

“Fun, disturbing and ultimately forgettable”? Notes on the Royal Court Theatre Production of Martin McDonagh’s *Hangmen*

Ondřej Pilný

HJEAS

Like many others, I was delighted to discover in the summer of 2015 that a new play by Martin McDonagh, *Hangmen*, was to be staged at the Royal Court Theatre in London, marking the playwright’s return to the English stage after twelve years. I was even more thrilled when I managed to solicit permission to translate the play into Czech, and eagerly awaited the text of *Hangmen*, which was to be made available shortly after the play opened on 10 September 2015.

When the text arrived, it was unmistakably McDonagh: funny, meticulously plotted, and building on numerous unexpected twists that make the play unremittingly captivating until the very end, violent but at the same time farcical. Moreover, as in his “Irish” plays, McDonagh demonstrated once again his talent for working with dialects: instead of the unabashed synthetic Hiberno-English of his earlier drama, however, the language of *Hangmen* is that of the North of England and of a London “spiv” (Craven) respectively (including, as always, a dose of anachronisms for the balance—see Evans). The natural theatricality of McDonagh’s dialogue was immediately apparent as well: in the words of David Morrissey, who starred in *Hangmen* as Britain’s second-best hangman Harry Wade, “there’s immediately this incredible rhythm, like you’re batting words back and forth” (qtd. in O’Hagan). Another trademark feature of the playwright’s work has been that of the ingenious and often comic recurrence of individual words or remarkable turns of phrase; once I started working on the translation, I realized that the extent of such repetitions is significantly increased in *Hangmen* and provides a fascinating texture within what already is a well-crafted play in itself. In this sense, *Hangmen* represents the perfection of the customary McDonagh formula and is a truly mature play; maintaining this subtle web of verbal recurrence presents probably the greatest challenge to the translator.

Hangmen involves an important first for McDonagh, however: this is the first time that he has modeled some of his principal characters on prominent figures from reality. Harry Wade is based on two existing British hangmen, Harry Bernard Allen, who served as Assistant Executioner in 1940-41 and 1945-55 and as Chief Executioner from 1955 until the passing of the Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act on 8 November 1965 (see Fielding

217, 260, 281-91), and Stephen Wade, Assistant Executioner from 1940-45 and Chief Executioner between 1946 and 1955 (Fielding 208, 281-89). Harry Wade's former assistant, Syd Armfield, is in turn based on the Assistant Executioner (1949-52), Sydney Dernley, and—most importantly—the best-known twentieth-century Chief Executioner, Albert Pierrepoint, makes a crucial appearance in the play. Both Harry Allen and Stephen Wade drew a degree of macabre public attention in their day; after the abolishment of the death penalty, Dernley published a memoir (1989) and frequently gave lectures and appeared on television in the early 1990s, while Allen became the subject of a biography (Stewart McLaughlin, *Harry Allen: Britain's Last Hangman* [2008]). Nonetheless, it was Albert Pierrepoint who has enjoyed a peculiar (and mostly unwanted) celebrity status, which was boosted by the publication of his memoirs in 1974. His presence in Britain's collective memory has recently been revived by a frequently screened TV documentary, *Executioner Pierrepoint* (2006), and a notable feature film released the same year and entitled simply *Pierrepoint*, with Timothy Spall and Juliet Stevenson delivering a marvelous performance as the hangman and his wife. McDonagh takes considerable liberties with these historical figures. Yet, his play clearly works with the audience's familiarity with Pierrepoint at least and taps into the lurid fascination steadily engendered by men hired to dispatch those sentenced to death.

A number of commentators have argued that of McDonagh's earlier work, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001) and *The Pillowman* (2003) in particular, were plays focused on vital political and ethical issues, interpreting *The Lieutenant* as a satire aimed at Irish Republicanism or, by extension, global terrorism, and *The Pillowman* as a drama that meditates about authorial responsibility. To me, such perspectives have always lacked appropriate substance: the *a priori* alienation of the audience from the characters in *The Lieutenant* in terms of IQ and social milieu, together with the play's excess of hyperbole and its likeness to a cult film, prevent the political matter from being taken seriously; in *The Pillowman*, the lengthy list of issues that seem to be foregrounded is ultimately erased due to the unscrupulous manipulation of the audience that comes to dominate the play and is exercised for the purpose of entertainment (for details of my argument, see Pilný 15-17). *Hangmen* struck me as the first play, however, in which McDonagh may have attempted to maintain a serious note throughout: the concern with capital punishment and justice is accompanied by a level of grim realism, on the one hand, while, on the other, the issue is not pushed aside by the presence of any subversive framing device. When I was translating the play, my initial

impression grew into curiosity as to the resolution that directors were going to adopt for what I saw as a crucial difficulty: how to reconcile the solemn with the rather daft humor that characterizes much of the conversations in Harry Wade's pub, including McDonagh's typical non-PC quips that are, frankly, mostly gratuitous in *Hangmen*.

The Royal Court production, directed by Matthew Dunster, was almost universally hailed as a howling success. Following its sell-out initial run, it transferred to Wyndham's Theatre in the West End and was eventually broadcast internationally as part of the NT Live scheme (which is how I finally got to see it in May 2016). It won both a Critics' Circle Theatre Award and a Lawrence Olivier Award for Best New Play, a South Bank Sky Arts Theatre Award; and a further Critics' Circle Theatre Award, a Lawrence Olivier Award, and an Evening Standard Theatre Award went to Anna Fleischle for her wonderful period design. The plentiful reviews lauded all aspects of the production, including Dunster's direction and Fleischle's set and the way the latter contrasted its naturalist details with the method of effecting the scene shifts, whereby the prison cell of the first scene was lifted up to the ceiling at its end, only to have the space of the diner descend from above onto Wade's pub at the beginning of act 2 and then go back up again. Special praise was reserved for the actors, particularly Morrissey as the unabashed and touchy Wade, the uncanny insouciance of Johnny Flynn as the "menacing" (McDonagh 47, 63, 68-70, 88) stranger Mooney, and the superb professional stage debut of Bronwyn James as the hangman's teenage daughter Shirley.

By universal consensus the play was exquisitely funny, and every night audiences seemed to be roaring with laughter. A number of reviewers testified to McDonagh's aptitude for faithfully conveying the atmosphere of a particular place and time, viewing *Hangmen* as a realistic depiction of early 1960s Britain that critically revised the notion of the Swinging Sixties (Coveney, Clapp, Lawrence, Calhoun). Others regarded it as a satire aimed against the practice of capital punishment (Taylor, "Hangmen, Wyndham's Theatre Review," Evans), a depiction of the impact of capital punishment on the executioners (Mountford, Letts, Lawrence), or more generally as a play about the violence that is inherent in humans (Wolf). Significantly, only a single reviewer seems to have related its content to contemporary Britain in more than an abstract sense, highlighting the play's display of blatant sexism, racism, homophobia, and the absolute faith in a corrupt system (Trueman).

The nature of the audiences' and reviewers' responses confirms my impressions of the Royal Court production of *Hangmen*. The opening scene, in which a condemned man is fighting with prison guards and hangmen, pleading his innocence, was rather surprisingly enacted in a stylized manner and was very clearly being played for laughs. True enough, the ensuing action that takes place in Harry Wade's pub was staged in a meticulously naturalist fashion; however, much of the events in the pub prominently feature a chorus of regulars aptly described by Matt Trueman as "imbeciles," who proffer or trigger the kind of humor that is perhaps the most difficult to harmonize with any potential note of seriousness. The dark farce that unravels in the pub in act 2 had a perfect pitch, nonetheless, flawlessly conveying the grotesque combination of brutal violence and the moral undoing of the "hero" with exuberant accidental comedy. But its concluding part made for another slight disappointment: as the only segment in the production, it seemed to lack clear directorial vision, coming across as a mere fumbling with the corpse, while the touch of nostalgia for the old times with which it was endowed failed to emphasize the obvious irony of such a sentiment in the circumstances. In my view, the scene calls rather for a mechanistic, matter-of-fact rendering, in which the hangman and his assistant would slide back into their old routine, treating the body of the deceased as an object to be disposed of; this might then deepen the shock of the preceding events.

Having said that, Martin McDonagh apparently attended virtually all rehearsals for the production (see O'Hagan) and presumably endorsed even those solutions adopted by Matthew Dunster that I consider here as shortcomings. Still, given the somber note that I would argue is there in *Hangmen*, playing just for entertainment runs the risk of the drama being consumed, as Lloyd Evans of *The Spectator* has put it, merely as a "macabre slice of knockabout" and eventually dismissed as "fun, disturbing and ultimately forgettable." In this context, the reaction of Aleks Sierz is also indicative. Sierz was an early champion of McDonagh's work and has expressed admiration also for both *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* and *The Pillowman*. Yet, he is the only critic to have decisively panned *Hangmen*. Sierz can hardly be regarded as an uptight theatre-goer lacking in a sense of humor, but in his review, he forcefully rejected McDonagh's "senselessly provocative" jokes, speaking of "puerile self-indulgence" of the work and considering thin characterization as the greatest problem (see Sierz). This implies that Sierz also sensed a serious note in the play, which was in part obscured and in part botched by a lack of insight into character psychology; in fact, the very title of Sierz's review calls *Hangmen* a "comedy about 1960s Britain" (Sierz; emphasis added).

I have argued so far that ideally a balance should be struck between the “knockabout” and the somber side in a production of McDonagh’s new work. Yet, a presumptuous thought still creeps in: as the grave matter in question is capital punishment, why do a play about it now, long after the last serious debates in Britain concerning the reintroduction of death by hanging? Can the subject have an edge at all?

Charles University, Prague

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