which the work initially appears to be operating, without paying enough attention to how McPherson moves more and more away from notions of discrete scenes and towards a sense of no-time or continuous time.

For Witoszek and Sheeran "[t]he Transcendent, then, implies timelessness as opposed to time, the limitless to the bound, unity to multiplicity, knowledge through identification as opposed to subject-object knowledge, the absolute to the relative" (108). A funerary cosmology rehearses, and is derived from, various stories of Transcendence/transcendence (109). They argue that transcendence with a small "t" is linked more to "the aspiration to evade contingent reality by means of resorting to a variety of autonomous realms—of

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the word, of fantasy, of obsession, of dogma—each of them an ersatz of the Absolute" (109). This form of "transcendence" works to make "defeat triumphant and ignominy endurable" in contrast to the sublime and the ineffable (109). Lower-case transcendence is linked to powerlessness, evasiveness, an ability to turn most circumstances into narratives of victimization and not enablement, and, above all else, to saying but not doing, to "suspended action," flight, or withdrawal (109-34).

For them, "when it was once shameful to have a body, now it is shameful to have a soul" (107). Additionally, Turner distinguishes between ceremony and ritual: "Ceremony *indicates*, ritual *transforms*" (80), and the prescribed patterns and behaviors of ritual make reference to what he calls "invisible beings or powers regarded as the first and final causes of all effects"—an orientation "to preternatural and invisible beings and powers singularly apposite" (79). He continues: "the liminal phase is the essential *anti-secular* component in ritual *per se* (80). So once ritual is drawn upon, it is difficult to evade the notion of cosmic, spiritual substance. Indeed, one of the appeals of McPherson's work seems to be that it is acceptable to have a soul, and in the words of Witoszek and Sheeran, "a trans-religious aspiration" (109). And across the work McPherson's linkage of black holes to God, ghosts to God, animals and insects as proof of some celestial design or victories over the devil appear to have spiritual implications, without a doctrinaire approach.

If funerary cultures focus on rites of separation, Christmas cultures emphasize more rites of integration, incorporation, and co-optation (Van Gennep's terms). Ideas and sensibilities of communitas also come to the fore. Turner identifies ideological, normative, and spontaneous forms of communitas (47). The notion of "spontaneous communitas" seems to be similar in orientation to what McPherson appears to be after, and this notion of "spontaneous communitas" occurs, in Turner's words, when compatible people share a "flash of lucid mutual understanding," an "intersubjective illumination" (48). At this moment, a "high value is placed on personal honesty, openness and lack of pretensions or pretentiousness" (48). Synchronization, sympathy, little withholding, a "'gut' understanding," flow, and gracefulness are further indicators of this state of consciousness (48). *The Seafarer* and *The Night Alive* mark moments of "spontaneous communitas," as an earlier play like *The Weir* (1997) dramatizes an evolving communitas, something that emerges through conflict, tensions, banter, encountering difference, reciprocation, and the sharing of narratives.

Schechner argues that "[r]itual has been variously defined—as concept, praxis, process, ideology, yearning, experience, function—that it

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means very little because it means so much" (228). And Christmas can be defined as a "concept, praxis, process, ideology, yearning, experience, function," which means so much and also very little. Just as rituals proffer "symbolic systems of meaning," "performative actions or processes," "experiences," "as part of the evolutionary development of animals" and "structures with formal qualities and definable relationships" (228), Christmas also operates within complex systems of meaning, where high degrees of symbolism are infused with "performative actions." Additionally, for the spectator, the memory and reflexive triggers of such festive occasions can potentially activate connections, associations, and desires for something different, without being seen necessarily as some form of longing for communal connection. Thus audience identifications, participations, ritualizations, and projections are vitally important to such performances. Each audience member will have very different perspectives on Christmas, for some it is not an enjoyable time, for others it is one of reflection and remembrance and an occasion to take stock, for still others it is a cue to become detached from the craziness of Christmas, for others it is a time to steady the ship, and for others it is a period to be enjoyed and appreciate what one has. Indeed, audiences and their "receptive and participative" actions provide the unconscious feeling-frame for such work.

Conclusion

McPherson infuses his plays with particular fragments, relics, artefacts, patterns, and dispositions associated with Christmas, from advent calendars to decrepit Christmas trees, from seasonal lights and decorations to lights in the windows of homes inviting inside those passing by, from wanted and unwanted Christmas gifts to misquoting Christmas tunes, from Christmas parties to unpaid Christmas bonuses, from the gathering and non-gathering of family and friends to the fallout from illicit relationships nurtured over the Christmas occasion, from the re-enactment of ritual antagonisms between couples and family members attempting to end relationships during the festive occasion, and from visits from the Magi to the mention of Santa Claus. In the various manifestations of Christmas across the plays there are the excesses of drinking but not of eating and little of the commercialization that riles many. In a postmodern world, it is easy to regard contemporary drawings on traditions as being forms of redundancy, hokum, inefficacy, resulting in pulp rituals of sorts. But in these plays, even if they are seen as predominantly residual by-products of a bygone era, they are neither hazardous nor toxic rituals, but something recycled, re-imagined, immensely valuable in a world obsessed with material worth.

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More importantly, there is the sense of witnessing the challenges of renewal that the Christmas period offers and a particular tapping into traditional customs, rituals, and older seasonal rhythms aligned with the natural world and its relentless cycles. The affiliations with Christmas do bring to consciousness the arrival of a newborn child/savior and the Christian triumphalism associated with a savior's birth. In these plays, there is in many ways a certain insistence on the "Transcendent" that Witoszek and Sheeran crave as well as an "anti-secular" impulse, which a post-modern dramaturgy cannot facilitate. The various positive traces, gestures of goodwill, and reciprocation that inform the various vectorizations of Christmas in McPherson's work suggest epiphanic, alchemic, and euphoric energies, sensibilities, and feelings that are almost, in Jill Dolan's words, an "utopian performative" (8).

As responses to a funerary-obsessed tradition of Irish writing, these plays by McPherson are less about duplicating markers of bereavement and sacrifice long associated with this tradition than partially about counterbalancing such dramaturgically. These plays are not simply an attempt to dilute a funerary disposition, nor to replace it with sentiment, optimism, renewal, or life as victory rather than death as triumph sentiment; these works are not a judicious counterbalancing, a resolution of "identical opposites" (Schechner 239) and not an easy synthesis of a funerary disposition and the salvation that Christmas affords. Such incorporations amount to something far more than the "cultural debris of some forgotten liminal ritual," a term Turner uses in relation to festivals like Mardi Gras, charivari, and home entertainments (55). For Schechner, "[i]n the life of the imagination, dreams are the paradigm of liminality, existing in a world totally 'as if'" (261). In McPherson's theatre, events surrounding Christmas become the manifestations of dream spaces, where nothing is predetermined, where chance can trump certainty, where time is anything but linear and causal, where there is neither regulation of nor limits on the possible. In its spontaneity, it is more a life-in-life rather than a death-in-life imperative, and a beginnings- and continuous present-oriented dramaturgy rather than a past-focused, resurrection-oriented, or end-obsessed one. The ghosts of past cosmic awarenesses evident in what remains at places like Newgrange seem to offer an opportunity, as McPherson suggests, to "intuit that we are part of everything that exists" ("The Pagan" 4). Thus, McPherson's dramas manipulate patterns, cycles, seasonalities, and rituals in order to suggest the possibility of other sorts of counter-life rhythms, alternative consciousnesses, and registers of singular and mutual aliveness.

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Notes

[1] Martin McDonagh's film *In Bruges* (2006) also marks a winter solstice moment, as two Dublin-born, London-living hitmen hide out in the Belgian city of Bruges. Sanctuary is only temporary. Christmas will bring a new life for the pregnant woman owner of the hotel in which they stay, but death to many others.

[2] In the "Introduction" to *Plays 2*, Frank McGuinness acknowledges that "at the hearts' core these plays centre around rituals and the need to disrupt ritual" (ix).

[3] Gilbert and Tompkins challenge Turner's "homogenising" and "evolutionist" arguments and Schechner's disinclination to distinguish between sacred and secular rituals (55).

[4] *St Nicholas* premiered at the Bush Theatre on 17 February 1997, with McPherson directing Brian Cox in the only role. The play was designed by Paul Russell.

[5] The indirect, but not tangential focus on Christmas here echoes what the single narrator in *Rum and Vodka* (1992) notes, "I was a good family man. I remembered birthdays and I was Santa" (11). Such limited markers of parenthood highlight his delusions of being a visibly present, available, and self-important father. In *The Weir* (1997), Finbar jokingly refers to the fact that the Christmas period is the signal for the local bachelors to do their annual change of bedsheets. In *The Veil* (2011), Mrs Goulding recounts a tale of her sixteen-year-old son falling for a woman who was a fairy, and who had him under her spell. The relationship started on Christmas Eve and ran over the holiday period.

[6] *Dublin Carol* opened at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs on 7 January 2000. Ian Rickson directed the premier, with the design by Rae Smith. Brian Cox played John, Andrew Scott played Mark, and Bronagh Gallagher played Mary. The Gate Theatre production opened on 3 October 2000 with Robin Lefevre directing and it featured John Kavanagh as John, Sean McDonagh as Mark, and Donna Kent as Mary.

[7] The Royal Court/Gate Theatre co-production of *Shining City* opened on 4 June 2004 at the Royal Court's Jerwood Theatre, directed by McPherson and designed by Rae Smith, before it transferred to the Gate Theatre on 23 September for the Dublin Theatre Festival of that year. Michael McElhatton played Ian, Stanley Townsend played John, Kathy Kiera Clarke played Nessa, and Tom Jordan Murphy played Laurence.

[8] *The Seafarer* was first performed at the National Theatre's Cottesloe Theatre, London on 28 September 2006, with McPherson directing, Rae Smith designing, and featuring Karl Johnston as Sharky, Jim Norton as Richard, Rook Cook as Mr Lockhart, Conleth Hill as Ivan, and Michael McIlhatton as Nicky. Jimmy Fay directed the Dublin premier at the Abbey Theatre in 2008, restaged in 2009 when McPherson directed it.

[9] See Christopher's Murray's exceptional analysis of the folkloric aspects, based on the work of Seán Ó Súilleabháin and Eilís Ní Anluain (68).

[10] The actual lyrics are:

> Oh, the weather outside is frightful,
> But the fire is so delightful.
> And since we've got no place to go,
> Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!

The song was written by lyricist Sammy Cahn and Broadway songwriter Jule Styne in 1945. It was first recorded by Vaughn Monroe and has since become a standard, with Patsy Cline,

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Martina McBride, Garth Brooks, Herb Alpert, Chris Isaak, the Carpenters, Carly Simon, and Jessica Simpson just some of the artists to record it. Dean Martin's version is one of the best known, and it fit his image as a swinging member of the Rat Pack without a care in the world. The most popular version on American radio (according to ASCAP), is by Harry Connick Jr. (Web, 26 Oct. 2015).

[11] *The Night Alive* opened at the Donmar Theatre, London on 19 June 2013. It was directed by McPherson and designed by Soutra Gilmour. The play starred Ciaran Hinds as Tommy, Caolfhionn Dunne as Aimee, Michael McIlhatton as Doc, Brian Gleeson as Kenneth, and Jim Norton as Maurice.

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