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Introduction: Contemporary Irish Drama

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Contemporary Irish Drama

INTRODUCTION

Ireland has always had a particular affinity with drama. The Literary Revival channelled much of its energies into the creation of a national theatre and produced such challenging, enduring works as Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* and O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*. The riotous reactions evidenced the first-night audiences' close involvement with what they witnessed and the extent to which the plays bore on issues of national and personal identity. In earlier centuries, a vivid succession of Anglo-Irish dramatists—Farquhar, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Wilde, and Shaw—had played with comic conventions and the norms of English society to subversive effect. So it should come as no surprise that contemporary Ireland should be experiencing renewed theatrical activity, a series of remarkable works from playwrights who—particularly in the case of Brian Friel—are also winning through to a world audience. But critical commentary has not kept pace with theatrical practice; and I'm grateful to Douglas Archibald and *Colby Quarterly* for this opportunity to provide some preliminary mappings of what has been represented on the Irish stage in recent decades.

The unexpected but inevitable founding father of contemporary Irish drama is the late Samuel Beckett. His successors have sought to bring the dramatic and other lessons of our "necessary interpreter" (Desmond Egan's phrase) back to bear on a more recognizably Irish milieu and context. The central character in Beckett, as earlier in Synge and Yeats and later in Friel and Murphy, is on the margins of society, driven to extremes by conditions which the play will illuminate. This liminal figure uses all the resources of drama to call the norms of that society into question, and has no ready solution or resolution to offer. Rather, the appeal is directly to the audience and to the creation of a possible community to transcend what appears onstage. In Ireland, the framework, the life narratives offered by church and state, have become increasingly threadbare and inadequate. The drama has once more regained its urgency, as it did in the approach to Irish independence, as the site in which the old models can be broken up and reshaped, reimagined through the medium of play. In the larger worldwide crisis, of politics and of spirit, contemporary Irish drama has something to offer.

A frame is set for this issue by Richard Pine's opening essay. It has a good deal to say about individual Friel plays and it raises issues of "Irishness" which are so crucial and so difficult to address. As he points out, many contemporary Irish plays appear "'difficult' to our orthodox critical systems because they offer references to a world that is somehow 'other,' elsewhere and haunting." Pine

also sets Friel in the context of his contemporaries, in particular Frank McGuinness, the most important of the younger playwrights. After the wide-ranging quality of these remarks, Brian Arkins pays close textual attention to Friel's most important and widely-travelled play, *Translations*. But since the issues raised are also linguistic and cultural, they have reference to Irish society and drama in general. Arkins is almost uniquely equipped to discuss the play, since as a trained classicist at University College Galway he is intimate with all four languages spoken in the play, where most of us are in the position of a Lancey or Yolland.

The other leading contemporary Irish playwright is Tom Murphy, less well known than he deserves to be outside the country, but whose best plays have had a seismic impact on Irish theatre, provoking walkouts and heated discussion. While much media attention has been given to the North, there has been a "Southern" crisis over the last two decades which has scarcely made it into the newspapers and of which Murphy has been one of the few and certainly the most incisive commentator, fearless and funny. Nicholas Grene's sensitive analysis of three of Tom Murphy's plays goes a good measure to show why. In their most recent plays, Friel and Murphy have both promoted women characters from the margins to the center of their dramatic worlds, and with considerable success. But this in turn raises the question: where are the Irish women playwrights? Eileen Kearney sets out to address this question and in particular to show those who would reply "Lady Gregory excepted, there are no Irish women playwrights" just how wrong they are. The anthology she is co-editing with Kathleen Quinn should do much to redress that situation. Claudia Harris takes up the matter of Northern Ireland and the plays of the late Stewart Parker, who came from within the Protestant community in Belfast. Parker was alert to the dramatic formulae which readily offered themselves in regard to the Northern situation and fought against them with inventiveness, wit, passion, and resilience. His premature loss is similar to those of Synge and Behan; all the more so given the society and people for whom he wrote. But he warned against martyrdom and would prefer that his legacy be a living, lovingly admonishing one.

Christopher Murray gets both the last word in terms of this special issue and virtually the first prophetic word in discussing the drama of Sebastian Barry. I was taken with Barry's *Boss Grady's Boys* but ultimately found it too derivative. But *Prayers of Sherkin* was a revelation; every word Murray writes about the effect of Caroline FitzGerald's luminous production echoes my experience. The past has always exerted a particular pressure on and in Ireland. Sebastian Barry joins with the best contemporary Irish playwrights in finding dramatic means to reinterpret by reimagining that past. All offer alternative narratives whose aim is liberation, a setting free of ghosts.

ANTHONY ROCHE
Guest Editor