



The Methuen Drama Anthology of Irish Plays

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REFERENCES

Patrick Lonergan (dir.), *The Methuen Drama Anthology of Irish Plays*, London, Methuen Drama, 2008, 448 p., ISBN 978-1-408-10678-5

- 1 This new anthology, published by Methuen, brings together five Irish plays: *The Hostage* (1958) by Brendan Behan, *Bailegangaire* (1985) by Tom Murphy, *The Belle of the Belfast City* (1989) by Christina Reid, *The Steward of Christendom* (1995) by Sebastian Barry and *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996) by Martin McDonagh. Patrick Lonergan, who lectures in contemporary drama at NUIG, explains his choice in a nine page introduction. Lonergan reminds us of Ireland's spectacular development: from the famine to the Celtic Tiger, from civil war to peace. For Lonergan, this rapid change has raised fundamental questions about the identity of the new Irish, all the more so as immigration has brought new problems to Ireland. Therefore, he wonders how the Irish can now reconcile their past with the present. To him then, the main purpose of the five plays collected here is to try and respond to these new problems from the middle of the 20th century. Lonergan further explains that these five Irish plays challenge and transgress the boundaries that define national identity: they ask what it means to feel Irish now and they explore how these identities and feelings can be represented on stage.
- 2 Lonergan chooses to start with the *The Hostage*, because it stages a group of characters imprisoned in a cycle of repetition – Anglo-Irish violence – which is put forward by the captivity of a British soldier in an Irish lodge-house. The author's text is studded with references to Irish and British history; the past effectively mars the characters' present and increases this feeling of imprisonment. On the contrary, Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire* is an attempt to go beyond that cycle of repetition. For Lonergan, Murphy's aim is to get the spectator to raise his consciousness in relation to the difference between fiction and

reality. This play helps him to take into account the tragic elements of his life: he needs to move on once tragedy has occurred. It is for that reason that Lonergan considers Murphy to be one of the greatest playwrights of the 20th century, and *Bailegangaire* his most beautiful play. With *The Belle of the Belfast City*, the editor shares Reid's viewpoint: many of the problems that the Northern Irish have are also rooted in the past of the Province. Their lives are forged by their environment no matter how far they go from it; their past is their inescapable present. For Lonergan and for Reid, the victims' version of history is worth listening to.

- 3 This is also the case in Barry's *The Steward of Christendom*, which sheds light on the life of Thomas Dunne, a man whose future was stolen because of an unconventional past. What is more interesting from Lonergan's viewpoint is that Barry's play announces a move from the traditional representation of the Irish past on stage. While Irish playwrights had traditionally given a poetic version of the Republic's past, Barry celebrates daily life and its meaning and finds beauty in what is not said.
- 4 The last play in this anthology, *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, clearly stands out from the others. It stages a crippled Irish boy who leaves the isles of Aran – as a real and authentic Irish place – for Hollywood to become a movie-star in Robert Flaherty's documentary film, *Man of Aran* (1934). The spectator is offered the opportunity to watch characters that in turn watch and judge the performance of Irishness in the movie. For Lonergan, McDonagh's light comic style and his play-within-the play technique are misleading since he calls for the spectator to meditate about himself and about Ireland seen as an object of global consumption. He invites the spectator to condemn the movie directors and playwrights who aim at imagining an authentic Ireland for commercial purposes.
- 5 In this anthology, we are shown the evolution of the dramatic representation of Ireland over fifty years echoing the rapid evolution of Ireland's situation. The whole island of Ireland, north and south, has been given an international dimension and the past is imprisoning no more. Such an anthology is thus interesting for academics since it calls for a reflection on the evolution of the dramatic representation of Ireland. The spectator is asked to reflect on Ireland's situation – locally and globally, and how it can be best represented on stage. The audience, like the characters, are no longer hostages of time, or of place; they are asked to act, react and ultimately take a stand with regard to their own condition. The climax is reached with *The Cripple* in which the following paradox emerges: the audience's desire to experience an authentic Ireland in theatre although the theatre is a place of imagination and fantasy.