

RESENHAS/BOOK REVIEWS

Lonergan, Patrick. *Irish Drama and Theatre Since 1950*. Methuen, 2019.

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Richard Pine's contention that modern Irish drama began in 1964 with Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* was a significant contribution to a criticism which presented the 1960s as the beginning of a second renaissance. This was when Friel, along with Tom Murphy and Tom Kilroy, revitalised a tired theatrical practice in which innovation had been sacrificed for a deadly conformity. Early in *Irish Drama and Theatre Since 1950*, Patrick Lonergan evidences the moribund nature of Irish theatre before Friel by pointing out that the original prompt book used in the premiere of Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* at the Abbey theatre, Dublin, in 1926 had seen service in each of some thirty five production of the play over the subsequent decades, removing the vitality from a once-radical drama. However, his intention is not to provide a gloss on a now outmoded reading of Irish theatre history which, as he acknowledges, has already been challenged by Joan Fitzpatrick Dean, Paul Murphy, Ian Walsh and Lionel Pilkington. His objective throughout this study is to bring often-forgotten plays and productions to critical attention and shed light on what they reveal about the society in which they were staged and the contribution they have made to what he demonstrates is a more complex story than one captured in views of the 1950s as a lost decade in terms of theatre. Ranging from the late 1940s to the 2000s – the most recent production referenced is Jez Butterworth's "Troubles" drama, *The Ferryman* (2017) – Lonergan gives credit to actors, audiences, directors and companies, as well as plays and playwrights, for this is an engagement with theatre as a complex social phenomenon as well as an aesthetic form.

In the opening chapter Lonergan references the work of Behan and Beckett but focuses on *The Righteous are Bold* by the less-known Frank Conroy, which ran for an unprecedented sixteen weeks on the occasion of its premiere at the Abbey Theatre in 1946 and received ten further productions between then and the early 1960s. While acknowledging that the play's confirmation of society's commitment to Catholic

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orthodoxy would not attract today's audiences, Lonergan's intention is to use it as a reference point from which he can trace the development of what he terms the "Post-Catholic" turn in Irish theatre. Tom Murphy's *The Sanctuary Lamp* (1975) and Stewart Parker's *Pentecost* (1987) are well-known interrogations of Ireland's Christian faith and the abuses committed by individuals and institutions in its name. By setting them alongside Máiréad Ní Ghráda's *An Triail* (1964) and Patricia Burke Brogan's *Eclipsed* (1992), two plays by women which were produced outside of the orbit of the Abbey, Lonergan enables a more complex picture to emerge which captures what he terms "the journey" from the Catholic conformity of *The Righteous are Bold* to the exposé of the brutality of the Magdalene Laundries in ANU's radical, site-specific production *Laundry* (2011).

As Lonergan acknowledges, he is writing in the context of #WakingTheFeminists, the response to the Abbey's failure properly to include women playwrights in its celebration of the centenary of the Easter Rising. This brings a heightened sense of the need not just to acknowledge, but critically engage with the contribution of women practitioners to the development of Irish theatre. So Máiréad Ní Ghráda is rightly seen as anticipating by some decades the questioning of the pernicious social effects of the state's subordination to Catholic dogma while Siobhán McKenna's performance as St Joan in her own Irish-language translation of Shaw's play is recognised as an influence on subsequent English-language productions. Garry Hynes's re-thinking of Synge, Christina Reid's "Troubles" plays and Marina Carr's "Midlands" dramas are celebrated as using feminist strategies to transform Irish theatre and make space for the staging of forms of identity marginalised in views of Irish society as unproblematically and (un)wholesomely homogeneous. Crucially, as Lonergan recognises, there is now more to Irish theatre than could be imagined in the early years of its foundation and, indeed, the more than a century-and-a-half which followed. Now "Nigerian, Polish and Croatian dramatists [have] been writing about coming to Ireland in the early 2000s", providing modes of understanding to the young Irish forced to emigrate to "Canada, Australia, Dubai or elsewhere" in the aftermath of the financial crash of 2008 (174). Lonergan acknowledges that he is not able to address all of the complex issue he raises but in crediting the contribution of Charlotte McIvor and Matthew Spangler's *Migration and Performance in Contemporary Ireland* (2016) and Fintan Walsh's *Queer Performance and Contemporary Ireland* (2014), he adds weight to his contention that "Irish theatre has been at its strongest when difference has been seen as something to be welcomed rather than feared" (180).

But this is in no sense a study whose intention to rethink the contours of Irish theatre history runs the risk of producing an equally exclusionary interpretation. Plays by established figures such as Friel and Murphy, Tom Kilroy and Frank McGuinness are included, as are those by more recent figures such as Enda Walsh, Conor McPherson and Martin McDonagh – indeed so current is the range of critical references that McDonagh's film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) is also noted. And in keeping with the stimulus Lonergan acknowledges was provided by #WakingThe-

Feminists, he also engages with Marie Jones and Charabanc, Deirdre Kinehan and Fishamble, Lynne Parker and Rough Magic, Louise Lowe and ANU along with work by Gina Moxley, Amy Conroy and Amanda Coogan. What Lonergan does, however, is set all these playwrights and performers in critical contexts in which they are seen as both inheritors and innovators in an Irish theatre which restlessly engages with a society of which it is both product and critic.

Not that the analysis is parochial in any sense, as Lonergan devotes a chapter to the international dimension of Irish theatre which embraces Friel's time with Tyrone Guthrie in Minnesota, the influence of London's Royal Court theatre and the phenomenon of the "Angry Young Men," and directors such as Robert Lepage who visited Ireland under the auspices of festivals in Dublin and Galway. Crucially, in terms of interpretations of Irish theatre which read it as lacking innovation and experimentation in comparison with other European countries, Lonergan spends some time examining the commitment of Tomás Mac Anna to a Brechtian style of production which was apparent in both Tom Murphy's *Famine* (1968) and Friel's *The Freedom of the City* (1973). Thematic issues along with production styles are also recognised for their international aspects, as Irish theatre broke with the cottage kitchen set and engaged with the urban realities of contemporary Irish life in plays such as Declan Hughes's *Digging for Fire* (1991) with its musical background of the Pixies, Iggy Pop, Tom Waits, and the Sex Pistols. What Hughes's play shares with others such as Elizabeth Kuti's *The Sugar Wife* (2005) and Sonya Kelly's *How to Keep an Alien* (2014), Lonergan suggests, is a determination not to provide narrow visions of Irish identity and so deny the potential creative change in the society.

This is the informing thesis of Lonergan's book: the belief that theatre can provide a stimulus for change and that, by being open to new forms of theatrical expression and ideas of national identity, the stage can invite audiences to contemplate a future distinguished by what Lonergan terms "new forms of escape, creativity and imagining" (180). There is, however, a caveat to this celebration of theatre's potential as a the engine-room of social transformation, for following every progressive moment in theatre, Lonergan suggests, "the world often goes back to its old tricks" (4) in which conservative and exclusionary practices reassert their hold. For while #WakingTheFeminists sets itself against contemporary patriarchal forms of theatre, plays and productions, Lonergan informs us of an earlier moment in 1975 when the Abbey produced a list of plays by some twenty women dramatists with a view to producing this work. But, he notes, "None of these plays was staged by the theatre" (3). Lonergan counters this negative evidence by stating that "Overall, though, my aim here has been to show how theatre matters in Ireland: it is a driver of change" (204). However, he also suggests that, as he noted in a 2019 *Irish Times* article "When viewed over a 70-year span, Irish theatre seemed to progress not in a straight line but in a series of waves – pushing Irish society to change for the better, only to be pushed back" (Lonergan, 2019). Precisely what is pushing back, and by what means, is unexplored. One assumes social pressure exerted by those who feel threatened by change, but the assertion rather than analysis

of the causal chain behind these “waves” of advance and retreat makes the generally optimistic assertion of theatre’s transformative power less certain and leaves open the question as to whether this is simply the case in all theatre cultures or an instance of an Irish exceptionalism which Lonergan appears to discount in other contexts.

This is the only uncertainty about a study which is fluent and wide-ranging with a style which moves comfortably and without jargon across plays and productions from the 1950s to the contemporary moment. Moreover, in keeping with the established pattern of the Methuen Critical Companions series, of which Lonergan is one of the editors, there are three essays in the section titled “Critical Perspectives” which extend the coverage into amateur theatre (a study of John B. Keane’s *Sive* by Fintan Gorman), performance art (by Áine Phillips) and stage design (by Siobhán O’Gorman). The fact that these are also “peripheral” in terms of conventional critical coverage is testimony to Lonergan’s intention to place “famous actors, plays and productions in conversation with events and people that deserve to be better known” (5).

The Critical Companions series already contains a number of significant volumes on Irish dramatists, specifically O’Casey, Beckett, Friel and Murphy. Lonergan’s volume is a major addition to the list and in many ways is an ideal pairing with an earlier volume in the series, Anthony Roche’s *The Irish Dramatic Revival 1899-1939* which, like Lonergan’s contribution, is also full of illuminating comparisons and juxtapositions. These two volumes cover the period from 1899 to the 2000s and make an essential addition to the bookcases of all interested in Irish theatre, whether academics looking for insights into established plays and playwrights, and introductions to those less known, or students and lay-readers making early steps in the study of a national theatre whose qualities are realized in all aspects by these studies.

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