

RESENHAS/BOOK REVIEWS

Jordan, Eamonn. *The Theatre and Films of Conor McPherson: Conspicuous Communities*. Methuen, 2019.

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The Theatre and Films of Conor McPherson: Conspicuous Communities (2019) by Eamonn Jordan is a masterful and refreshing study of McPherson's work. Jordan's comprehensive book is wide-ranging in not only addressing McPherson's theatre and films as promised in the title but also his work for television and his musical.

This book does not situate McPherson in relation to a tradition or history of Irish writers and artists. Nor does it seek to locate and validate any particular theorization or interpretation of the society, identity or history of Ireland in McPherson's work. Not only has this been already done but also such approaches seem reductive of works that Jordan convincingly argues "transcend national boundaries and identitarian politics" (10). As the opening of this book makes clear, the majority of McPherson's plays have been premiered at some of London's most prestigious venues and often then transferred to theatres in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles before ever being produced in Ireland. The work, although rooted in Ireland, has a wider appeal without trading in stereotype or nostalgia for an invented Irish past. This study responds to the form and matter of the work by identifying and charting recurring themes, tropes and play with generic conventions. Relevant appropriate frameworks are then employed in the analysis, drawn from diverse areas such as neuroscience, psychology and sociology. All of this is greatly complemented with astute personal judgment based on years of experiencing the work first hand. Jordan situates McPherson's work "within the networks of the larger world dominated by the ideology loosely defined as neo-liberalism" (10). He cogently argues that McPherson's work responds and challenges neo-liberalism's promotion of a selfish and cruel individualism through his repeated representations on stage, in film and television of communities that resist commodification or consideration only in terms of market value.

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While he charts development in the work, Jordan prefers to view McPherson's work as a continuum: "There is a sense that McPherson's body of work is not simply consecutively written plays, rather it is as if they shadow, ghost or hover over and co-exist alongside each other" (18). This is signaled in the recurrence of the particular names John, Nick and Mary or variations of these names throughout the plays and film scripts. With the pieces viewed as a continuum, Jordan logically organizes his analysis by grouping the work for the stage and the big and small screen according to themes rather than chronology. Each chapter is well structured beginning with an introduction to the thematic focus of the chapter followed by smaller sections that elaborate on this theme in relation to a particular play or film, and then the chapter ends with a summative conclusion. The key arguments and treatments of specific plays are easily found and complicated ideas and theories are communicated in a clear, simple to follow prose style, which should see this book included on many undergraduate reading lists.

Chapter 1 explores the monologue plays addressing the criticism of McPherson's use of this form as undramatic, patriarchal and superficial as it denies an audience creative participation in the performance event. Jordan challenges these positions by quoting McPherson's own defense of this form as being inherently theatrical, as the spectator must be present and alert to the performance of the unfolding narrative which "tests the account for plausibility, consistency and accuracy, and listens out for anomalies and contradictions" (24). This chapter then goes on to intelligently highlight how these monologue plays all focus on the relevance of money to people's lives and its ability to privilege, disadvantage and impact on identity and social status. Jordan points out that the plays resist fetishizing "the decency of the less affluent" (45) or demonizing the wealthy, and instead empower the spectators to make their own ethical judgments. Lesser-known works such as *Come on Over* and *Rum and Vodka* are included in the analysis here alongside the better-known *This Lime Tree Bower*, *The Good Thief* and *Port Authority*.

In the second chapter the films *I Went Down*, *Saltwater* and *The Actors* are considered in relation to their presentation of criminality that is read as "a complex and subversive articulation of the hierarchies of consumerist capital" (64). It is made obvious how the medium of film aids McPherson's appeal to spectators to scrutinize the actions of his characters through greater embodiment, visual richness and close-up shots that are unavailable as devices in the performance of a monologue. This examination of these films is one that primarily concentrates on character analysis but does so in terms of the conventions of comedy and tragi-comedy to good effect.

Chapter 3 engages with the recurrence of the supernatural in the work in the form of ghosts and the uncanny. Jordan quotes how for McPherson the theatrical act itself is "a kind of a séance" in which an audience can reconnect with the mysteriousness of everyday life as they "commune with the beyond" (14). In plays such as *St. Nicholas* and *Shining City* or in the film *Eclipse* and the television series *Paula*, McPherson offers the spectator a sense of the precariousness of existence when he first presents

a conventional, safe reality only then to undermine this through a supernatural occurrence. This chapter charts how the doppelgängers, vampires and ghosts of these texts serve to rupture a conventional reality and create unease. However, they also function as a device that enables transformation and growth for the characters in presenting them with immediate opportunity to face down and accept their fears.

The fourth chapter continues an exploration of the spectral but situates this in relation to issues of “home-places, eviction and homelessness” (14) in pieces written during the global recession that began in 2008. Not only are McPherson’s dramas *The Night Alive* and *The Veil* considered here but also his adaptation of Daphne Du Maurier’s *The Birds* and his musical *Girl From the North Country*, based on the music of Bob Dylan. It is argued that all these plays contain demonstrations of endurance and resilience by characters who gather as a community in temporary shelter because they have been denied the safety of permanent homesteads. Most interestingly here *The Veil*, set in pre-Great Famine Ireland of 1822, is read as a “dramaturgical doppelgänger” (116) of *Girl from the North Country* set in 1934 Duluth, Minnesota. A slight criticism of the appraisal of the *Girl from the North Country* is that it lacks comparative analysis with the specific contexts and conventions of musical theatre.

Chapter 5 moves from McPherson’s fascination of the supernatural to his obsession with Christmas festivities. This chapter wonderfully explains how this particular time of the year as treated in *Dublin Carol* and *The Seafarer* allows for many of McPherson’s themes to come to the fore. The reader learns how Christmas as a dramatic event forces tensions in the works between the commercial and the communal, the material and the spiritual, abundance and scarcity while it also “marks moments of transition, and a movement towards light and away from darkness, not by way of linearity per se, but more by way of circularity, seasonality and continuity” (16).

The final chapter functions as a fitting climax to all that has gone before, expertly collecting together all the previous strands of argument in an analysis of McPherson’s best-known play: *The Weir*. This is the only chapter-length study of just one work and thus gives this drama pride of place amongst all of McPherson’s pieces, acknowledging that it is this international hit play that will be most familiar and appealing to readers.

A significant strength of the book is Jordan’s dedication to following and experiencing McPherson’s work over three decades and offering the reader first-hand accounts of so many productions of the plays. This gives his judgments extra weight as the reader learns to trust in his personal experience and impressive long-term commitment to the work. For example, in his analysis of the often dismissed *Come on Over* he quotes from the unfavorable reviews of the first production that felt the play in its monologue form broke no new ground for McPherson as a playwright and that the directorial decision for both of the actors to be hooded throughout was a terrible mistake. Jordan follows this with a personal comment that undermines these negative reviews and peaks the reader’s interest in the play. He writes: “For me, sitting in the

theatre experiencing such a performance was a difficult and unnerving experience. I had little of the distance that I usually have in the theatre” (44).

Such boldness to challenge the agreed consensus on particular works and offer alternative readings is another aspect of the book to be commended. This is most apparent in his analysis of *Paula*, a television serial written by McPherson for Cuba Pictures and broadcast on both BBC and RTÉ. Jordan takes issue with how the critics judged and dismissed the title character’s sexual activities as rash, silly and promiscuous, writing that “the sexual encounters here have nothing to indicate guilt, shame, repression, perversion or dysfunction, frames of mind that too often appear as the default reflex in much Irish writing about sex” (86). Indeed the book is keen to address the gendered criticism of McPherson’s early work that often leads to a dismissal of his work in its entirety. Jordan highlights that foregrounding masculinity “does not necessarily imply a disavowal of femininity” (11) and makes sure to emphasize the complexity of his female characters throughout McPherson’s oeuvre.

True to the Methuen Critical Companions format, the book also contains supplementary essays by other writers that serve to add and/or respond to positions taken and areas covered in the main text. An essay by Lisa Fitzpatrick examines the representation of haunted and haunting female figures in *The Weir*, *The Veil* and *Paula*, convincingly arguing that these characters are “constructed as a loci for the uncanny” and function as a “recurring trope for the exploration of grief and regret” (177). Ben Brantley, the leading theatre critic of the *New York Times* and a champion of McPherson’s work, offers a brief, astute piece on the inventiveness and theatricality of the language in the plays. Maha Alatawi, in his essay, conducts a forensic investigation of narrativity and function of the narrator figure in *Port Authority*, *The Veil* and *Girl from the North Country*. Here also is an interview with McPherson conducted by Jordan that allows the playwright’s own voice to be included in the conversation. He is asked to directly comment on some of the ideas developed in the book. In his answers to the questions what is most striking is McPherson’s passionate commitment to always writing to engage an audience, his respect for actors and their craft when directing and his keen awareness of form.

This companion is essential reading not only for all those with a special interest in McPherson but also for anyone who enjoys thoughtful, authoritative and inspiring analysis of theatre and film.

Reference

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