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Eileen Kearney

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Current Women's Voices in the Irish Theatre: New Dramatic Visions

by EILEEN KEARNEY

Two years ago at an academic conference I related the many frustrations Kathleen Quinn and I met with in our research to compile an anthology of plays by Irish women dramatists. Our operative questions were, "Who are these women?" "Where are they?" and "What plays are they writing?" In attempting to unearth the names and works of women other than the obvious Lady Gregory and the unfortunately not-so-obvious Teresa Deevy, we have ranged from running up against brick walls and dead ends to discovering approximately 200 scripts penned by 75 playwrights. And we had initially been concerned that we would be unable to find even ten plays to propose for the anthology! What a welcome dilemma we now find ourselves in—having to choose the best few plays out of so many. And as for the whereabouts of contemporary Irish women dramatists, they're all over Ireland right this moment, and they are producing an impressive array of works.

Kathleen Quinn made some frustrating discoveries about the availability of plays by women that have already been published. In a leading Dublin bookstore during the summer of 1988, she inquired as to the whereabouts of plays written by Irish women, and was promptly directed to the section on Lady Gregory. "No," she said, "OTHER Irish women," whereupon the salesman replied, "Women do not write plays." She was then sent on to the feminist Attic Press (which does not publish plays) and from there to another leading store, whose employees could not think of any women dramatists.

As we have stated in the Introduction to the anthology, our original goal was to collect and publish forgotten or neglected plays written by twentieth-century Irish women. It might serve, we felt, as an historical record of minor playwrights. We were initially concerned that we might find ourselves at a loss for a sufficient number of good plays by women. Instead, our search has uncovered a rich literary tradition, introducing us to hundreds of little-known or unknown plays. Contrary to what the Dublin salesman believes, women do indeed write plays.

The proposed Table of Contents for this anthology spans the entire twentieth century and includes nineteen plays. The historic perspective will be set with Alice Milligan's *The Last Feast of the Fianna* (1900), the first Celtic Twilight drama to emerge in Ireland. It will then move to Maud Gonne MacBride's *Dawn* (1904), a feminist response to Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, in which Maud Gonne had played the title role. That will be followed by Lady Gregory's *The Workhouse Ward* (1908), a brilliant play that demonstrates why her works are

still so popular. Kate O'Brien's *Distinguished Villa* (1926) focuses on middle-class appearances, while Teresa Deevy's *The King of Spain's Daughter* (1935) illustrates the importance of dreams and visions. Maura Laverty's *Liffey Lane* (1947) illustrates life in the Dublin tenements, and Edna O'Brien's *A Cheap Bunch of Nice Flowers* (1963) centers on the relationship between a mother and daughter.

The most exciting drama to emerge from Ireland since the Literary Renaissance, however, has appeared in the last ten years, and it is these works which comprise the bulk of our anthology. The primary challenge, which seemed insurmountable at times in our beginning stages, was to discover the titles and whereabouts of these plays and playwrights.

The exploration:

In attempting to shed some light on a mysterious woman playwright's competition supposedly sponsored by *The Irish Times*, Quinn naturally started her investigation at the competition's alleged source. After a frustrating series of dead ends, Quinn was finally led to the *Times* library, where she uncovered a July 1982 article on the competition. It had actually been co-sponsored by *The Irish Times* and the Dublin Theatre Festival—it was one of those first and last “annual competitions.” The judges included the late Brendan Smith, the then-director of the Dublin Theatre Festival; Garry Hynes, then the artistic director of the Druid Theatre in Galway; and Carolyn Swift, playwright, critic, and co-founder of the Pike Theatre, Dublin. In evaluating the 188 plays submitted for the prize of 1,000 pounds, the judges concluded that, although many were not particularly worthwhile, several “were of a higher standard than plays by male authors which had got productions in recent years.” They also acknowledged that there is sufficient talent out there to warrant “more plays by women to be produced on Irish stages than at present” (“Hospital Play”). The eight plays which made the “short list” were: *Semi-Private* by Mary Halpin; *Boat People* by Alice O'Donoghue; *Cradlesong* by Rita E. Kelly; *No Chips for Johnny* by Una Lynch-Caffrey; *Tea in a China Cup* by Christina Reid; *Facade* by Ann O'Musoy; *Country Banking* by Nesta Tuomey; and *Supermarket* by Barbara H. Walsh.

The award went to Dublin playwright Mary Halpin for *Semi-Private*, a sensitive, if at times bitingly irreverent, study of four women sharing a hospital room, all of whom have had “female complications.” The play addresses the caretaking support and intimacy of women as they share and mutually understand each other's physical problems. Many of the plays submitted dealt with birth and the problems associated with it. *Semi-Private* was produced at the Dublin Theatre Festival in October 1982.

Runner-up to *Semi-Private* was Christina Reid's *Tea in a China Cup*, which the judges described as “a sensitive study of the life and times of a Protestant working-class family in Northern Ireland over three generations—with an emphasis on how the constant warring of the men affects the women” (“Hospital Play”).

Ever since this 1982 competition, new opportunities for literary and dramatic success have appeared for Irish women dramatists. Twelve of the dramatists

included in our book have written their most successful plays since that time. Their work continues to be produced in mainstream theatres, on the fringe, and overseas. These fine playwrights are becoming increasingly recognized as innovative writers, skilled in their craft. And the modern plays we have selected demonstrate a wide range of style and subject matter.

I will now address our most recent findings regarding these contemporary playwrights and present a survey of who is out there and what they are writing. In doing so, I will address both the process and the product—both of which continue to fascinate us.

The discovery:

As for finding the dead playwrights, we started by consulting the lists of plays produced at the Abbey Theatre, compiled by Hugh Hunt, as well as working in the National Library manuscripts collection. This collection still offers much uncovered material and would serve as a worthwhile, if time-consuming, project for an eager scholar.

If it is easier to deal with the works of the deceased playwrights, it was certainly easier to locate the works of those who are living. In my early research, I interviewed Jacinta O'Rourke of the Society of Irish Playwrights, Charabanc actress Eleanor Methven, directors Lynne Parker of Rough Magic, Emelie Fitzgibbon of Graffiti, the innovative Cork-based Theatre-in-Education company, freelance director Caroline FitzGerald, Garry Hynes, founder and former artistic director of the Druid Theatre in Galway and presently artistic director of the Abbey, and Christopher FitzSimon, then the Abbey script supervisor. During these discussions we were able to come up with names of women they know who have written plays. During the summers of 1989 and 1990, I conducted interviews with eight of the following playwrights and, whenever possible, secured scripts from them of their unpublished plays. I spent many hours and many pounds on photocopying these and returning the originals to the writers. The interviews often took place in pubs, over the phone, over coffee (or rather, tea), over a meal, outside on the pavement by the stage door, in parlors of the bed and breakfasts I was staying in, in theatre green rooms, in between rehearsals, after performances, even "in between jobs." Some took place in sunlight; more of them took place on rain-drenched days. I even got locked into the Druid Theatre in Galway during one lunch hour and had to be rescued by Garry Hynes. As I told her, I have been locked out of many theatres in my life, but this was the first time I had ever been locked in.

I would now like to take you on an alphabetical stroll through the gallery of active Irish women playwrights of the 1980s and 1990s. These twelve represent only a sample of the impressive talent out there and the persistent efforts being exerted.

The treasures unearthed:

Geraldine Aron is a Galway native who now resides in London. She has to date been most often produced by the Druid Theatre Company, which has given

the Irish premieres of *Bar and Ger*, *A Galway Girl*, the world premiere of *Same Old Moon*, and most recently (the summer of 1990) two more one-acts, *The Stanley Parkers*, which deals sensitively with the AIDS crisis, and *The Donohue Sisters*, a chilling portrayal of a family secret. These two last shows were both directed by Garry Hynes. Critics have described Aron's tone as tragicomic, and her style as reminiscent of Thornton Wilder's sophisticated simplicity and direct theatricality in that her characters often comment on the action in a third-person narrative format (Ferguson 1985, viii); Aron, however, takes this device a step further by sharing with the audience the characters' interior monologues.

Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy wears several impressive hats in the professional theatre. She was a founding member, actress, and prolific director with the Focus Theatre in Dublin. She is currently an acting instructor at the Gaiety School of Acting in Dublin. She is well known in theatre circles for her adaptations for the stage of Irish folk tales and myths. In fact, she is the artistic director and founder of Storytellers, a company which began in 1985 and to date continues to make a unique contribution to Irish theatre. This troupe performs archetypal, ironic, and non-naturalistic stories which are derived from folk tale, novel, or myth. Their stylized performance mode is reminiscent of Paul Sills's Story Theatre troupe which developed out of Chicago's Second City improvisational troupe in the early 1970s, although Burke-Kennedy acknowledges a debt to the innovative style of Peter Brook in the late seventies. Storytellers is particularly appropriate in Ireland where "the cultural heritage is spectacularly rich in storytelling; where there is a treasury of stories to be kept alive; and where a theatrical extension of the *seanchai* can readily be understood and savoured" (Program Notes). Burke-Kennedy's better-known works are *Legends*, which explores the Irish fascination with the supernatural, and *Curigh the Shapeshifter*, both of which toured nationally in 1981. She also directed her original play for children, *The Parrot*, for the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1983. Her more recent script, *Uncle Silas* (based on the J. Sheridan LeFanu novel), was produced at the Project Arts Centre. Perhaps her best-known work is *Women in Arms*, a dramatic rendering of the legend of the *Tain*, presented from a feminist perspective. The play celebrates the beauty, craft, power, and endurance of the four mythological characters of Nessa, Macha, Deirdre and Maeve. As one critic put it, "once upon a time, in the golden, fertile Celtic Twilight, women had power, and education, and they led armies of thousands and made their curses felt" (Garvey).

Marina Carr is a name to watch for in the future. This young playwright has a growing reputation in Irish theatre according to Joe Dowling, current director of the Gaiety School of Acting, which will mark her out as an important figure of the future. Carr's play, *Low in the Dark*, was performed by Crooked Sixpence in the Project Arts Centre (directed by Philip Hardy) in November 1989. *The Deer's Surrender* was performed at the Gaiety School of Acting in the summer of 1990. I had the opportunity to see this production, and it was exciting to see this work which developed over an eight-month period in workshop format, during which Carr was able to shape and develop the early imaginative ideas of the Gaiety acting students. Her best work to date, though, is *Ullaloo*, an almost

absurdist drama somewhat reminiscent of Beckett; but it is an innovative rather than derivative drama. First read at the 1989 Dublin Theatre Festival, *Ullaloo* was given a full staging at the Peacock in March 1991 with Olwen Fouere and Mark Lambert in a production by David Byrne. A month earlier, the Project staged Carr's *This Love Thing*, fruits of her collaboration with two young theatre companies, *Tinderbox* in Belfast and *Pigsback* in Dublin. Christopher FitzSimon remarks about Marina Carr's plays: "They are theatre of the absurd, really, 25 years too late. But it's her own brand of theatre of the absurd, and the dialogue is very Irish. And we didn't really go through theatre of the absurd plays when everyone else was doing them. . . . She's rather like Ionesco, but there's a sort of warmth in her plays that absurd writers don't usually have (FitzSimon, interview).

Anne Devlin, a native of Belfast, has published a volume of short stories and was awarded the Hennessy Literary Award for these. She made her playwriting debut in 1985 with *Ourselves Alone*, which addresses the women of Ulster who exist on the fringe of the Northern Ireland conflicts. Applauded by the critics, *Ourselves Alone* was awarded the Susan Blackburn Prize, which acknowledges outstanding women authors writing for the English-speaking theatre. Currently residing in Birmingham, Devlin now is an associate writer for the Royal Court Theatre in London and has been commissioned to write a play for the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Mary Halpin's comedy, *Semi-Private*, winner in that 1982 *The Irish Times*/Dublin Theatre Festival competition for a play by a woman, focuses on four women from vastly different backgrounds, all of whom find themselves sharing a semi-private room in a hospital gynecological ward. The ensuing discussions of semi-private issues have made the play a commercial success; during the summer of 1990, the company celebrated its 100th performance at Dublin's Tivoli Theatre. Halpin has also written a one-act, *Shady Ladies*, a comic portrait of several women from different periods of Irish history, which was produced at the Peacock. She has also written a novel and continues to write for stage and radio.

Anne Le Marquand Hartigan, a remarkably talented playwright, poet, and painter, has written several plays worthy of attention. One of her best is *I Do Like To Be Beside the Seaside*, which sympathetically treats the problems of the elderly; this play was given a staged reading at the Abbey in 1984. Others include *Strings* (a one-act), *Beds* (performed in the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1982), *La Corbière* (performed in the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1989), and *Now Is a Moveable Feast* (a dramatic epic poem that has been performed on stage and on the radio).

Born in Dublin, though now residing in Derry, the prolific novelist Jennifer Johnston has written several noteworthy one-act plays which demonstrate her sharp humor and insights into characterization; among these are *The Porch*, *The Invisible Man*, and *The Nightingale and Not the Lark*. Her first full-length play, *Triptych*, was staged at the Peacock in 1989. A recent double bill of two one-act monologues designed to be performed together, *Christine and Billy* (1990) portrays a couple destroyed by the turmoil in the North.

Marie Jones writes for Charabanc, the internationally acclaimed, politically oriented theatre troupe from Belfast. Charabanc was formed in 1983 by five out-of-work actresses who were determined to survive in the male-dominated theatre world by creating their own vehicles. They have dedicated themselves largely to addressing, and performing within, the Belfast Protestant and Catholic working-class communities from which they came. Their developmental process entails collecting oral history about a period or place and then writing a script and performing it for their sources. Many of the lines have come directly from taped interviews with the people about whom they are writing. In spite of this collaborative nature of script development, however, Marie Jones has, for the most part, actually penned these plays, among which are *Lay Up Your Ends* (co-authored with Martin Lynch), *Oul' Delf and False Teeth, Now You're Talkin', Gold in the Streets, The Girls in the Big Picture, Somewhere Over the Balcony, The Hamster Wheel, Servants Living on the Antrim Road, The Blind Fiddler of Glenadauch, and Weddins, Weans, and Wakes*. Charabanc's genius continues to be their ability to translate political struggles, past and present, to the stage, where their gift for satire and black comedy shines.

Limerick-based Harriet O'Carroll writes primarily for television and radio though she has adapted her script, *The Image of Her Mother* (1988), for the stage as well. This one-act deals poignantly and humorously with the difficulties of communication between the generations.

Belfast native Christina Reid has published several plays which address with a tender humor issues prevalent in her conflict-weary native city. Her best-known works are *Tea in a China Cup, Joyriders, The Belle of the Belfast City, and Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?*

Carolyn Swift is currently on the Abbey board of directors and serves as dance correspondent to *The Irish Times*. She is also a prolific writer of plays for stage, television, and radio, and of children's stories. In the early 1950s, she co-founded the Pike Theatre in Dublin with her then-husband Alan Simpson; she adeptly chronicles the history of this in her book *Stage by Stage*, published in 1985. Swift's fascinating one-woman show, *Lady G* (1987), presents the many facets of Lady Gregory as a creative individual rather than as a mere supporter of Yeats, Synge, and O'Casey.

Dolores Walshe's plays are similar to Charabanc's in that they astutely convey the author's political sensibilities. While Charabanc's scripts tend to demand a broader performance style, however, Walshe's works focus on intricate plot and character development resulting in powerfully dramatic scripts reminiscent of the works of O'Neill and Miller. Although Walshe did not start writing until 1986, she has been remarkably successful with her frequently lauded poetry, short stories, and plays. *In the Talking Dark*, her first play, sensitively deals with the highly personal effects of the political and social turmoil in South Africa. Originally entitled *The Spear and the Volk*, this play won the O. Z. Whitehead/Society of Irish Playwrights/PEN Playwriting Literary Award in 1987. It also won acclaim in the Mobil Playwriting Competition in conjunction with the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester, England, in that it

was chosen out of almost 2,000 entries as one of only two plays to be staged by the Royal Exchange. In her more recent play, *The Stranded Hours Between*, Walshe continues to explore the brutality of oppression in South Africa, although this time she views the unrest through a slightly brighter lens. This play won a joint first prize in the O. Z. Whitehead competition in Dublin in 1989. Her other plays include *A Country in Our Heads*, set in the California home of Irish immigrants, and *The Sins in Sally Gardens*, set in a dream-shattered, quarrelsome Dublin family's home. Walshe is currently commissioned to write two new plays: *Skin, Heart, Bone* for the Royal Exchange and another play for BBC Radio Drama in Belfast.

The challenge ahead:

Two years ago, I ended my conference paper by reciting a litany of forty-six women playwrights whose works merit examination and exposure. Many of them were names without plays available, names without scholarly articles about them, or names that had enjoyed popularity but now were silenced and forgotten. At that time I appealed to other scholars to find these women and find their plays. While there still remains much to be explored about this wealth of dramatic literature, and while some of these women are gaining visibility, this field remains wide open for more research and exposure.

Let me now share with you this admittedly incomplete litany of seventy-four playwrights, almost all of whom have had plays produced in the twentieth century in Ireland:

Rose McKenna, Elizabeth Inchbald, Dorothy MacArdle, Sadie Casey, Elizabeth Harte, Cathleen M. O'Brennan, Margaret O'Leary, Maud Gonne, Alice Milligan, Augusta Lady Gregory, Constance Markievicz, Eva Gore-Booth, Maura Molloy, Maeve O'Callaghan, Teresa Deevy, Christine Lady Longford, Mary Rynne, Molly Keane, Mary Manning, Elizabeth Connor, Nora MacAdam, Maura Laverty, Elizabeth Bowen, Olga Fielden, Kate O'Brien, Eibhlin Ni Suilleabhain, Mairead Ni Ghrada, Ann Daly, Pauline Maguire, Marjorie Watson, Eilis Dillon, Marjorie Barkentin, Edna O'Brien, Helen Cahill, Maureen Duffy, May Cluskey, Angela Clarke, Nesta Tuomey, Ann O'Musoy, Rita E. Kelly, Una Lynch-Caffrey, Alice O'Donoghue, Sheila Flitton, Leland Bardwell, Margaret Neylon, Barbara Walsh, Garry Hynes, Miriam Gallagher, Maeve Binchy, Margaretta d'Arcy, Siobhan O Suilleabhain, Brid Arthurs, Maureen Charlton, Ena May, Anne Devlin, Jennifer Johnston, Geraldine Aron, Mary Halpin, Christina Reid, Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, Dolores Walshe, Marie Jones (Charabanc), Harriet O'Carroll, Carolyn Swift, Anne Le Marquand Hartigan, Marina Carr, Ivy Bannister, Louise Hermana, Celia de Freine, Clair O'Connor, Colette O'Connor, Deirdre Hines, Judy Murphy, and Rita Ann Higgins.

How many of these names ring a bell? How many of these women would you connect to the Irish canon of dramatic literature? It is vital that the woman dramatist's perspective be recognized as valid and be given serious academic attention. And should not an informed women's perspective be welcomed and encouraged in the mainstream (rather than the fringe) theatre, onstage as well as off, in a society that is 50% women? Women also make up 50% of the audience, and mainstream theatre would do well to serve them more positively and attentively.

I am privileged to be part of this research, discovery, and recognition process

for the acknowledgement of new voices in the contemporary Irish theatre. The time continues to be ripe for promoting and encouraging the works of these women who have remained in the wings (and on the fringe) just a bit too long.

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