Performing on the Razor's Edge: The Aesthetics of the Theatre of Martin McDonagh

Péter P. Müller

HJEAS

> "Violence is the purely aesthetic thing, it has nothing political, there is no morality involved, it is purely aesthetic"
>
> (Quentin Tarantino, "Talks about *Reservoir Dogs*").

> "The whole idea of theatrical realism becomes itself the biggest double-take of all . . ." (Fintan O'Toole, "Shadows over Ireland").

Theatre and violence

Since the emergence of naturalism in the theatre in the last decades of the nineteenth century the reality of an action on the stage has been put into a new context, different from the previous, dominant tradition of performance characterized by artificial, schematic solutions in gestures and speaking. In this new aesthetics of naturalism, representation seemed to be replaced by direct presentation: performance pretending as if real events were taking place in an artificial, stylized context, that is, within the framework of the theatre. Dialogues became similar to ordinary speech, acting became similar to everyday behavior, stage sets became similar to real locales, stage properties became real—for instance, water coming from the tap, fire burning in the stove. This type of theatre, which can be represented by the stage realism of Stanislavsky and the stage naturalism of Otto Brahm and André Antoine, is opposed to the other major paradigm which can be described as the kind of performance undertaking or stressing its own theatricality. While the first one sells itself as emotional, psychological, and physical reality, the other one—which can be connected not only to Brecht or Meyerhold, but also to the tradition of carnivalesque and fairground entertainment—does not hide its own theatricality but takes it into consideration and uses it to create manifest, immediate effects and direct contact with the audience. Stage realism/naturalism allows—or rather restricts—the members of the audience to be silent spectators, voyeurs, and witnesses, even repressing their own bodily presence, and forces them to pretend not to be present during the production. Only after the curtain goes down or/and the lights are turned on in the auditorium are the audience allowed to express their presence. In this type of theatre there is no direct communication between players and viewers, it is even forbidden for actors to look out on the audience from the fictitious

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world set up and performed on the stage. The theatricality-driven performance, on the other hand, builds upon the presence of the audience, it looks for interaction, and it does not force things to be accepted as real, including violence, death, and so on. Looking at the plays of Martin McDonagh it seems obvious that these works fall within the paradigm of stage naturalism. But this is just an appearance if we study the plays and their aesthetics more thoroughly.

The Achilles heel of the naturalism of McDonagh's plays is the function and extent of violence presented in them. Viewing the problem of violence from a more distant point, however, the approach to the phenomenon of violence performed in the theatre could start with the social, psychological, political, and philosophical context of a given play or oeuvre, as Eamonn Jordan did in his monograph on Martin McDonagh, *From Leenane to L.A.* (2014). In his introduction, Jordan discusses two works on violence in detail, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: A History of Violence and Humanity* by Steven Pinker (2011) and Slavoj Žižek's *Violence* (2009). Both books put violence in a broad historical and philosophical context, focusing on the moral aspects of human cruelty (16-17). In agreement with both Pinker and Žižek, Jordan argues that such an approach to violence, understanding and interpreting it as the content and subject matter of the work, inevitably leads into the dead end of moralizing, the endless debate of whether or not the showing of violence in the media and in the arts would influence people to become violent and to do violence against each other (17).

The tradition of performing violent actions on the stage may serve as another context for interpreting the oeuvre of Martin McDonagh. In ancient Greek theatre murders and torture were only narrated but never performed. The purely verbal representation of cruel actions remained the practice in European theatre up to the Renaissance. Before that, European drama excluded homicide, suicide, and torture from the stage: these actions took place offstage and were only reported, and these reported brutal actions became part of the plot only in their consequences. This way theatre strongly relied upon the imagination of the spectators who reacted to these reports with such emotions as if they had been watching the actions taking place onstage, in front of their eyes. Elizabethan and Jacobean plays broke this tradition by staging murder, amputation, torture, and other brutal scenes. But the performance being self-reflexive, stylized, and theatricality-driven, these actions were performed in a non-naturalistic manner. The significant change in the theatrical representation of violence took place in the nineteenth century, in two different forms and periods. The first one was the Theatre of

Grand Guignol, originating from Lyon at the beginning of the century as a marionette show but becoming popular in Paris cabarets at the end of the century. "This specialized in short plays of violence, murder, rape, ghostly apparitions, and suicide, all intended to chill and delight the spectator" (Hartnoll 420). Recent interpreters relate Grand Guignol to carnival, popular entertainment, and melodrama (Jordan 17-18). It is not by chance that the strengthening of the Grand Guignol coincides with the development of stage naturalism, since violence is one of the shared aesthetic features of the two.

Among closer antecedents in the history of drama and theatre, in post-war British drama violence and stage representation of brutality jumped into focus. The 1960s plays of Edward Bond, especially *Saved* (1965) and *Lear* (1971), are outstanding examples of staging homicide and torture. Later, in the 1990s, a young generation of playwrights, often labeled as brutalists, appeared in Britain: Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane, and Martin McDonagh, among others. These British playwrights—together with other European authors, such as the German Marius von Mayenburg, Dea Loher, and Theresia Walser—have been "regarded as too explicit in terms of both subject-matter and means of expression to be produced by institutional theatres" (Sugiera 16-17).

It is not a surprise that Martin McDonagh is labeled as a brutalist. Domestic violence and social/political violence hallmark most of his plays in which family relationships are primarily those that include violent elements. In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, for instance, the middle-aged Marueen lives together with her mother, Mag, and the two of them play their manipulative and humiliating parent-child games throughout the plot, which culminates in Maureen brutally murdering her mom. In *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, the teenage protagonist Cripple Billy is the target of the stigmatization of the parental, adult world. In *The Pillowman*, police investigators torture the writer Katurian and his brother Michal, who had been abused by their parents in the brothers' childhood, but the only onstage brutality by the detectives occurs against Katurian, while Michal's offstage torture turns out to be just pretend.

As Shaun Richards summarizes the Leenane Trilogy, McDonagh's "plays are also replete with violence: matricide in *The Beauty Queen*; death through drink-driving, attempted murder and the desecration of the bones of the dead in *A Skull in Connemara*; parricide and the suicide of a priest in *The Lonesome West*" (204). Although in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, the political subject matter dominates, domestic violence occurs as well, since the psychopathically violent protagonist, Mad Padraic, terrorizes his own father, Donny, first threatening to kill him and then forcing the old man to dissect

his three murdered military mates. In *A Skull in Connemara*, Mairtin and Mick hammer the remains of human beings, bones and skulls, on a table until they fall into small pieces. Here the violence is against human remains, which are normally extended into spiritual dimensions and separated from the living. But in this play, "a corpse is just a corpse, a skull on a kitchen table is just a skull, with no real fears or anxieties surrounding the presence of remains" (Jordan 85).

It is not necessary to restrict the context and supposed influence on McDonagh's plays to drama and theatre, especially in our age of strong visual culture, which includes film, television, videogames, cartoons, comics, and so forth. In the history of art there are many examples of an artist being influenced by a form or genre other than the one in which his work was composed. (Famously, Samuel Beckett acknowledges Caspar David Friedrich's painting *The Man and Woman Looking at the Moon* as an inspiration for his *Waiting for Godot* [Knowlson 378].) The influence of film on Martin McDonagh's oeuvre is well-known. In film, presenting violence is less complicated than in the theatre as there are filmic genres devoted to violent actions, such as zombie films, thrillers, horror movies, gangster movies, slasher films, and vampire films. But one can also think of several feature films that include violent actions and scenes. After McDonagh's career shifts towards cinema, in his full-length feature films, *In Bruge* and *Seven Psychopaths*, he adapts violent actions and images familiar from the works of such directors as Quentin Tarantino (*Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*), Martin Scorsese (*Taxi Driver*), Charles Laughton (*The Night of the Hunter*), the Coen brothers (*Fargo*), Robert Rodriguez (*Desperado*), Oliver Stone (*Natural Born Killers*), and so on as inspirations for his plays.

In the exaggeration of brutality, in the level of violence, and in the quantity of blood one can see the influence of, or at least a resemblance to, these films in which the level of violence turns them into a parody of their genre. And it would be quite astonishing if one were to criticize a zombie film or a slasher film from a moral point of view. To object that it is not "nice" to exaggerate murder and cruelty to such an extent as each appears in horror movies or in thrillers would seem rather narrow-minded and hypocritical. So why is such an approach undertaken by many critics to the works of Martin McDonagh? Yet after the RSC premiere of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* in Stratford-upon-Avon at The Other Place (TOP), many commented on its content and social and political layers and, playing the morality card, debated whether the extent of violence in the play can be accepted at all. But if we want to leave the moralizing and content-based approach towards violence

behind, we inevitably arrive at the question of the aesthetic relevance and function of presenting violence in works of art.

Violence as an aesthetic issue and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*

Fintan O'Toole, writing about Irish playwrights, introduced McDonagh—together with Conor McPherson—to the American professional public in 1998:

> A new generation of playwrights began to pick up the pieces of the old, shattered, traditional Ireland and hold them up to the light. Unlike the first wave of Irish playwrights in this [twentieth] century, they were not trying to revive this old world as part of a great nationalist project. Unlike the second wave, they were not locked in a struggle to the death with these old traditions. They were interested simply in looking at these peculiar fragments of a dead society. This impulse is most obvious in McDonagh's work. ("Shadows" 18)

Talking about "a dead society" seems to refer to the historical past, but most of McDonagh's Ireland-based plays take place in the present. This is true for *The Lieutenant* as well, which—according to the opening stage instruction—starts in a "*cottage on Inishmore circa 1993*" (3). But if one depicts a contemporary society as "dead," this can either be a social criticism or a parody and satire of existing conditions. Ondřej Pilný puts both parody and satire into the title of one of his essays on McDonagh ("Martin McDonagh"), stressing the farcical register of these plays. But other critics see this parodistic approach within the context of Irish drama, such as Vic Merriman, who draws attention to the fact that McDonagh's "plays are often greeted as parodies of the works of John Millington Synge" (316). Other interpreters also draw parallels between the world of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* and *The Playboy of the Western World*. It is not my intention to follow this track, but it is worth mentioning that the aesthetic view of parody, satire, and farce can be recognized in the antecedents of McDonagh's plays, not just in the oeuvre of Synge, but in the plays of a closer predecessor, Joe Orton as well (Wallace, Jordan). The comic, satirical register of these plays often goes together with the use of violence, with the delicate balance of realistic and unrealistic actions, behaviors, and dialogues.

In his introduction to McDonagh's *Plays 1*, O'Toole stresses that in these plays

> the real and the unreal become increasingly hard to tell apart, the whole idea of theatrical realism becomes itself the biggest double-take of all. The conversations of domestic drama are at once followed and parodied. The domestic details . . . that ought to provide a "realistic" backdrop to the action are instead pushed relentlessly into the foreground by McDonagh's brilliant dialogue. . . . It is easy to be fooled by the apparently traditional, naturalistic form of the plays. On the surface, they seem to hark back to the kitchen sink Irish realism of the 1950s . . . . ("Introduction" xii)

It is not surprising that the evidence of brutality prompts critics to reflect on this layer of the play. What is not so evident is that many of the interpreters take these actions and motives—which are simply restricted to physical brutality—at face value, not recognizing that their exaggeration is an aesthetic vehicle rather than a naturalistic reflection on social reality. Summarising the play, Patrick Burke, for example, writes that

> *The Lieutenant* takes the pattern to unprecedented extremes, presenting us with a world where sons threaten to kill their fathers, who in turn dismember the sons' corpses, where girls deliberately try to shoot their brothers' eyes out, where sons trample on their own mothers, where lovers shoot lovers. The political, even religious icon of this ultra-Jacobean murderous world is the amoral, sensation-driven cat. (160)

Mary Luckhurst raises objections against the play for its not being realistic and authentic from a social, psychological, and historical point of view. "We have no sense of McDonagh's characters," she argues, "interacting as family members or as people who need to earn a living, no sense of their geographical ties or social community. . . . They certainly do not show signs of an intellectual or emotional life, and . . . they appear bankrupt of historical knowledge" (119). But after a long hammering of the play, Luckhurst seems to recognize that McDonagh's "primary concern is with aesthetics" (124). Arguing with Luckhurst about her realistic and reflective approach, Catherine Rees stresses first of all that "[t]he characters in *Lieutenant* cannot be judged within a naturalistic, believable, and realistic context" (138).

There is a dividing line between these two approaches which determines the reception and understanding of McDonagh's *The Lieutenant*. If one looks at the play from the paradigm of naturalistic/realistic theatre and with the view and preconception that art reflects social reality, then the play will, or might, be rejected on the basis of not fulfilling these expectations. But

if the perspective of theatricality is applied, understanding and accepting that art cannot only be seen as reflection but as creation, then those expectations of realism become irrelevant. Critics seeing connections between historical events and parts of the play does not, however, necessarily mean that they take a reflective point of view. Patrick Lonergan, for instance, mentions that "most Irish audiences must have been aware that many of the 'jokes' in *The Lieutenant* refer to actual IRA atrocities" (640). Clare Wallace writes that this play "takes on overtly political subject matter. It does so, however, in a manner that precludes serious consideration of that subject matter" (30-31). And in his monograph on McDonagh, Eamonn Jordan describes in detail those political events, terrorist attacks, paramilitary actions which are referred to in the play (131-32). But none of these authors discommend the extreme elements of the play because of this.

However, these historical sources and references fade or disappear when *The Lieutenant* is performed in different corners of the world, as part of the globalization of theatre (Lonergan 638-40). So it is a reasonable and relevant approach to look at *The Lieutenant* from a point of view that is beyond the comparison of historical and social facts and the events depicted in the play. An approach from an aesthetic point of view will help to reveal the trap, or basic paradox, that McDonagh creates in this play.

Ashley Taggart stresses that "McDonagh's ability to straddle the razor's edge between horror and humour had produced an intriguing meta-theatrical moment" (163). This observation is confirmed by the playwright himself in an interview given before the RSC premiere of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. McDonagh, paradoxically describing himself as an anarchist in an anti-violence way, said: "I have tried to be as vicious or as attacking as the groups on both sides have been over the last 25 years, but have no one get injured for it. To do something creatively that was almost as vicious or as explosive as what they have been doing in a non-creative way" (Interview). Reviewing the premiere, David Nowlan wrote:

> Every caricature is dim-witted to the point of retardation, and violence seems endemic in all souls. It is, of course, a seriously surreal piece of theatre. But its surrealism is such that any kind of suspension of disbelief becomes almost impossible, so that its considerable comedy and its angry gore become almost irrelevant to the actual situation at which he is farcically laughing. (Review)

A closer look at the details of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* reveals how the stage directions and dialogues depict and present violence and how they exaggerate brutality in an excessive manner, leading to comic effects. The opening instruction of the play includes the following descriptions: "*A cottage on Inishmore circa 1993. . . . A couple of armchairs near the back wall and a table centre, on which, as the play begins, lays a dead black cat, its head half missing.*" The idyllic rural still life of the set is subverted by the description of the carrion of the cat. The first utterance is Davey's, which is followed by an instruction:

> DAVEY. Do you think he's dead, Donny?
> *Pause. DONNY picks up the limp dead cat. Bits of its brain plop out.* (3)

The idyll seems to evaporate in the twinkling of an eye. It is quite unprecedented to open a play with a dead animal in focus (although the image of a hanged cat appears in the opening scene of Hungarian playwright György Spiró's *Chicken-Head* [1986]).

A few moments later the two men are arguing over Wee Thomas's death when the stage direction says: "*DONNY goes over to the cat and strokes it sadly, then sits in the armchair stage left, looking at the cat's blood on his hands*" (5). In this sentence we see McDonagh's technique of combining diverse things all of a sudden. The grief and sorrow is replaced by embarrassment, the emotional dimension turns into a physical experience. The play is still within its first five minutes, but blood and brains are already there—at least in the stage directions available for the reader, but it is likely that they appear in the performance as well, either with the use of props (fake brain and fake blood), or with the use of symbolic expressions.

Further horrors come in Scene Two, when the protagonist, Mad Padraic, a splinter, is torturing a drug dealer called James. Padraic has taken off two of James's toenails already, and now he says: "The next item on the agenda is which nipple of yours do you want to say goodbye to" (12). After quarrelling with the victim on whether he deserves being tortured, which hassle is orchestrated by McDonagh to raise tension, the climax is reached in the instruction that "*PADRAIC takes JAMES's right tit in his hand so that the nipple points out, and is just about to slice if off*" (13). This climax can be continued in two directions. Either the threat is executed, or it is alleviated or terminated. McDonagh chooses the latter by making Padraic's cell phone ring, which turns the character's attention away from the ongoing ferocity.

When Padraic arrives home and finds a different cat in the place of Wee Thomas, "*He shoots the sleeping cat, point blank. It explodes in a ball of blood*

and bones. DAVEY begins screaming hysterically. DONNY puts his hands to his head. PADRAIC shoves DAVEY's face into the bloody cat to stop him screaming" (40). We already saw in the opening scene a dead cat with blood and brains, and now there is another cat presented in its bloody remains. The scene of the exploding cat applies ambiguous effects. If it is performed in a realistic/naturalistic way, pretending that the characters and the stage are splashed with internal organs, blood, fur, and so on; then the situation produces disgust and horror which might be mixed with laughter caused by the extent and striking brutality of the action.

In the same scene—Scene Eight—part of the punishment by Padraic is that he "*takes out a bowie knife and starts roughly hacking off all of DAVEY's hair*" (42). This attack, symbolizing castration, plays with the unpredictable behavior of Mad Padraic and the possibility of him using the knife to injure or kill Davey. When Padraic uses the knife for haircut, this creates a suprising contradiction with the expected action of killing or torturing.

When a group of three paramilitaries attack Padraic and they start to fight outside the house, after the shooting the group bursts into the house: "*all three are bleeding profusely from their eyes, at which they clutch and tear, blinded, still screaming, crawling around the floor*" (50). They have been blinded by Mairead, a young girl who is fond of Padraic, and who had practiced shooting by blinding cows. The shooting between the group and Padraic continues onstage, so that Padraic shoots the first two in the head, and the third in the chest.

The last scene—scene 9—opens with the following instructions,

> *DONNY's house, night. As the scene begins the blood-soaked living room is strewn with the body parts of BRENDAN and JOEY, which DONNY and DAVEY, blood-soaked also, hack away at to sizeable chunks . . . . PADRAIC is sitting on CHRISTY's corpse, stroking Wee Thomas' headless, dirt-soiled body. Through CHRISTY's mouth, with the pointed end sticking out of the back of his neck, has been shoved the cross with "Wee Thomas" on it.* (55)

Padraic commands Davey and his father, Donny, to make the three corpses unidentifiable. When they hesitate, Padraic threatens them; therefore, Davey "*kneels back down beside DONNY and starts absent-mindedly hammering the teeth out of one of the heads*" (64). The two men hammering the corpses conclude that their situation is getting worse and worse. This image of hammering skulls is a (self)-reference to McDonagh's *A Skull in Connemara*, where in scene 3 Mairtin and Mick do the same.

Near the end of the play it turns out that the cat which replaced Wee Thomas but was shot by Padraic belonged to the girl. "*MAIREAD appears blank-eyed in the doorway of the bathroom, clutching the body of the bloody and black Sir Roger to her chest*" (64). Here McDonagh gradually builds up an extreme and unexpected solution when Mairead behaves towards Padraic on the surface as his lover, finishing the situation with a kiss, but inside she prepares for a revenge for the killing of her cat: "*She shoots PADRAIC in the head with both guns. PADRAIC falls back on the table behind him, dead*" (65).

As these examples of the plot and extracts of the stage directions show, the play is full of blood and brains, two cats and four people (half of the cast) are killed, one tortured. In the summary of Davey it sounds like this: "Four dead fellas, two dead cats . . . me hairstyle ruined," to which Donny adds: "All me shoe polish gone" (68). This enumeration equalizes losses which have significant difference in value and importance—to comical effect. The list includes repetition: the enumeration of losses, but with a twist the list of deaths turns into a complaint because of the loss of hair and shoe polish.

As Tarantino says in an interview cited in the epigraph, violence is an aesthetic thing. It cannot be "purely" aesthetic though, because the content presented puts the violent actions into social, political, psychological contexts. But this approach towards violence proves that what seems outrageous and provocative as subject matter, from an aesthetic point of view can be a means for strong and subversive influence, often in the comical register.

Such a transfiguration can be observed in the shooting scenes in *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Django Unchained*, and *The Hateful Eight* by Tarantino and several other film examples. There is one major difference though, between the function of violence in feature film and in the theatre. In these films, the action itself is exaggerated to a peak culminating in mass shootings. Technology makes it possible for the film to give a full illusion that everything on the screen really happens to the killers and victims. But on the stage, with live and present actors/actresses, the massacre is always and inevitably pretended. However excellent the technique is in the usage of props, it will always include doubt about the reality of the action. Fake blood and fake brains—the props of *The Lieutenant*—are necessary prerequisites, and exposures of the non-reality of the violence.

This is what Martin McDonagh takes into consideration in his aesthetics applying a traditional, even conservative dramatic form to present subversive content, shocking actions. Performing these violent parts of his plays is a challenge for the director, but it is obvious that the playwright does

not care whether it is easy, difficult, or almost impossible to produce these brutal actions so self-evidently communicated by him. McDonagh is aware of the ambivalent feature of violence in the theatre and he relies upon this ambivalence. He even uses it as a theatrical self-reflection in some cases, like in *The Pillowman*. There is a scene in which the protagonist Katurian's brother is tortured offstage, and his screams can be heard. Katurian identifies his brother Michal's voice and soon the investigator, Ariel, "*returns, wrapping his bloodied hand in white cloth*" (23). But later in a quarrel Ariel's boss, Tupolski, says that the blood on Ariel's hand is "so obviously fake blood" (29). Later Michal confesses to his brother that he was asked to scream, though he was not harmed at all.

As I have described elsewhere: "in the example of Michal's pretended torture McDonagh implies the very essence of the play. Here Michal, Ariel, and Tupolski play 'theatre' for Katurian to make him believe that something has really happened, and to exercise a strong influence on him" ("Body Politics" 55). Within the usage of the extensive direct, onstage violence one can recognize this self-reflective theatricality. It is both a great challenge and an opportunity for the theatre to perform authentically these violent events and actions on the stage. In McDonagh's aesthetics, conservative dramatic form and subversive content are productively combined.[1] The oscillation between brutal and comic registers both in dialogue and action results in the subversive content of domestic violence and political terror being depicted in a farcical way. Dark and tragic violence brings about humorous and ridiculous effects.

The Hungarian reception of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*

The play has had five Hungarian productions so far. Reviewing the Hungarian reception from the beginning till 2005, I briefly discussed the first two *Lieutenant* productions in my 2006 essay entitled "Domesticating a Theatre of Cruelty." The play was first produced in Hungary by the Comedy Theatre (Vígszínház) in Budapest in September 2002, and then in Kaposvár in November 2003. Ilona Szverle reviews the Hungarian theatrical reception of McDonagh's plays in the subsequent years till 2008. In this period *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* had another two productions, both in 2007, one of them in Szeged in January and another in the Hungarian language theatre of Komarno in Slovakia in February (202-12). The most recent *Lieutenant* premiere took place in Nyíregyháza in January 2015.

The two Hungarian productions I saw, that of the Comedy Theatre and of Kaposvár, handle the staging of naturalistic and brutal scenes in very

different manners, thereby giving examples of alternative methods of putting blood and brains from page to stage. They reflect opposing attitudes towards the representation of such scenes determined by the play's text. Although both versions were translated by Kornél Hamvai, the difference is already present in the Hungarian title and names of characters. In Kaposvár the title (*Az inishmore-i hadnagy*) and the characters' names literally follow the original, whereas the production in the Comedy Theatre includes a pun in the title, *Alhangya*, by combining two features of the protagonist (being mad, "*hangyás*," and being a lieutenant, "hadnagy"). The names in this production are translated as nicknames, Padraic becomes "Pitbull," Donny becomes "Szenyor," Mairead becomes "Vakond" (meaning "mole"), Davey becomes "Gida" (that is "fawn").

In Kaposvár, Tamás Ascher directed a horrifying farce. All brutal and naturalistic events are represented as taking place on stage. When the three paramilitaries return to the stage blinded, they have black spots under their eyes, indicating gunpowder. When they are shot to death, blood spreads all over their bodies. There are corpses on the table in scene 9, cut and sawed into pieces. Arms, legs, and heads seem real, as if of the people previously attacking Padraic.

In the Comedy Theatre's production, director Péter Forgács excludes naturalism and physical brutality and instead chooses a stylized acting and theatrical representation. When in scene 2 Padraic tortures a drug dealer and takes off his toenails, in the production he tears off the sole of James's boots with a nipper. When the group of paramilitaries are blinded, the three characters simply close their eyes. In Kaposvár there is a real shooting between Padraic and the group, in Budapest the deaths are represented in a symbolic way: the three fighters sing a marching song, then stop singing one by one, thus indicating their being shot to death.

The set design already demonstrates the different attitudes of the two productions. In the Comedy Theatre there is no stage, the studio is a small black box, part of which functions as the space for acting. There are several square-shape couches put together in the studio hall that create the space for the play. The arms and backs of the couches create a network of paths, while the seats down and between function as locations. In Kaposvár the play is performed on the main stage. The house of Donny is represented only by an L-shape wall. The domestic scenes take place inside and in front of this wall, while during the open-air scenes the wall is drawn aside, and the stage becomes empty.

The difference may be made more specific by adding that in Kaposvár the scenes are separated (or linked) by live rock (or punk) music, played in a backstage corner, one actor from the cast being part of the band. This is a non-realistic element which strongly differs from the otherwise more naturalistic, psychologically realistic, performance. Though the details of the characters are precisely elaborated, the whole style of acting is beyond realism and includes an ironical segment. In the Comedy Theatre the stylized directing determines the acting as well. Rather than impersonate these Irish people, the cast employs collective stylized acting.

The whole play has a metatheatrical feature. Although in practice anything can represent anything else on stage (in set design, in props, in gestures, and so on), there are some basic human activities which have always been a challenge for the theatre. Since film can show directly (and not only refer to) everything, for instance, any part of the human body—both from inside and outside—and every kind of action, theatre cannot compete with film in naturalistic-realistic representation. Such basic human activities as eating, giving birth, having sex, dying, bleeding, and others are very difficult to represent on the stage. If stylized, it can become ridiculous; if realistic, the spectators will meditate on the technique which made it seem real. In his plays, McDonagh includes all sorts of theatrical impossibilities. Reading them as literature, the brutal, violent scenes have a full value. The problem of how this savagery is to be put on stage, how blood and brains are to be turned from page to stage, the playwright leaves to the theatre to solve.

University of Pécs

Note

[1] The form is conservative because exclusively restricted to the "picture-frame" stage, the one which Peter Szondi described as "the only one adequate to the absoluteness of the drama" (27).

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