

Putting Irish "Space" on the Stage

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1

When it comes to asking questions about Ireland, the Irish people, and, myth-laden or not, what is often and readily called "Irishness," it is immediately clear to us in the first decade of the twenty-first century that, literally or figuratively, the problem of "space" continues to serve as a key to our delving into any such question. Irish "space" may be discussed in the framework of "atonal ensemble" (Said 386) rather than that of "symphony" (386), to borrow Edward W. Said's terms. If, by adopting musical analogies, Said draws our attention to "all sorts of spatial or geographical and rhetorical practices" (386), which "[tend] to elucidate a complex and *uneven* topography" (386) [emphasis added], we might say that his connecting Ireland with, for example, the Caribbean islands and the Far East (Said xi), Algeria and Indonesia (xii), and Australia (xvi) should be of great help in our reading Deepika Bahri's terse comment on the Irish people supposedly having "the 'right' color" (60), namely, their "whiteness" (60) having failed to "prevent the Irish from being targeted as inferior or from being targeted for 'development'" (60). In turn, there seems little doubt about such recapitulations of Irish "space" casting light upon Claire Connolly's reminder as she discusses some of the recent changes which Irish "space" has gone through:

A great many things have happened and are happening on the island that are not primarily concerned with nationality and its discontents: great swathes of contemporary popular culture, multinational capitalism, migrants and refugee seekers all participate in and are moved by global forces that traverse the island of Ireland, blind to the intricate complexities of its past. (2-3)

One more example will suffice, for the moment, if we want to get the general idea of "space" playing a vital part in the kind of "atonal ensemble" that explicates the *uneven* Ireland/Irish people/"Irishness": Margaret Llewellyn Jones, in referring to Irish diaspora, asserts that "Ireland is both everywhere and nowhere" (13).

Nevertheless, when Irish "space" is materialised on stage in a theatrical production, any resultant version of Ireland/Irish people/"Irishness" can hardly be more tangible or more acutely here-and-now, that is, as far as members of the audience are concerned. We might remember Henri Lefebvre's schematic definition of "theatrical space" (188): while it "certainly implies a

representation of space—scenic space—corresponding to a particular *conception of space*" (188), what Lefebvre calls "theatrical space" shall not be complete unless "[t]he *representational space*, mediated yet directly experienced, which infuses the work and the moment, is established as such through the dramatic action itself" (188) [original emphases]. Of countless instances of theatrical space "representing" what is supposed to be an aspect of Ireland/Irish people/"Irishness," one of the more esoteric may be found in act 2 of *John Bull's Other Island*, a play by George Bernard Shaw, which was first performed at the beginning of the last century. Shaw's acidulous stage directions for the act suggest that members of the audience should have no choice but to be collectively spoon-fed with the visual ingredients of a "hillside of granite rock" (Shaw 138), "heather slopes" (138), a "desolate valley" (138), and, last but not least, a "round tower" (138), which are all indispensable for the audience to recognise a picture-perfect Irish countryside, made of planks and cloth. When the first character on the scene, Keegan, starts talking to a "grasshopper" (138), not only the content of what he says but also his accent, indicated quasi-phonetically in the play-text, are quite as impeccable as the "fake" Irish landscape:

THE MAN [KEEGAN]. An is that yourself, Mither Grasshopper? I hope I see you well this fine evenin.

THE GRASSHOPPER. (prompt and shrill in answer)
X. X.

THE MAN. (encouragingly) Thats right. I suppose now youve come out to make yourself miserable be admyerin the sunset?

THE GRASSHOPPER. (sadly) X. X.

THE MAN. Aye, youre a true Irish grasshopper.

THE GRASSHOPPER. (loudly) X. X. X.

THE MAN. Three cheers for ould Ireland, is it? [...]
(138)

If we must point to a problem deriving from the notion and practice of "Irish 'space' on stage," it has to do with the very liveness, again as far as members of the audience are concerned, of what to a scholar like Richard Kearney shall remain forever the elusive "fifth province" (100). While it may freely be "imagined and reimagined [sic]" (Kearney 100), this particular "province," according to Kearney, is neither a "fixed point" (100) nor a "centralized power" (100), which inevitably seems to mean that our attempt to "identif[y]" (99) Ireland cannot but fail (99-100). Is "Irish 'space' on stage" a contradiction in terms?

Breathtakingly here-and-now though any production of *John Bull's Other Island* may be, for example? To rephrase the question, we may wonder if a play like *John Bull* is debatable precisely because it dares to challenge the impossible, and with some success.

The purpose of this essay is to examine some of the manners in which playwrights set out to challenge the impossible, that is, to put Irish "space" on the stage. Instead of going back a hundred years and starting an analysis with the works of Shaw and those of other playwrights from that period of time, I will focus on writers of our time and discuss plays which were written and first performed in the 1990s. There, I am drawing heavily as well as freely on a discerning reappraisal, by Christopher Morash, of what we might call a post-Field-Day theatrical trend in Ireland. Whereas no one would dispute over the "importance of Field Day in the theatre culture of the 1980s" (Morash 336), for many people including Morash himself the company still "belonged to an earlier cultural formation" (336), as if to "bear the burden of representing an entire nation, much as the Abbey had done before it" (336). If anything, suggests Morash, the work of Field Day has opened our eyes to precisely what the company did *not* intend to do:

Even while Field Day was at its peak, Irish theatre culture was diversifying, with theatre companies and practitioners opting to explore particular theatrical forms or ideas in an Irish context, rather than with defining Irishness *per se*. [...] The Irish theatre has [...] entered the new millennium neither fully obsessed with its own past, nor forgetful of its beginnings. (336-37)

Plays which Morash mentions in this regard include *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* by Frank McGuinness, *The Mai* by Marina Carr, and *The Weir* by Conor McPherson (336). We will have a close look at those three plays.

In our attempt to point out crucial differences between the plays in terms of "space," Erika Fischer-Lichte's cryptic description of a basic rule of the game, namely, theatre, proves quite useful: "when A acts in order to portray X, then the space no longer denotes its original utility function, but rather the special space of the performance; in other words, it signifies whatever particular space X finds herself in" (9). We can make a list of fictional-theatrical possibilities: when X is specified in a play-text as a person of Irish origin, X may "find herself" either in Ireland or elsewhere, depending on what the text says; supposing that X is specified in a play-text as being non-Irish, X may still "find herself" either in Ireland or elsewhere, again depending on what the text says. As will soon be obvious in what follows, the three plays by McGuinness, Carr, and McPherson are all distinctively

straightforward in establishing the kind of characters and "space" that Fischer-Lichte explains; members of the audience should have no doubt about a character whom they see on stage being Irish or non-Irish and about her "space" being somewhere in Ireland or not. Nonetheless, what seems so "obvious" in each play will end up looking, and also sounding, quite different from that which we as members of the audience will have expected to witness; in other words, the three plays challenge the impossible, each in its own way.

2

Dedicated to Brian Keenan (Lojek, "Watching Over Frank McGuinness's Stereotypes" 132), who on his part contributed an introduction to the Faber edition of the play-text (Keenan v-vii), *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* by McGuinness hardly strikes us, at first glance at least, as a piece that would allow members of the audience much interpretative freedom. Anecdotes abound, one of which being that McGuinness, with a project for a new play about a hostage situation, approached Keenan, a former captive in Beirut, and "said he would do nothing further if [Keenan] felt it caused any danger or hurt to those men who at that time remained in chains in Lebanon" (Keenan v). If, for the sake of the argument, we chose to disregard the entire history of McGuinness and the writing of *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, what would be left for us to see and hear in experiencing the play in production? A short answer might be: we probably would not notice the difference.

Someone Who'll Watch Over Me is written in such a way that, even without background knowledge, members of the audience will be able to grasp, within five minutes into scene 1, the basic profiles of the characters whom the actors "portray" and the kind of "space" in which the characters find themselves. As soon as scene 1 of *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* begins, the first character, Edward, says to the second character, Adam, "Did you have *Desert Island Discs* in America?" (McGuinness 1), which functions as a cue for members of the audience to tentatively identify the second character as an American; the supposition is to be confirmed instantly: the actor playing Adam must utter his reply, "No. What is it?" (1), with an American accent. About twenty lines later, Adam starts teasing Edward; a "great Irish mare" (2), a "favourite" (2) of Edward's, was, says Adam:

Protestant, you were Catholic, and you were already married. (2)

The accent which the actor playing Edward should have assumed since the beginning of scene 1 has now "formally" been explained. Meanwhile, that the Irishman and the American are confined to a "cell" (McGuinness x)

could not possibly be missed by members of the audience: Edward and Adam are “separately chained to the walls” (1), as the stage directions for scene 1 tell us. Before the scene ends, the two men even remind each other that they are “in Lebanon” (McGuinness 6), indeed as if to specify their “space” out loud for the sake of the audience. The last character in the play, Michael, makes his first appearance in scene 2, sound asleep and also being “chained to the wall” (McGuinness 7); having had no chance to talk to him yet, Edward and Adam wonder if the newcomer “speaks English” (7); when Michael wakes up abruptly and interrupts their conversation, the severe joke which Edward promptly takes upon himself to improvise on the newcomer should have no effect on the audience unless the actor playing Michael utters his very first line, “I’m terribly sorry, but where am I?”, with an accent that instantly betrays where the character comes from:

MICHAEL. I’m terribly sorry, but where am I?

EDWARD. So it’s yourself, is it?

MICHAEL. Pardon?

EDWARD. Do you not recognize me? We were at school together.

MICHAEL. I don’t think so.

EDWARD. Eton, wasn’t it? Or Harrow?

MICHAEL. No, I don’t—where am I? (9)

Morash refers to *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me* as an example of what he calls “chamber pieces” (336), which, on the Irish stage in the 1990s, started to take over plays that would “tackle big, culture-defining topics” (336) like those we find in *Mutabilitie*, another of McGuinness’s pieces from the same decade (336). In terms of character portrayal as well as the use of “space” on stage, we could go even further and say that, compared not only with *Mutabilitie* but also with *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, arguably the colossal of a McGuinness play, *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me* is both rightfully and inevitably much closer to some plays of modern classics, for instance, *A Doll’s House*, *Miss Julie*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *Three Sisters*, which all have English versions written by McGuinness. If in the opening dialogue of *Uncle Vanya* the characters Marina and Astrov set the whole play in context quite elegantly (Chekhov, *Uncle Vanya* 129-30), the character Olga does the same in a series of soliloquies with which *Three Sisters* begins (Chekhov, *Three Sisters* 193-95); the “madness” of Julie in *Miss Julie* is explained chapter and verse by the characters Jean and Christine, that is, before we as members of the audience get the first glimpse of the person herself (Strindberg 35-38). Likewise, what we need to know about Nora and Torvald in *A Doll’s House* is duly provided as the protagonists plunge into the first of many dialogues assigned to them throughout the play; we can turn to

McGuinness’s translation of *A Doll’s House* for a portion of that crucial opening dialogue:

HELMER. [...] Did you say bought? All of this? I’ve a little bird who likes to fritter money, has that little bird been frittering again?

NORA. Yes, but this year, Torvald, we can spend a little more. This is the first Christmas we’ve not had to watch the purse strings.

HELMER. You know very well we can’t spend a fortune.

NORA. I said a little more, Torvald. We can, yes? Just a little more! [...] (Ibsen 2)

Meanwhile, none of the characters mentioned above, from Marina to Nora, finds her-/himself in a spatial circumstance which is peculiar enough for members of the audience to have their doubts about the fictional-theatrical “validity” of the lines uttered by the character in question. As we recall, Edward, Adam, and Michael in *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me* validate the setting for the play, a “cell,” by simply being chained to the walls, which in turn authenticates, just as neatly, every single line the three characters say to one another. Have Edward, Adam, and Michael descended, as it were, directly from a character that was created a hundred years ago by a playwright like Ibsen or Strindberg or Chekhov?

If, as Christopher Murray among others points out, “[t]here is in [McGuinness’s] work usually no clear through-line of dramatic action” (172), we can see immediately that *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me* is no exception. Regardless of ample information about the characters and their spatial circumstances being embedded in the play-text, *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me* is not a piece with which, and here we rephrase Murray, a Stanislavskian acting would automatically be associated. According to Helen Lojek, “[w]hat we need to watch for in this nearly plotless play is not so much sentiment as ideas, and those ideas are revealed in part through patterns and contrasts of stereotypes” (“Watching Over Frank McGuinness’s Stereotypes” 136). The playwright having “put on the stage” three characters who turn out to be an Irishman, an American, and an Englishman respectively is only half of what matters to members of the audience, the other and much more important half being that Edward, Adam, and Michael deliberately thrive on stereotypes: the characters practically hurl at one another both worn-out and state-of-the-art stereotypes while almost looking, as well as sounding, as if they are altogether a living proof of what those stereotypes are based upon. Indeed, were this particular piece merely about three characters calling on stereotypes, those who play the roles of Edward, Adam, and Michael would hardly require an acting method as complex and rigorous as the “System.” We might

argue instead that a Stanislavskian acting may be rather irrelevant to *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* not so much because each character has to eat, as it were, what Joan FitzPatrick Dean calls "mutually exclusive categories or labels" (156) as because each character, by doing exactly that, miraculously ends up gaining his "individuality" (Dean 156) on stage. It is, asserts Murray, only with a "Blakean neglect of the logic of plot development in favour of scenes autonomously existent and emotionally viable" (172) that McGuinness the playwright elaborates fully on stereotypes themselves and "their transformation with a new emerging situation" (172). We can point to a brilliant example of the "Blakean neglect" in *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*: the sequence in which Michael and Edward together create an imaginary car which somehow flies and takes them back to England and Ireland (McGuinness 53-55).

As long as we focus on the question of a play putting Irish "space" on the stage, *The Mai* by Carr, which is another of the pieces that Morash cites in his argument for the post-Field-Day 1990s, does seem to parallel McGuinness's *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*. It should not be too difficult, nonetheless, for members of the audience to detect a critical difference between the very use of "space" in *The Mai* and that in the McGuinness play. We can first turn to Cathy Leeney, who indicates that, as a play, *The Mai* occupies a pivotal position in the whole of Carr's work to date:

[Carr's *Ullaloo* and *Low in the Dark*] operate entirely without reference to realist representation, so that with *The Mai* [...] Carr's apparent adoption of realist conventions such as an identifiable time and place, and focus on individual psychologies, may be guardedly acknowledged, and held in balance with the symbolic structures organizing the action, the use of storytelling, and of direct address to the audience. (158)

A "room with a huge bay window" (Carr 107), the fixed and only setting for *The Mai*, is reminiscent of a "cell" in *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* not simply for the fact that the latter, with or without a prisoner either chained or not chained to its walls, is also a kind of "room," the point which the character Michael chooses to stress (McGuinness 25); the parallel more crucially derives from the fact that, to members of the audience, the "space" in which the Carr characters find themselves is, if we borrow Leeney's term, as easily and clearly "identifiable" as its equivalent in the McGuinness play. The extent to which *The Mai* delineates the profiles of the characters and their spatial circumstances is such that the play as a whole hardly leaves enough "room," in this case figuratively, of course, for members of the audience to speculate on the

details, or, for want of a better expression, to exercise what we may call their "imagination." The female characters in *The Mai*, who are all related, comprise four generations of an Irish family; some of the lines uttered by these characters are "transcribed" quasi-phonetically in the play-text, indeed as in the Shaw play; the room is part of the house that the protagonist, Mai, has "built" (Carr 108) in rural Ireland; the plot is roughly "half an acre" (135), and, being the "most coveted [...] in the county" (111), it was "sold" (111) to Mai in favour of "hoteliers, publicans, restaurateurs, rich industrialists, [and] Yanks" (111); the myth-laden "Owl Lake" (107, 147), which members of the audience probably do not get to see in any shape or colour, is nevertheless firmly established as part of the *mise en scène*, thanks not merely to distinctively Chekhovian stage directions like "[s]ounds of swans and geese" (107) and "of water" (186) but more pertinently to the protagonist often finding herself near the above-mentioned bay window, looking out. The list goes on. What exactly, then, is the difference between the Carr piece and *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*? While both plays are replete with information about the characters and their "space," *The Mai*, unlike the McGuinness play, thoroughly embraces a Stanislavskian "through-line of dramatic action." If we put it rather simply, "Owl Lake" in the Carr play may trace its history back to the cherry trees in *The Cherry Orchard*.

That, in a sense, partly explains why some critics are fascinated and bothered at the same time by the works of Carr, who they regard as "one of the most celebrated Irish playwrights of the 1990s" (Merriman, "Staging Contemporary Ireland" 253). According to Shaun Richards, pieces by Carr and Martin McDonagh, another of the playwrights much discussed in the 1990s, seem to "recycle rather than critique disabling images" ("Plays of (Ever) Changing Ireland" 9) of what we in this essay have called Irish "space"; in the same vein, Vic Merriman argues that "Carr's and McDonagh's misrecognition as practitioners of the historical role of dramatic artists in twentieth-century Ireland testifies to the ways in which form eclipses content in the multiple circulations of late capitalism" ("Settling for More" 62). Nevertheless, we must not forget that Carr, like McDonagh, is perfectly capable of changing the form as well as the style of her writing whenever she likes, namely, from play to play; as a result, a piece by Carr may be Beckettian or Chekhovian, anti-Stanislavski or pro-Stanislavski, or indeed anything, and the same would be said for a McDonagh piece. Furthermore, if, for example, *The Mai* can be presented to members of the audience only within the constraints of a mock-Chekhov form/style, it should mean that the playwright knows how to let the form/style, which she has chosen for the piece, speak for itself. While Merriman's

conclusion, the works of both playwrights “substitute for human vitality a set of monsters frozen in the stony gaze of the triumphant bourgeoisie” (“Staging” 256), will strike a sympathetic chord in our interpretative mind, what we cannot ignore is that Carr and McDonagh, the latter in more “provocative” (Wallace 665) and yet more nonchalant a manner, do in fact bring about the “gaze” superbly in a variety of forms and styles. Never positing *the* Irish question as such in her pieces, Carr, to sum up, is truly and substantially part of the force that has set the post-Field-Day theatrical trend in Ireland.

In his book which takes an overview of Irish theatre “from Boucicault to Friel,” Nicholas Grene discusses the problem of “otherness” from yet another point of view:

The spaces of Irish drama, like the language of its people, are predicated as being authentic, truly reflecting the speech and behaviour of a reality out there—hence Synge’s strenuous efforts to protect the genuineness of his dialect and audience resistance to those claims. But it is always out there, somewhere other than the metropolitan habitat shared (more or less) by playwright and audience alike. (263)

Along with *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me* and *The Mai*, McPherson’s *The Weir* is given as an example by Morash when he defines post-Field-Day Irish theatre. Curiously enough, *The Weir* also serves as an excellent piece with which we will be able to look into the very problem taken up by Grene, namely, Irish “space” on stage for some reason being “always out there.” While it should be noted that the “metropolitan habitat,” as Grene puts it, does not necessarily mean Dublin, or any other town or city in Ireland for that matter, there is no reason why we cannot promptly cite Dublin as an epitome of the kind of “habitat” in which, according to Grene, we inevitably find playwrights and the audience. The sole setting for the McPherson play is a “room,” indeed as in the two pieces by McGuinness and Carr; on the other hand, to make a fine contrast with either *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me* or *The Mai*, the “room” in *The Weir* functions primarily as a public area: it is, as the stage directions in the play-text tell us, a “small rural bar” (McPherson 12) somewhere in “Northwest Leitrim or Sligo” (12). Crucially, in the course of the play we are informed that four of the five characters are “locals” and the fifth is from Dublin. If the lines uttered by the locals and the spatial circumstances in which the four find themselves cannot but lead members of the “metropolitan” audience to sense, either consciously or subconsciously, something that is definitely “out there,” the introduction of the character Valerie, whom one of the locals summarily calls a “Dublin woman” (McPherson 22) before actually seeing her for the first time, is precisely what makes *The Weir* quite special among other pieces

we have taken up in this essay. It can be argued that Valerie bears the burden of standing in for the entire “metropolitan” audience; the “space” on stage, in other words, starts functioning as a kind of meta-space, thanks first of all to the sheer presence of Valerie in the “bar” but just as importantly to some of the lines that she utters there, the simplest example of which we find when she asks the character Brendan, who runs the pub, if he has “a glass of white wine” (McPherson 25): the request, clearly unexpected, is met with a brief, awkward silence in the whole bar (25).

At the same time, true to his reputation as one of the major playwrights of the 1990s, McPherson does not simply leave the question of “otherness” *as it is* in *The Weir*. If members of the audience are inclined to sympathise with a “novice” from Dublin who, for better or worse, makes a spectacle of herself in front of a pub owner and three of his “regulars,” the same audience must realise towards the midsection of this one-act play, if not before, that the often casual, even playful, but still clearly detectable conflict between “them” and “us” on stage is indeed more a kind of disguise than a well-executed parody. Of characters in McPherson’s plays, Scott T. Cummings writes: “I have a story, therefore I am. This is the lifeblood and essence of McPherson’s troubled heroes” (303). The cryptic statement apparently tells us nothing new if we remember that McPherson is commonly regarded as a playwright who willingly “continu[es] an Irish tradition of lyrically and linguistically rich storytelling onstage, as London theatre-marketing would have us believe” (Wallace 665); nonetheless, as far as *The Weir* is concerned, we might follow Cummings and assert that the “lifeblood” of each of the characters keeps boiling, ready to burst out at the slightest provocation, under the disguise of what we might call the “them”-“us” dichotomy. Whereas in a McGuinness play each and every “Blakean” leap goes hand in hand with characters’ “stories,” we find in a McPherson piece very little of the Blakean element in the first place; rather, characters created by McPherson tell “stories” which, in effect, “become [...] stories about storytelling” (Cummings 306). If Valerie, Brendan, and the others in *The Weir* literally “live to tell the story,” it also means that the above-mentioned “them”-“us” disguise has a highly theatrical effect: the disguise is emphasised in the first half of *The Weir* precisely because it is meant to be thrown off, part by part by each character, in the latter half of the play. One of the four locals, Jack, for example, reminisces what he did and felt on the day his former girlfriend got married; the jewel in his “story” is not that the former girlfriend merely “looked at” (McPherson 68) him at the church, making him realise that he “was only another guest at the wedding” (68), but that a “barman” in

a pub improvised a sandwich for the emotionally shattered man on his way back from the church:

JACK. [...] He took two big slices off a fresh loaf and buttered them carefully, spreading it all around. I'll never forget it. And then he sliced some cheese and cooked ham and an onion out of a jar, and put it all on a plate and sliced it down the middle. And, just someone doing this for me. And putting it down in front of me. "Get that down you now," he said. And then he folded up his newspaper and put on his jacket and went off on his break. (69)

Jack's meticulous recollection of a person making an ordinary sandwich could not have a more universal implication; members of the audience, together with Valerie and Brendan, who are listening to the "story," touches the "lifeblood" of the character Jack.

In *Modernism and the Celtic Revival*, Gregory Castle describes the "Revival" as it was understood in the last decade of the twentieth century, when "the legends of Cuchulain and Fionn MacCumhaill [were] no longer taken as foundational or even relevant" (260). If we are to believe that writers of the 1990s were still active in "reviving" something, it primarily has to do with the fact that those writers "return[ed] to the seedbed of the Revival—to their own turf, there to fight local battles in the north and south, east and west, town and village, bog and shore" (260). McGuinness, Carr, and McPherson put Irish "space" on the stage in such a manner that, to members of the audience, whether or not the three "challenged the impossible" was hardly of a primary concern anymore. The three playwrights took a hard and serious look at "their own turf," which could even be materialised on stage as a "cell" in Beirut.

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