THE NATIVE QUARTER: THE HYPHENATED-REAL – THE DRAMA OF MARTIN MCDONAGH

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Martin McDonagh has had a very successful career in terms of box office and international awards, and his plays have been produced internationally, either using the original script as a starting point for productions or in translation, but to date in very few instances has permission been given for adaptations of his work. Productions are obliged to work within the parameters of the published texts and any serious deviations from their constraints and imperatives are discouraged or disallowed. With all writing, it is possible to interrogate McDonagh’s plays for dominant values, for repetitive or biased dramaturgical patterns and gender prejudices, as well as to test the work against current theatrical trends and traditions.

Evaluations of McDonagh’s work to date have relied substantially on the complex relationship between theatre space, language, character and action. More significantly, criticism has dealt with the connections between the written and performed texts and the Irish contexts within which the majority of the plays are set. All the plays have been brushed by a range of critical analyses that rely on everything from Marxism to postcolonial theory, from feminist and gender evaluations, to an interrogation of the post-modern imperatives and postdramatic inclinations in the work. What interests me is how the conventions of a notional naturalism/realism informs but also limits the texts in unusual ways, and more substantially, how issues surrounding verisimilitude, mimetic realism, and context, in political

and socio-economic terms, seem to be the dominant, but not the only frameworks through which critics and commentators take the plays to task, particularly for their transgressions of authenticity.  

Writers, of what is considered to be realism/naturalism, are tested by their ability to mimic the real world accurately, are measured by how appropriately the past is accommodated in the present, are checked to ensure the relationship between cause and effect has some grounding in normality, verifiability, and plausibility. The same realist writers are usually analysed to see if the physical use of the stage space is governed by the physical expectations of the real world, and, finally, of course, are inspected to affirm that language has some communicative coherence. Additionally, spectators seem to have in-built proxemic expectations surrounding the staging of intimacy and conflict between characters and around initiation, reflex and response rhythms in terms of actions and reactions of actors in performance, to comments, gestures, revelations, etc.. So, the expectations, assumptions and perceptions concerning realism are in part about credibility, in part about the suspension of belief, and, in part about trusting the dramaturgy of the writer and the mise-en-scène of the production, to harmonize, or, at least, to find the stage action equivalent to perceptions of what constitutes the lived work. As Hanna Scolnicov rightly advises: “It is only in the naturalistic theatre that the theatrical space tries to fool the audience into believing that it is essentially analogous to everyday space.”

In McDonagh’s work there are references to products like Complan, Kimberley biscuits, Tayto crisps, Frosties, published magazines, real television programmes, and football championships, and there are references to real people and circumstances like the Guilford Four, the Birmingham Six, and the events of Bloody Sunday.

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2 Of course, the fact that a non-Irish born playwright is transgressive, seems part of the motivation, as does Ireland’s colonial history, where there seems a recurring need to test representations for marginality, oppression, prejudice. The blatant, apparent simplicity of McDonagh’s dramaturgy is for some an infringement, at worst it is deeply insulting, a continuation and a capitulation to old types and the worst excesses of colonial representations.

3 In production, gendered and age appropriate performances are deemed satisfactory if they are in tandem with expectation. There is also the issue of colour-blind casting as well.